Aeneas in the New World: Reshaping the Interpretive Motif in Barlow's *Columbiad*

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Abstract

Barlow's *Columbiad* evokes Virgil's *Aeneid* by using the motifs of revelation and interpretation to explore the role of the past in informing the present. Virgil creates an opposition between Aeneas, who receives prophecies and signs but is prevented from interpreting them by his shock and fear, and his father Anchises, who interprets the prophecies and guides the Trojans. Aeneas learns to use his father's interpretive ritual but must utilize this technique to craft forward-looking interpretations and lead his people into the unknown, in order to fulfill his destiny. This combination of traditional ritual with a progressive outlook reflects symbolically the new political circumstances of Virgil's Rome. In the *Columbiad*, Columbus views scenes from early American history, and presents Hesper with the problems and criticisms he sees in the nation's development, relying on Hesper to explain them. Through their intermittent dialogue, the two advocate cyclical and linear models of historical development, respectively. Hesper's interpretation of mankind's progressive improvement prevails, reflecting Barlow's vision of post-revolutionary America as distinct from and improving upon its Old World predecessors. The two epics' common motif reveals the complexity of Columbus' character and reinforces Barlow's democratic message.
A true classic yields inspired imitations. This is the mechanism by which the classics have enriched modern literature, as the forms and paradigms established by classical literature have provided a structure of ideas and themes that subsequent authors have found creative ways to evoke and subvert. Virgil is perhaps the most famous Latin author, such that when T. S. Eliot asked “What is a classic?” his strategy for answering that question consisted of finding the best way to describe Virgil. Virgil needs no introduction, in part because he is so familiar but also because his works, especially the *Aeneid*, have so often been evoked, recreated and reimagined. This paper will focus on one of Virgil’s lesser-known evocations: Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad*.

Barlow lived through the American Revolution, and he wrote the *Columbiad* in its aftermath, publishing the text in its present version in 1807, to offer a republican history of the new nation (Blakemore 4). In the poem, Hesper, the genius of the New World, visits an elderly Christopher Columbus, who rots in prison, betrayed by his former backers and jealous rivals. To lift Columbus’ spirits, Hesper shares with him a vision of America’s future. The epic is divided into ten books, exposing episodes from the colonial period, with a long digression on the Incan Empire, and the American Revolution. The narrative ends in Barlow’s time, at which Hesper and Columbus discuss the meaning of the events they have witnessed, and Hesper describes a utopian future in which democracy triumphs and the world’s nations forget their differences.

On a basic level, the *Columbiad* appears comparable to the *Aeneid* because both are epics. Both participate in the same epic tradition and hence are in conversation on a generic level. The two are further linked by the *Columbiad’s* numerous allusions to the *Aeneid*. The first appear in Barlow’s proem, which opens, “I sing the mariner who first
unfurl'd/An eastern banner o'er the western world" (*Columbiad* 1.1-2), an obvious imitation of Virgil's "Arma virumque cano" (*Aeneid* 1.1). The allusion signals that the *Columbiad* will be an epic of voyage and discovery. The contrast between east and west also suggests the theme of transition, which both epics explore. Later in his proem, Barlow refers to America as a "future empire" (*Columbiad* 1.3), a term that does not accurately describe the American republic but serves to remind readers of earlier empires, especially Rome's. Kallendorf notes that Columbus' "virtuous steps" in the proem (1.7) recalls Aeneas' pietas (191), and also points out how Barlow's designation of America as Hesperia (*Columbiad* 1.147) and his reference to the Ivory gate (*Columbiad* 9.240) allude to the *Aeneid*.1 Blakemore also notes that prophecy delivered by Potomac, a personification of the river, to Lord Delaware's settling party establishes a parallel between the Potomac and the Tiber, Washington DC and Rome, and the martial achievements of George Washington and Aeneas (92).

Despite the manifold similarities between the two texts, the *Columbiad* is more interesting for the ways in which it differs from the *Aeneid*. Barlow explains in his Preface how he sees his work relating to the epic tradition. Barlow claims that epic writers disfigure their subject matter in a way that would not do justice to the historical events he wishes to describe, and that this will distinguish his epic from its predecessors (Works 2.376). He offers two criteria for judging an epic, on the basis of their "poetical objects" and their "moral objects" (Works 2.377). He declares that his work should be judged on the basis of its moral object, the "political tendency" it projects. He then criticizes Homer for being poetically brilliant but morally abhorrent, glorifying bellicose despots (Works 2.378). Virgil, too, he singles out for moral censure, complaining that the

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“Eneid” “increase[d] the veneration of the people for a master” and was written for subjects, not citizens (Works 2.380). As a counterexample, Barlow points to Lucan, “the only republican among the ancient epic poets,” whose moral object he praises but whose poetical sense he criticizes (Works 2.381).

The contrast between Lucan’s and Virgil’s poetic forms foreshadows an essential tension that will characterize Barlow’s text. In his classic Epic and Empire, Quint analyzes Lucan’s digressive, repetitive style, which Barlow so dislikes, and sees Lucan’s “formlessness [as]... a resistance to form: to the political unity and uniformity that the imperial regime sought to impose” (147). Lucan’s opposite is Virgil’s Aeneid, whose linear narrative and emphasis on fate serve to legitimize imperial power. Blakemore attempts to fit the Columbiad into this distinction. He repeats Quint’s characterization of Lucan’s Pharsalia as a republican epic of resistance, and hence an epic of losers. The Columbiad, rather, recounts America’s revolutionary victory, and it departs from the republican epic tradition by conforming to a linear, teleological, and hence Virgilian structure (29-30). If so, the Columbiad satisfies Barlow’s stated goal of combining a correct moral object with a superior poetic form.

This paper will challenge Blakemore’s assessment and show that the actual picture is more complex, containing both cyclical and linear structural elements. I will show this by exploring one of the Columbiad’s less obvious connections with the Aeneid. Barlow and Virgil both employ the motifs of prophecy and interpretation to create a

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2This distinction between cyclical and linear structures loosely corresponds to the pessimistic and optimistic readings of the Aeneid, as the Columbiad’s cyclical and linear models of history will be shown to constitute pessimistic and optimistic readings, respectively. Analysis of the Aeneid will generally be limited to the traditional, optimistic reading. For the distinction between the two readings of the Aeneid, see Parry’s argument, refined by Moorton. Kallendorf explicitly connects the Columbiad with the Aeneid’s pessimistic strain, but limits his discussion to one on the Columbiad’s self-contained episodes.
forum for their characters to examine their relationship with the past. In each, a pair of characters differ and disagree in their efforts to find meaning in the omens, prophecies, and revelations they experience. Through their differing interpretations, the two characters present alternate strategies for how the past should inform the future. In the case of the *Aeneid*, Anchises assumes that the future will mirror the past, as Aeneas founds a new Troy and the Trojans suffer until Aeneas learns to combine his father’s traditional rituals with more forward-looking interpretations. In the *Columbiad*, Columbus and Hesper disagree on whether human history follows a pattern that is cyclical or linear and progressive. Both poems resolve their conflicts in a manner that reveals an ideological stance sympathetic to the new political circumstances that accompany the epics’ composition.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas must rely on Anchises to guide his interpretation of the omens and prophecies that Aeneas receives. Yet, Aeneas’ success in completing his epic voyage relies on his ability to learn from his father without following him. Initially, whenever Aeneas receives an omen or prophecy, he experiences a paralyzing fear that renders him unable to comprehend or interpret it. Fortunately, Anchises is on hand to teach Aeneas the proper method and ritual for responding to divine signs. Yet, as Anchises demonstrates the technique, his perspective remains grounded in memories of the past, and as a result, his backward-looking interpretations lead the hero astray and prolong Aeneas’ wandering. In order to proceed towards his divinely-appointed destiny, Aeneas must master Anchises’ interpretation ritual but use it to craft forward-looking interpretations.
Book 2 exposes the initial contrast between Aeneas’ and Anchises’ attitudes towards prophecy. This conflict foreshadows the ways in which prophetic communications will guide the Trojans’ journey throughout the poem. Throughout Book 2, Aeneas demonstrates a fearful aversion to his prophetic visions, and responds to them with fright, incomprehension and disregard. The first such vision occurs when Hector visits Aeneas in a dream. Hector informs Aeneas of Troy’s imminent destruction and advises him to flee immediately. His injunction takes the form of an urgent command: “Heu fuge, nate dea, teque his,’ ait, ‘eripe flammis’” (2.289). Aeneas’ response, though, is languid. He eventually wakes up and climbs onto his roof to admire the scene Hector has already described to him. Aeneas stands on the roof stupefied like an uncomprehending shepherd: “[veluti] stupet inscius...pastor” (2.307-8). The rural image with which Virgil describes him emphasizes the disconnect between Aeneas and the scene of urban mayhem and destruction before him. Aeneas eventually awakens from this shocked daze to take up arms and rush to his city’s defense. In doing so, Aeneas deliberately ignores this first injunction to flee. In recounting the story, he even acknowledges his efforts’ futility: “arma amens capio; nec sat rationis in armis” (2.314), in effect admitting that Hector was right and flight is the only rational option. This comment serves to highlight the brazenness of Aeneas’ disregard for Hector’s injunction.

Later, in the confused fighting in the streets of Troy, Aeneas again ignores a divine command when Venus appears to quell his battle rage and urge him to escape. While promising to protect Aeneas on his way to Anchises’ house, Venus’ exhortation recalls Hector’s previous entreaty: “Eripe, nate, fugam finemque inpone labori” (2.619). Aeneas does not react to Venus with fear, presumably because she is his mother, but his
obedience only goes so far. Venus' prophecy is more concrete and immediate for Aeneas, as it describes the scene of destruction visible before his eyes rather than predicting still-imminent events to a sleeping man. Aeneas accordingly begins to follow Venus' advice, accepting her protection and making his way to his father's house, but upon arriving he declares that he will go back out into the battle: "Reddite me Danais, sine instaurata revisam/proelia" (2.669-70). In spite of multiple warnings, Aeneas stubbornly refuses to obey the immortals' will. Aeneas' final encounter with an immortal in Book 2 illustrates the fright that he experiences with many divine revelations. Just before leaving Troy, Aeneas meets the shade of Creusa, who urges him to stop looking for her body and flee. Though he no longer rejects her advice, as with Venus and Hector, his reaction to seeing his wife's umbra is one of confusion and alarm. He is struck dumb, his hair stands on end, and his voice freezes: "Obstipui, steteruntque comae, et vox faucibus haesit" (2.774). This reaction foreshadows Aeneas' reaction to the appearance of shades and deities later in the narrative, introducing a linguistic formula that appears at multiple points in the poem. Between his reluctance to follow the apparitions' advice and his fright at receiving such apparitions, it is clear that Aeneas' attitude will make it difficult for him to fulfill his divinely appointed mission. Fortunately, he has Anchises to help him.

The omen of Jupiter in Book 2 illustrates the differences between Aeneas' and Anchises' understanding of divine revelation and the reason that Aeneas will need Anchises on his journey. Anchises initially refuses to leave Troy, even as Aeneas is about to flee with his family, and his insistence exasperates Aeneas. Without warning, Iulus' hair begins to shine with lumen (2.683) and flamma (2.684). Aeneas reacts

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3 3.48, 4.280, 5.90
typically with terror—he and Creusa are *pavidi* (2.685) and he tries to extinguish the fire. Anchises, though, looks to the sky, in a reverent gesture, and calls upon Jupiter, asking for some confirmation of this omen and reminding the god of the mortals’ *pietas* (2.690-1). While Aeneas reacts to the omen’s consequence, Anchises looks instead for its significance, and he respond to it with a prayer. Anchises’ approach is validated, as Jupiter answers his prayer with a shooting star. This subtle flash of light is sufficient to convince Anchises of what Aeneas had to be told repeatedly: namely that he should flee the city. This episode contains many elements that will reappear in subsequent incidences of prophecies and divine warnings: Aeneas receives some information from a divine or immortal being, but his fearful reaction prevents him from understanding its meaning. He must rely on Anchises, who responds to any communication with the gods by making a sacrifice or prayer of thanks, and then interprets the words or sign observed by Aeneas into actionable information. Their distinct roles will make the characters indispensable to each other and ensure that Aeneas will face great hardship when Anchises dies.

The pattern set in Book 2 is borne out in Book 3 as Aeneas receives prophecies and omens from Polydorus, Apollo, the Penates, Celaeno and Helenus. On each occasion, Aeneas exhibits a degree of fright and confusion, while Anchises provides the gods with thanks and interprets their will. Aeneas meets the shade of his brother-in-law Polydorus when he tries to settle in Thrace. Polydorus’ shade appears while Aeneas is ploughing, informing him that the land is cursed with greed and urging Aeneas to abandon it. The sight of the ghost paralyzes Aeneas, who is described with the exact same words as after Creusa’s appearance in Book 2: “obstipui, steteruntque comae, et
vox faucibus hausit" (3.48). Rather than try to interpret his vision alone, Aeneas brings it to the council of leaders and to his father, who decide to leave Thrace for Delos. There, Aeneas receives another revelation, this one much less private but eliciting an equally formulaic response. This time Aeneas requests a prophecy, praying to Apollo’s oracle for a sign to excite his comrades’ minds (animis inlabere nostris, 3.89). Apollo’s oracle responds and advises Aeneas to seek out his ancestors’ homeland (Antiquam exquirite matrem, 3.96). Unlike with previous prophecies and oracles, Aeneas receives this one in public, but the audience of his fellow Trojans magnifies rather than mollifies his fright. As the oracle is announced to a large group, the crowd enters a state of confusion and tumult: “mixtoque ingens exorta tumultu/laetitia” (3.99-100). As with the Polydorus incident, it takes Anchises’ interpretive power to dispel their panic. At this point Virgil identifies Anchises as genitor (3.102), recalling the maternal invocation a few lines earlier and thereby establishing a unique connection between Anchises and the words of the oracle. Anchises makes his speech, recommending that the party settle on Crete. He then caps his interpretation with sacrifices to Neptune, Apollo, and the winds, a display of piety emphasizing both gratitude to the oracle and peremptory appeasement for the deities that will affect the Trojans’ sailing. His response to the oracle thus reaffirms the pious values that guide Aeneas and rescues him from his post-prophetic confusion while creating a clear path for the Trojans to follow. Although Anchises provides an undeniable service to Aeneas and the Trojans, his proposed path also exposes Anchises’ critical flaw. Anchises later reveals that his family has two homelands, Crete and Italy, but upon hearing Apollo’s prophecy he only recommends the Trojans go to Crete. Rather than share the two possibilities with Aeneas, Anchises picks the safer and close
destination. This choice reveals Anchises’ preference for the familiar over the unknown. Aeneas has already learned from Hector and Creusa in Book 2 that his journey will be long and will end in Hesperia, but as long as he follows Anchises’ advice, his band remains trapped in the Aegean, where they try to recreate Troy on every island they reach. Anchises’ advice keeps Aeneas moving, but it also prevents him from making the bold voyage into the unknown that his destiny requires.

Aeneas’ encounters with the Penates, Celaeno, and Helenus in Book 3 exhibit the same basic structure as previous prophetic episodes but with various elements amiss. The Penates approach Aeneas during sleep, and the narrator emphasizes the private and personal nature of the Penates’ appearance with his description of the night’s stillness: “nox erat, et terris animalia somnus habebat” (3.147). The Penates stress their special bond with Aeneas and inform him that he must abandon Crete. Aeneas’ reaction is again characterized by fright, again manifested bodily. Aeneas describes being startled from sleep by the gods’ sight and voices (talibus attonitus visis et voce deorum/nec sopor illud erat, 3.172-3) and breaking into a sweat (tum gelidus toto manabat corpore sudor, 3.175). Unlike what happened after previous divine encounters, though, Aeneas offers his own prayer of thanks to the gods. The role of interpreter, however, remains Anchises’, as the Penates acknowledge in their speech that Aeneas will not understand their words and will need Anchises to decode them. The prophecy of the harpy Celaeno differs from the pattern in Book 2 because Aeneas’ reaction of fear is no longer private but possesses his entire army. In this respect it recalls the prophecy of Apollo at Delos, but it surpasses that episode in the degree of the fear that infects the Trojans present. The harpy’s prophecy is preceded by martial scene in which the Trojans fend off a harpy attack. The
scene emphasizes Aeneas’ role as leader of the band, as they arm themselves and attack at his command (edico, 3.235). The attack ceases with Celaeno’s prophecy, which predicts future hardship for the Trojans. Fear overtakes the whole force, as they are struck with formidine (3.259), a word previously used to describe Aeneas’ reaction to Polydorus (3.47). Aeneas makes no attempt to relieve his comrades, presumably because he himself is just as frightened; his martial authority and confidence just moments earlier makes his descent into fear a striking reversal. Into this sudden leadership vacuum steps Anchises. His pious gesture of turning his hands to the sky and asking the gods for protection distinguishes him from Aeneas, who remains awestruck and just as uncertain as his soldiers. Though his prayer is not one of thanks, due to the nature of Celaeno’s curses, Anchises’ words still fulfill the apparent need for every prophecy to be received with a prayer.

Aeneas’ response to the final prophecy in Book 3 given by Helenus, suggests that he will soon be capable of assuming his father’s interpretive role. Helenus’ prophecy entails none of the fright or confusion that Aeneas experiences in earlier prophecies. Though this may be attributable to Aeneas’ development as a character, a more likely explanation is that Helenus is a mortal and a friend. The fright is most acute when Aeneas sees a ghost or god. The absence of this fright allows Aeneas to listen to Helenus’ prophecy and offer a dignified response. Helenus tells Aeneas about the geography of Hesperia, how Aeneas must sail there, and some of the hardships he will encounter along the way. Receiving the prophecy, Aeneas prepares his ships to continue the journey, but before leaving he makes a solemn speech, claiming that he is called by fate (nos alia aliis in fata vocamur, 3.494) and speaking of his descendents in the new
land. The speech demonstrates that Aeneas has listened to the prophecy and accepted Helenus’ description of his fate. Aeneas still relies on Anchises, who uses Helenus’ words to interpret their first sights of the Italian coast. Nevertheless, Aeneas’ ability to understand Helenus’ prophecy without his father’s mediation represents a departure from previous episodes in Book 3 and hints at the function he will be forced to assume after his father’s death.

Anchises’ death at the end of Book 3 leaves Aeneas bereft of a trusted advisor, and until the two meet in Book 6, Aeneas’s struggles with prophecy and divine revelation represent erratic and imperfect attempts to fill his father’s shoes. Aeneas’ encounters with divine messengers in books 1, 4 and 5 often provoke the same fear Aeneas has suffered since Book 2, but he is no longer as uniformly disobedient as before and he begins to respond to prophecies in the manner of his father, with prayers and sacrifices. Following the poem’s internal chronology, the first prophecy Aeneas receives after Anchises’ death come from Venus in Book 1. Venus appears to Aeneas and his companion, Achates, after Juno’s storm pushes their ship to Libya, and briefs the pair on the history of Carthage, predicting that they will be welcomed by Dido and reunited with their comrades. Venus disguises herself as a Spartan peasant girl, and while Aeneas recognizes that he faces a goddess in disguise, the ruse allows him to hear and interact with the divinity without being paralyzed by fear. When it comes to offering thanks for the divine advice, Aeneas does not follow his father. Rather, he recognizes that the masquerading goddess is none other than his mother, and he reproaches her for deceiving him. The plaintive, less-than-pious tone of this speech is summarized by Virgil’s coda to it: “talibus incusat” (1.410). Besides failing to offer thanks, Aeneas further falls short of
his father in the task of interpreting Venus' words; he requires Achates to interpret the sights of Libya and explain how they reflect Venus' predictions. Thus while Aeneas avoids frightened paralysis, his reception of Venus' prophecy demonstrates him to remain dependent on a mature comrade to interpret the divinity's words.

After settling in Carthage, Aeneas receives his next divine direction from Mercury, in an encounter that recalls his divine visitations from Books 2 and 3. Mercury appears privately to Aeneas as he is laying the foundations for Carthage's citadel, in a scene recalling Polydorus' appearance just after Aeneas has planned the walls of his Thracian city. Aeneas' reaction to Mercury further recalls Polydorus, as his hair stands on end and his voice freezes. This is described with language echoing Aeneas response to both Creusa's and Polydorus' appearances4 ("arrectaeque horrore comae, et vox faucibus haesit" 4.280). Aeneas' fright is further described as "attonitus" (4.282), a word that occurred previously in Aeneas' reaction to the Penates (3.172). The linguistic parallels between Mercury's visit and Aeneas' earlier encounters serve to highlight the continuity between Aeneas' reactions to these prophecies, during which the appearance of a divine or semi-divine messenger shocks Aeneas into a state of near incomprehension. In the case of Mercury, however, Aeneas' fright does not prevent him from obeying prophecy's advice. Aeneas' reaction to this vision contrasts with those of Book 2 in that Aeneas makes a clear effort to obey the messenger's advice. Mercury's speech is relatively oblique, as it contains no direct commands comparable to Hector's "fuge," for instance. Aeneas does not stop to thank the god with a sacrifice or offer a formal, verbal interpretation of the god's advice, as Anchises might, but he responds to this advice by calling on three of his men to prepare their fleet for flight. Aeneas fails to replicate the

4 2.774, 3.48
full interpretative process that Anchises modeled for him, but his effort to use Mercury’s prophecy as a motivator for action still represents significant progress from Aeneas’ attitude and reactions toward prophecies in Book 2.

Though Aeneas demonstrates limited agency through his active response to Mercury’s first prophecy, his efforts prove insufficient, a fact confirmed by the Mercury’s reappearance later in Book 4. Mercury delivers the same advice, this time more explicitly, and elicits a similar fear from Aeneas, but on this occasion the hero musters a proper response. Mercury visits Aeneas in a dream, as Aeneas sleeps on his ship, dawdling before making his escape from Carthage. Mercury’s phrases his advice in clearer terms, asking pointedly why Aeneas has ignored his advice by failing to depart (“Non fugis hinc praeceps, dum precipitare potestas?” 4.565). The bluntness of Mercury’s words, compared to that of his previous speech, emphasizes the urgency of his message. Virgil’s first description of Aeneas, upon the speech’s conclusion, paints the hero, unsurprisingly, as fearful of unexpected apparition (“Tum vero Aeneas, subitis exterritus umbris,...” 4.571). On this occasion, however, the usual frightened state lasts only for a moment, as the very next line describes Aeneas rousing himself and his comrades (“corripit e somno corpus sociosque fatigat” 4.572). Aeneas responds to Mercury’s injunction first with words and then with action. He calls for his men’s attention (“vigilate!” 4.573) and informs them that the god has told him to flee immediately (“deus...festinare fugam...iterum stimulat” 4.574-6). Aeneas goes on to pledge his allegiance to the god (“sequimur te, sancte deorum,” 4.576) and ask for his protection on the journey (“Adsis o placidusque iuves,” 4.578). Though startled and scared by Mercury’s appearance, Aeneas thus masters his fear and responds to the
prophecy as his father would have, sharing his interpretation with his men and thanking
the god for his help. The words by which Aeneas invokes Mercury recall those of
Anchises, who calls on the gods as “placidi” (3.266) when praying after Celaeno’s
prophecy. With Mercury’s second prophecy, Aeneas’s attempt to emulate his father is
thus imperfect, as it includes a temporary bout of fright, but ultimately successful.

As commentators have noted, Virgil uses the funeral games of Book 5 to show
Aeneas assuming his role as Anchises’ successor (Lloyd 51); the same can be said of the
prophecies in Book 5. In his article “Anchises in the Aeneid,” Lloyd discusses various
points during the funeral games where Virgil describes Aeneas using epithets that recall
his father. Presiding over the boat race, Aeneas is identified as “satus Anchisa” (5.244),
and during the boxing match he is referred to as “Anchisiades” (5.407) and “satus
Anchisa” (5.424) again (Lloyd 52). Lloyd notes that both of these epithets occur for the
first time in the poem in Book 5. He also notes that Aeneas uses Anchises’ crater to
reward Acestes for his performance in the shooting match, further reminding the reader
of Aeneas’ connection to his father. It may be fitting, then, that the games begin with
Aeneas making a sacrifice to his father’s memory and receiving a sign, which he first
struggles but then succeeds in understanding. Aeneas leads the crowd of Trojans to his
father’s grave, his head wreathed in myrtle, to pour out a libation and offer a prayer to his
father’s memory. Aeneas’ prayer emphasizes Anchises’ absence, declaring that he had
been rescued in vain (“recepti/ nequiquam” 5.80-1) and lamenting that Anchises will not
be able to accompany Aeneas to Italy (“Non licuit finis Italos...tecum...quaerere” 5.82-
3). This will not be a problem since Aeneas is learning to take over his father’s role as
the expedition’s interpreter and leader. Upon the prayer’s completion, a snake slithers
out of Anchises’ shrine and coils itself around the tomb. Aeneas first reacts immaturity,
staring dumbstruck at the sign. The poem emphasizes the similarity between this and
Aeneas’ previous reactions to divine omens by describing Aeneas with the word
“obstipuit” (5.90), recalling his reactions to Creusa and Polydorus⁵. As with Mercury’s
visits in Book 4, though, Aeneas quickly recovers from his stupor and provides a proper
response. He conducts a lavish sacrifice, recalling the sacrifices Anchises leads after
Apollo’s omen at Delos. The episode shows Aeneas becoming increasingly comfortable
with the ritual of receiving an omen or divine communication. He remains at loss,
though, on the matter of interpretation. The poem explains that Aeneas is uncertain
(“incertus” 5.95) as to whether the snake represented the genius of his father or of his
father’s grave. The snake’s appearance thus provides Aeneas an opportunity to display to
his men his authority, as demonstrated by his familiarity with modes of communication
with the dead and divine, while masking his persistent internal confusion.

Book 5 contains one more prophetic episode that must be acknowledged but does
not fit the pattern outlined above. After the women burn Aeneas’ ships, Anchises appears
to Aeneas and encourages him not to despair in the quest for Italy. Unlike with Hector or
Creusa’s appearances, the poem makes no mention of Aeneas experiencing fear at his
father’s visage. Nevertheless, this fact does not mean that Aeneas has overcome his
habitual fright, because Anchises is atypical of the category of supernatural messengers.
First, Anchises is Aeneas’ parent, and it has already been demonstrated above that
Aeneas does not react fearfully when his mother Venus visits him. Additionally, Lloyd
points out that “the aura in which he [Anchises] appears is quite different from that of the
ghost of Hector or Creusa” (52). Hence the fact that Aeneas remains unperturbed at the

⁵2.774, 3.48,
sight of his father’s ghost is owing not to a sudden abandonment of his old habits but rather the peculiarity of his relationship to Anchises.

Aeneas’ contact with Anchises in Book 6 motivates the hero’s journey to the underworld, a process that relieves Aeneas of his fear of the supernatural and prepares him to assume full responsibility for guiding the Trojans. The katabasis of Book 6 is an extraordinary journey, even by Aeneas’ standards, yet the hero remains calm throughout. His entrance to the underworld foreshadows this, as Aeneas enters the cave with fearless strides (“haud timidis...passibus” 6.263). Unlike in Aeneas’ previous encounters with the supernatural, Aeneas experiences pity more than fear, as when he views the souls clambering into Charon’s boat (“animi miseratus” 6.332) and later upon Dido’s departure (“et miseratur euntem” 6.476). Aeneas experiences these and other sights without being distracted by the fear and confusion of his earlier supernatural encounters because he maintains his focus on finding his father Anchises. This focus explains Aeneas’ response to the Sibyl’s first speech. The Sibyl gives Aeneas a prophecy about the Trojans’ future in Italy, and Aeneas responds to the prophecy with a prayer, as customary. In this prayer, however, he barely acknowledges the Sibyl’s message, emphasizing instead his devotion to his father: “Unum oro:.../ire ad conspectum cari genitoris” (6.106-8). The single-mindedness of this declaration demonstrates how Aeneas’ desire to meet Anchises supersedes and supplants his usual reaction to prophecy. The Sibyl reiterates Aeneas’ mission to Charon, when he questions Aeneas’ presence as a mortal on the River Styx. The Sibyl identifies Aeneas and praises him for his piety (“Troius Aeneas, pietate insignis et armis” 6.403) and then invites Charon to admire that piety (“Si te nulla movet tantae pietatis imago...” 6.405). Charon’s assent reveals the transformative power of
Aeneas' pietas as a motivator. It enables Aeneas to cross the boundary between life and death and endows him with the exceptional calm that he exhibits throughout Book 6.

Aeneas reaffirms the goal of his underworld journey once more upon meeting Anchises. He declares that his father's image drove him to the threshold of Elysium ("Tua me, genitor, tua tristis imago/saepius occurrens haec limina tendere adegit" 6.695-6). This profession summarizes the motivation and sense of duty that carries Aeneas through Book 6 and allows him to reach his father without being distracted or struck dumb by the wonders he encounters along the way. This new attitude towards supernatural encounters, as requiring calm interpretation rather than fright, stays with Aeneas through the rest of the epic, a fact foreshadowed by a command of Anchises. Anchises foretells the future of Aeneas' race, perhaps soothing some of Aeneas' anxiety and warns Aeneas not to be hindered by fear ("aut metus Ausonia prohibet consistere terra?" 6.807). The question impresses on Aeneas the necessity of confident leadership, whether he is leading the Trojans into battle or interacting with a god to learn his next step. Anchises' encouragement signals a shift in Aeneas' personality, from the uncertain wanderer, leading his people erratically, to the humble guide, capable of interpreting and fulfilling his fate.

Having wandered the sea and descended to the underworld, Aeneas emerges with a new outlook on prophecy and divine revelations, which he accepts with the humble gratitude once exhibited by Anchises. After receiving the extended prophecies of Book 6, Aeneas no longer relies on divine communications as regularly as in Books 2 and 3, so a sampling of the prophecies he does receive will be sufficient to demonstrate the shift his attitude towards them has undergone. In Book 8, the river god Tiberinus visits
Aeneas in a dream and advises him to seek Pallas and his Arcadians, promising to reverse the Tiber’s flow and carry the Trojans upstream to Pallanteum. The episode recalls manifestations of the prophetic motif in Book 3 because it bears linguistic parallels with an earlier dream sequence, namely that of the Penates’ visit. The scene opens with a description of the scene very closely resembling the opening of the Penates’ dream, in which it is night and all the animals of the land are asleep ("nox erat, et terras animalia fessa per omnis/...sopor altus habebat" 8.26-7). Tiberinus’ speech further recalls that of the Penates’ as he uses the same command, “surge age, nate dea” (8.59), as the Penates to call Aeneas to action (O’Hara 41). The words of address following the command further recall the words of Hector (2.289) and Venus (2.594), among others. These linguistic connections between Tiberinus’ scene and earlier ones serve to heighten the contrast between their endings. After Tiberinus finishes speaking, Aeneas does not react violently or in fright. He awakens peacefully, as indicated by the plain description “nox Aenean somnusque reliquit” (8.67), stating simply that sleep departed. He exhibits immediate unreflecting obedience to the prophecy, as signified by the verb identifying the first action he takes, “surgit” (8.68), the exact verb used by Tiberinus. After waking up, Aeneas’ first action is to offer a prayer acknowledging Tiberinus’ authority (“corniger hesperidum fluvius regnator aquarum,” 8.77) and humbly asking for his protection. He then calls his men to outfit ships for the journey that Tiberinus instructed him to take. This prophecy differs from those of the earlier books in the pious manner with which Aeneas responds to it, awakening calmly after seeing the god, offering his immediate thanks to the god, and then humbly obeying the god’s prophecy.
Book 8 contains another significant prophecy in the form of Aeneas’ shield. Once Venus appears to Aeneas and hands him the shield, the poem makes no mention of Aeneas giving thanks for the gift or trying to interpret its message, as with the prophecy delivered by Tiberinus a few lines earlier. This apparent lapse cannot be attributed to any failure of the interpretive faculties Aeneas demonstrated in the Tiberinus episode, though. The most obvious reason for this is that the prophecies of Aeneas’ shield are beyond his power to interpret, as their intended audience is the poem’s readers, not any characters. In addition, the language used to describe Aeneas’ awe at the shield differs from that used to describe his frightened paralysis upon hearing the early prophecies of Books 2 and 3. Aeneas is not struck dumb (2.774, 3.48, and 5.90) but rather struck with wonder (miratur, 8.619 and 730) and filled with joy (gaudet, 8.730). Before describing the shield, the poem acknowledges the impossibility of Aeneas interpreting it, as he was viewing a sight beyond description (clipei non enarrabile textum, 8.625). Thus while Aeneas refrains from interpreting the divine revelation constituted by the shield, this omission does not diminish the significance or comprehensiveness of Aeneas’ shift from scared recipient of prophecies to confident interpreter.

The speech of the nymph Cymodocea to Aeneas in Book 10 resembles that of Tiberinus in many respects and demonstrates the consistency of Aeneas’ responses to prophetic communications through the second half of the epic. Cymodocea appears to Aeneas with other nymphs as he sails back the Trojans. She brings him a message from Cybele, informing him of Ascanius’ dire situation in the battle. Her words include the same gentle urging used by Tiberinus (“surge, age,” 10.241). Aeneas experiences wonder at the nymph’s appearance, expressed by the verb “stupet” (10.249), a milder
version of the prefixed "obstipuit" that describes his reaction to so many of the earlier prophecies. He responds to Cymodocea's revelation with a brief prayer, addressing Cybele as a nurturing deity ("alma parens Idaea deum," 10.252) and asking for her guidance ("adsis pede, diva, secundo," 10.255). Though the exchange is brief and Cymodocea's advice only encourages Aeneas on a journey he is already in the process of making, the episode serves to underscore the change that occurs in Aeneas between the first and second halves of the epic with regards to prophecy. Here as with Tiberinus' prophecy, Aeneas beholds the supernatural messenger without fear and accepts his or her words with a grateful prayer, just as Anchises would have done.

Aeneas' response to the nymphs' prophecy illustrates the lessons he learned from Anchises, to accept prophecies and divine communications with piety and humility. His success in reaching that point, though, reveals the lessons from Anchises that he rejected. Anchises' guidance bound the Trojans to the known, Aegean world, where they attempted to rebuild and recreate their former home. After Anchises' death, Aeneas is able to accept that he would found a new city in an unknown land, but his difficulty in recreating Anchises' interpretive ritual keeps him from finding that land, and leads him on detours to Carthage and Sicily. It is only by combining the correct ritual pose with Aeneas' forward-looking perspective that the Trojans are able to find their proper seat in a foreign land. Aeneas needs Anchises to teach him how to respond to and interpret the divine omens and prophecies, yet in order for Aeneas to fulfill these prophecies, he must move beyond the nostalgia for Troy that informed and distorted his father's interpretations.
This combination of traditional form with radical or new substance serves as a metaphor for the political state of Rome in Virgil’s day. Augustus publicly declared his sympathy and commitment to Rome’s traditional institutions, from the Senate and the Republic to old-fashioned religious and social customs. Yet his actual policies were radically different. He maintained the form of Republican government while centralizing all of the power in one person. Likewise, he encouraged interest in old religious customs, yet by placing such a large personal stake in reviving them, he identified his new rule with the old traditions. Worshipping the old gods became a political statement of deference to the new emperor who championed them. Thus the process of interpretation illustrated in the *Aeneid* by Aeneas and Anchises symbolically renders the fine line between traditionalism and innovation that was central to Augustan political life.

The relationship between Columbus and Hesper in the *Columbiad* mirrors that of Aeneas and Anchises in both its structure and its function. Hesper shows Columbus a series of geographical & historical scenes, at times narrating them. Columbus is a critical observer, though, and occasionally he stops Hesper to ask questions and seek clarification. Through these asides, Columbus voices a perspective that is generally skeptical: he tends to point out the things that are wrong with New World life. Like Aeneas with his omens and prophecies, every time that Columbus develops a new insight he brings it to Hesper to explain for him. Hesper’s interpretations share a common trait: they always refer to the future. Hesper refutes Columbus’ objections by laying out the next chapter in America’s story, such that the future events demonstrate Hesper’s refutation. This is how Hesper justifies his assertion that Columbus, as a mortal, suffers
from too narrow a view; Columbus cannot see the big picture and hence is unable to properly interpret the past.

Columbus first objects to America’s isolation, which charge Hesper refutes by revealing the previously-obscure Mississippi. Hesper begins his vision with a catalogue of rivers along America’s eastern seaboard, followed by the Great Lakes, crowing over their beauty. Columbus interrupts him with an accusation, asking “why [the land is] spread so wide and form’d so fair in vain?” (1.657). Calling America useless is a sharp break from the admiring description Hesper has been offering, but Columbus clarifies his characterization by pointing out that “no ship can point her pendants here,/No stream conducts nor ocean wanders near” (1.663-4) to the central region of North America. This comment exemplifies the consistent negativity of Columbus’ interjections. Columbus adopts a plaintive tone as he further explains himself. He asks repeated, almost accusatory “why” questions: “why these seats,” “why spread so wide,” and “why so distant?” (1.655-8). He piles on intensifiers, like “so wide,” “so fair,” and “so distant” (1.657-8) that magnify the sense of inconsistency between the continent’s bountiful endowments and its minimal utility. This effect of magnification is further manifested in the absolutes Columbus uses, lamenting that “no ship,” “no stream,” and “no ocean” can access America’s inland (1.663-4), which “must forever rest” (1.659). Columbus further expands on the theme of futility by infusing his description of America with images of isolation: of “far dim deserts lost” which “illude [sic] [men] in their search” and which “the tired sun scarcely finds” (1.662-6). The plaintive mood created by such language contrasts with the numinous tone of Hesper’s preceding monologue. Hesper favors phrases like “bold Erie’s wave sublimely stod [sic]” (1.637) as “white clouds of mist
expanding o’er him play” (1.641). Hesper describes America in vocabulary that is majestic, admiring and alluring. The contrast in tone between Hesper’s narration and Columbus’ interjection reflects the critical nature of Columbus’ commentary: he elucidates a fault that he sees in Hesper’s subject.

Just as Columbus’ first question exemplifies his inclination to find fault, Hesper’s reply exhibits a strategy he will consistently employ for all of Columbus’ objections. Hesper’s answer consists of giving Columbus new, previously unavailable information that ostensibly invalidates the objection. In this case, that new information is the existence of the Mississippi River. Perhaps the river was obscured from Columbus’ view by the Appalachians, but its presence answers fully the charge that America’s interior lacks water access. Besides bringing new facts to light, however, Hesper recognizes that Columbus’ tone reveals a general underlying skepticism, and his response invokes imagery to counter this. Hesper calls America’s interior “the happiest land” (1.668), home to “numerous nations” (1.669) and fed by a river that “scorns...dim bounds” (1.676) and “furrows half the world” (1.694), replacing Columbus’ scenes of desolation with images of activity, potential and centrality. He claims that “bold Mississippi” (1.675) collects “rains and floods...from western heavens” (1.677) across “regions pregnant with a hundred states” (1.680), answering Columbus’ complaints of futility with images of bounty. In answering Columbus, Hesper does not directly refute him by criticizing his argument. Hesper rather corrects Columbus by revealing new information, revealing limits to the explorer’s argument that he could not have possibly have foreseen, and then replacing Columbus’ analysis with his own argument that incorporates this new revelation. This first dispute illustrates that the two men argue from fundamentally
different points, and that Columbus, while enthusiastically critical, is constantly hindered from making a complete argument due to his lack of complete information. This theme, exposing the inherent limitation of human understanding, reappears throughout the narrative nearly every time that Columbus speaks.

Columbus initiates a dialogue in Book 2 on the native peoples that illustrates how Hesper’s answers lead Columbus to more questions. Hesper answers Columbus by revealing information that renders his objections moot, but rather than accept Hesper’s answer, Columbus incorporates the new information into his analyses and finds new ways to challenge it. For instance, Hesper answers Columbus’ concerns about America’s habitability by revealing more of its landscape and asserting that new nations shall rise there, yet when he demonstrates this by showing Columbus the inhabitants, Columbus calls into question these inhabitants’ humanity. Through each stage of the dialogue, Columbus finds new inconsistencies in Hesper’s characterizations of the natives, until Hesper must expose the next historical episode to quiet Columbus’ objections. Columbus opens the dialogue by interrupting Hesper’s narrative to challenge the natives’ status as humans. While the narrative regularly refers to them as people, Columbus views their barbaric warfare as closer to the manner of animals. He describes them as between human and beast, emphasizing the contradiction that “Their human frames with brutal souls combine” (2.31). He goes on to refer to his own experience with the Caribbean natives, a “timorous herd” capable of “frantic rage” (2.37-42). The inconsistency of the Indians’ character and their inability to follow any logic identifies the natives as animals. Columbus further depicts the indigenous peoples as incorrigibly stubborn, complaining that not even “sure defeat [could] control/The same indignant savageness of soul” (2.45-
6). In short, while Hesper has shown America accessible, Columbus disputes whether it is truly habitable by people. He concludes his speech by asking Hesper to clarify the origins of these alleged people, why their skin should be so dark, and whether nature had adapted them specifically for servitude.

Hesper rejects the idea of the natives being subhuman and answers Columbus’ questions systematically, emphasizing the logical explanation for each of his observations. Hesper first proposes a theory of atoms that “nourish the growth and every change produce” (2.70), even in Columbus’ own ancestors. He asserts that while Columbus’ atoms are assembled “in due proportion” (2.73), the Native Americans were formed “where crude atoms disproportioned rise” (2.77). The example of atoms, although more symbolic than explanatory, establishes the Hesper’s conception of the relationship between the native people and Europeans: similar at a basic level, yet separated by distinctions that arise from environmental factors. The first such factor that Hesper elucidates is climate. He claims that the tribes, “attempering to the clime,/Still vary downward with the years of time” (2.81-2). He envisions climate as a distinguishing force, making the natives significantly different from the Europeans. Still, he recognizes difference stemming from climate as a fluid condition, not absolute or intrinsic, suggesting a potential for the natives to become less barbaric in time. Hesper extends this implication in describing the effects of the sun on the native people. He uses the sun to explain the natives’ dark skin, reminding Columbus that “A different cast the glowing zone demands” (2.93). He then explicitly extends this condition to include Europeans, predicting that “old Europe’s noblest pride,...A ruddier hue and deeper shade shall gain” (2.121-3) upon settling in America. This observation represents another example of
Hesper using information about the future, which Columbus could not have taken into account, to defuse one of Columbus’ arguments. It is effective because it demonstrates that while Europeans and native Americans have reacted to the sun differently, they are nevertheless subject to the same influences. This universalizes Hesper’s cause-and-effect argument, extending it to include Europeans and thus denying that the native Americans’ uniqueness arises from some intrinsic inferiority. Hesper uses his prediction to conclude the natives’ basic similarity to Europeans, advising Columbus to “think not...that different pairs each different cast began” (2.131-2). Columbus, however, remains unsatisfied, and once again finds contradictory implications in Hesper’s revelation.

As the dialogue continues, every piece of information Hesper offers for illumination Columbus turns into a source of confusion. Columbus first wonders how the native people arrived in America, inquiring directly “who led these wanderers o’er the dreary main” (2.136). While tentatively accepting that the Indians may be people, he points out that all the seafarers of Greece and Tyre “shunn’d the task” of sailing the Atlantic (2.140). Hence, the causes that Hesper outlines to explain the Indians’ character makes their presences in the New World seem more illogical. Columbus emphasizes the illogic of the Indians’ appearance in the new world as he questions their aptitude for the voyage, contrasting the “weak sires unskill’d in human lore” with the “bold bark” needed for the journey (2.137-8). He places the words “weak” and “bold” at the same metrical position in successive lines, emphasizing the disjunction between the Indians’ abilities and their task. Columbus’ question about the Indians’ emigration is thus phrased not as an innocent curiosity but as an objection to Hesper’s previous revelation, exemplifying the skeptical viewpoint with which he understands Hesper’s explanations.
Columbus' final speech in the conversation reveals the source of his interest in the dialogue and the root of his skepticism. Hesper informs him that the Indians came from the Hellespont and Tartaria, blown across the sea by storms, meaning that they share not just a common species with Columbus but almost a common heritage. While Hesper provides this as an answer, Columbus understands it as a problem. He points out that in all their years of inhabiting America, the Indians never developed a civilization "nor arts nor social joys" (2.194), while their counterparts in Asia have built many. He emphasizes how long the Indians have failed in this respect, observing, "Long the lapse of ages, since thy hand/Conducted here thy first adventurous band" (2.195-6). The word he uses, "lapse," reveals the reason for his keen interest in the subject. He suggests that the Indians' lack of civilization represents a lapse in their development, as they have lagged behind humankind. This possibility appears particularly worrying in light of Hesper's earlier attempt to justify the Indians' condition by referencing their surroundings. Perhaps the land, the climate, the sun, etc., have adversely affecting the proto-European arrivals, causing them to "lapse" back into a less advanced state of being. If so, this would have dire implications for the followers of Columbus who, in settling the New World, risk becoming more like the Indians; Hesper has already promised that it will happen to their skin. Though the worry sounds farfetched, Columbus seizes on it as the logical conclusion of the interpretations Hesper has offered. Further, this discussion of historical "lapse" foreshadows the opinion Columbus will propose to Hesper in book 9, in which he interprets the whole story of human history as a series of lapses. At this point, however, Hesper solves Columbus' conundrum the same way he answers all of Columbus' questions: with a new revelation.
Hesper provides Columbus with a logical explanation of the conditions necessary for civilization, illustrated by the stories of the Aztecs and Incas. Hesper describes the conditions met by the Indians in the New World: "Here to vagrant tribes no bounds arose,/they form'd no union as they fear'd no foes" (2.221-2). This image of the tribes as roving without bounds across the continent contrasts with earlier descriptions, where "like scattering herds the swarthy people move/In tribes innumerable" (2.6-7). The state of underpopulation among the Indians was thus not evident, and Columbus can be excused for not taking it into account. This explanation hence conforms to the pattern in which Hesper debunks Columbus’ interpretations by citing information to which Columbus had not had access. Hesper defends the validity of his explanation by denying that their lack of civilization is owing to any intrinsic traits of the Indians. He observes that “the wide domain.../supplied their food uncultured from the ground” (2.211-2), identifying the land as the primary factor enabling the Indians’ uncivilized state. Further, he asserts that “the human kind/[is] of freedom fond” (2.213-4), suggesting that the Asian civilizations Columbus cites would not have been built had their people lived in the New World. Hesper’s explanation thus fully invalidates the contradiction Columbus cites: the natives in America developed differently from their Eurasian ancestors as a result of their different environments, and this difference does not preclude the possibility that the two groups share basic similarities of character. As proof, Hesper again chooses to reveal to Columbus a new scene that introduces the next chapter of the vision. Hesper shows Columbus the civilizations of the Aztecs, demonstrating that with sufficient population density the Indians can build a civilization. He observes that because “the realms are peopled and their arts begun” (2.230), “a few famed cities glitter to the skies” (2.232).
The vocabulary signals a direct rejection of Columbus’ charge that the Indians possess
"nor arts nor social joys" (2.194). He also describes the Aztec ruler moving “in eastern
pomp” (2.233), thus likening him to a Turkish ruler, countering Columbus’ charge that
the Indians from the Hellespont differed greatly the people of Asia. Hesper’s
explanation, too, foreshadows the position he will take in Book 9’s debate, in which he
uses his knowledge of the future to refute Columbus’ interpretation of history and argue
instead for the possibility of human progress.

In his soliloquy hailing the Aztecs, Columbus interprets the scene before him by
summarizing it, using terms that demonstrate both his habit of drawing attention to
problems in the New World and the interpretive handicap resulting from his limited,
mortal perspective. Columbus expresses joy and admiration at the Aztec empire’s
achievements using language that recalls Hesper’s introduction of the Aztecs. Columbus
hails the Aztec territory as a haven “far in the midland, safe from every foe” (2.293),
echoing Hesper’s direction to look at, “where yon mid region elevated lies,/A few famed
cities” (2.231-2). In addition, both identify temples (2.234 & 2.297) as praiseworthy
marks of civilization, symbolizing a level of order and organization that other indigenous
religions tend to lack. Finally, Columbus wishes, “And sires of nations from they sons
descend” (2.296), recalling Hesper’s observation, “from sire to son they stray” (2.223).
These allusions confirm that Columbus has, at least temporarily, accepted Hesper’s
characterization of the Indians as capable of existing in civilized settings as well as wild
ones. Ironically, even as Columbus confirms Hesper’s “happy” (2.292) predictions, he
simultaneously highlights their flaws. Hesper responds to Columbus by recounting the
actual fate of the Aztecs, as almost a mirror image of Columbus’ predictions and hopes.
As Columbus wishes "no gold-thirsty race thy temples tread" (2.297), Hesper addresses the conqueror Cortez, "With gold and carnage swell thy sateless mind" (2.323), "climb the wide roofs, the lofty towers ascend" (2.344); and as Columbus wishes that no invader "Insult thy rites nor heap thy plain with dead" (2.298), Hesper describes Cortez standing "mid the field of slain, /Where base and brave promiscuous strow the plain" (2.307-8). The terms of Columbus' paean thus change the description of the Aztec's fate from one of a misfortune into one of an outright reversal. The arrival of the Spanish completely negates any progress that the Indians have made towards building a civilization and moving beyond the primitive nomadic lifestyle.

The Aztecs' story can thus be read as an inspiration for Columbus' developing cyclical view of history, in which periods of progress are always compensated for by periods of decline. Columbus' ill-founded optimism, too, foreshadows Hesper's criticism of this view. Columbus' praise for the Aztecs is based on his assumption that their prosperity will continue, and his celebration of the Aztec culture demonstrates his lack of awareness of the Indians' fate. This deficit is exactly what leads Columbus to mistakenly predict a happy and illustrious future for the Aztecs. The speech thus illustrates Hesper's perpetual charge that Columbus cannot correctly understand or interpret what he sees due to his limited perspective.

After watching the Aztecs' reversal, Columbus and Hesper attempt to interpret the scene and arrive at vastly different conclusions about its significance. Columbus offers a pessimistic reassessment, in which the Aztecs' cities, originally introduced by Hesper triumphantly as proof of the Indians' abilities and achievements, become rather guarantors of eventual tragedy. He first describes his own voyage, recasting it in terms
portentous and menacing. He laments that the sun “awoke the gale” that sped his ships
(2.352), as though it were a monster, rough rather than encouraging. He further describes
the European explorers as “tigers [led] forth to fang mankind” (2.354). This is a far cry
from the laudatory descriptions earlier in the poem. Columbus next describes the Aztecs,
reusing some of the terms and images that Hesper employed introducing the Indians but
revising them to fit his interpretation. For instance, Columbus invokes “the tribes
beneath these bounteous skies” (2.355), recalling the “cities glitter[ing] to the skies”
(2.232) and “new built towers…with golden skies” (2.46-7) of the Aztecs’ introduction.
In Columbus’ reinterpretation, though, without tall towers the sky appears empty, making
the Indians appear exposed and vulnerable. Columbus also describes the Aztecs using
images of domesticity and settlement, observing “their walls widen and their harvests
rise” (2.356). His re-characterization of the Aztecs thus casts them as victims, whose
destruction now appears inevitable. Columbus’ description of the two forces’ meeting
picks up on this inevitability. He urges the “sleeping empire [to] meet the murderous
band” (2.367), again emphasizing the Indians’ vulnerability and the Europeans ignobility.
He also calls the Europeans a “storm” that “taught the dark sons of slaughter where to
roam” (2.364-5). This line accuses the European invasion of reducing the Indians from a
civilized state back to their nomadic roots, directly countering Hesper’s claim that
nomadism should give way to civilization in the conditions. The allusion to Hesper’s
earlier statement illuminates the message that Columbus draws from the Aztec
experience: human progress is temporary and will always be cancelled out by events like
the Spanish invasion. Every triumph that Hesper presents is simultaneously and
inevitably a source of tragedy.
Hesper responds to Columbus’ pessimism by reaffirming the positive direction of historical progress. He criticizes Columbus’ vision of history as a whole the same way that he earlier criticized the explorer’s view of specific historical events, by claiming that Columbus is fatally limited in his knowledge of history’s big picture. Hesper identifies a hierarchy of historical forces, in which that of man is subordinate to some “guardian care” (2.379), which Hesper identifies with. As an agent of this superior direction, influencing history to follow his own design, Hesper admonishes Columbus, “Nor think the labors vain; to good they tend” (2.383). Thus whatever the combination of positive or negative developments Columbus sees in the New World, Hesper assures him that the positive will last longer than the negative. With this is a statement, Hesper rejects Columbus’ interpretation of history not by reassessing that facts of past historical events but by asserting a superior knowledge and simply denying Columbus’ view. Again, Hesper rebuts Columbus using revelation rather than interpretation. In this instance, though, the act takes on symbolic significance beyond the immediate argument. Just as Columbus’ interpretation of past events seems never to yield an accurate prediction of the future, Hesper implies that history as a whole is not bound by the past, but is rather capable of changing direction suddenly and in ways unforeseeable to mortals like Columbus. Even if the past follows Columbus’ cyclical schema, there is no reason for the future to as well. This position is essential to Hesper’s belief in the eventual progress and improvement of human society, as inevitable if not predictable.

As the poem continues, Columbus and Hesper review more episodes from American history but all throughout their interpretive stances remain the same. Leaving the Aztecs behind, Hesper shows Columbus the story of the Incas, focusing closely and at
length on the story of the Inca Empire’s founder. The eventual destruction of the Inca Empire at the hands of Pizarro is rendered all the more tragic by the sympathetic portrayal of Capac, the Incan emperor. Capac unites the pagan tribes into a single state by converting them to his pseudo-Christian monotheistic religion. Capac is an agent of progress, so to speak, bringing the savage Indians more in line with civilized, European value systems. His defeat is interpreted predictably by Columbus as a sign of history repeating itself and the impossibility of improving the human condition, as “growing nations [that] spread the walks of peace” (4.4) give way to “a realm unpeopled and a world undone” (4.22). Hesper denies this significance of the Incan story, and responds that “years far advanced beyond this darksome age/Shall feast thee here” (4.42-3). This promise explains the purpose of the next historical episode that Columbus will view, in which Hesper presents the European settlement of North America as evidence that colonialism will not always be a destructive force. Hesper’s presentation of the North American colonies once again represents an attempt to disprove Columbus’ interpretation by revealing new evidence.

Even in North America, though, Columbus sees in colonialism seeds of destruction. Columbus initially celebrates the advent of Northern European colonists by praising their opportunity to break from the past. He pleads that North America’s natives be saved “from the thirst of gold” (4.314), suggesting that the success of the North American colonies will rest on their ability to reject the legacy of their predecessors rather than build on it. He credits the colonists’ potential to their ability to abandon Old World traditions and prejudices. The narrator later alludes to Columbus’ hope by celebrating the “glad streamers” as “Swedes, Belgian, Gauls their various flags display”
Although the line first appears to be optimistic, subsequent events show that it also foreshadows tragedy.

The description of North American colonization is quickly followed by the outbreak of the French and Indian War, which Columbus interprets as an example of Old World grievances invading and corrupting the New World. The War’s description contains many allusions to prior battles and incursions. The foreign armies “strow their corpses thro the pathless lands” (5.212), recalling how “the ground is strow’d/with sever’d limbs and corpses bathed in blood” (3.605-6) after Capac’s battle for the Inca Empire. The French invading force even mimics the journey of Columbus, as “with hostile flag unfurl’d/A Gallic fortress awe[s] the western world” (5.169-70), a clear reference to the Columbiad’s opening lines, “I sing the mariner who first unfurl’d/An eastern banner o’er the western world” (1.1-2). The French and Indian War thus represents another regression, a negation of the progress achieved by the settlers in building a more peaceful civilization. Columbus even suggests settlement itself as a root cause of the conflict. He lists all the battlefields of Europe, asking whether “Belgia’s plains, so fertile made with gore,/ [can] Hide heroes’ bones nor feast the vultures more” (5.217-8). The French and Indian War demonstrates the impossibility of separating America from Europe’s quarrels, and the mix of people colonizing America ensure that it will be a victim of Europe’s struggles rather than transcend them. Columbus takes this as evidence that process of North American colonization, introduced by Hesper as a change from the violence of Spanish colonization, actually guarantees that America’s future will be marred by violence just like its past. Hesper disagrees with this view, and chooses to see the French and Indian War as a positive event in America’s development. He justifies this contrary
interpretation by appealing to America's future, claiming that through this war the Americans will gain the "veteran force" (5.231) necessary to victory in the coming Revolutionary War. Thus Hesper casts the French and Indian War as a step forward, rather than a lapse, by interpreting the episode in light of America's future, rather than its past.

In book 9, Hesper and Columbus engage in an explicit debate over the shape of human history, in which Hesper's victory over Columbus' superior argument speaks to the poem's ideological agenda. Hesper exposes his position first, describing history as a "march" (9.43) and declaring, "progressive are the paths we go" (9.39). The image of a march implies that history follows a specific direction, as implied previously when Hesper claimed that Columbus' actions tended toward good ends (2.383). The marching image also suggests that history's direction is externally motivated, as Hesper specifies that "how the march must end/her sons decide not" (9.44-5). This accords with Hesper's tendency to explain things like the Indians' lack of civilization in terms of external causes and environmental factors, rather than peoples' internal characteristics. The only caveat Hesper identifies is fear, which "blocks nature's path and sends him wandering wide,/ without a guardian and without a guide" (9.147-8). This exception significantly undermines Hesper's advocacy of historical progress. It suggests that when people give into fear, they can choose not to move forward on history's march, and wander to a different end. This implication contradicts Hesper's portrayal of the historical march as an inexorable process, beyond the power of mere mortals to influence.

Hesper's examples preserve this contradiction, rather than resolving it. Hesper describes the beginning of the universe, declaring that Chaos "groups their systems, lots
to each his place,...And every system found a centred sun” (9.61-4). From the beginning, the universe exhibits order and symmetry, which suggests a higher power and purpose. Hesper traces the narrative of ancient history through the classical period, emphasizing the progress in arts and science made by the ancients, who left “wrecks that humiliate still all modern states” (9.119). He then revises his story by presenting a counter-narrative, in which early humans personified and worshipped natural phenomena that they feared. These habits of worshipping unworthy entities distracted people from productive endeavors, like farming, and prepared them for accepting tyrants claiming divine status or divine sanction. He portrays the ignorance of religion as a hindrance to human progress, which Columbus’ contemporaries must still overcome in order to “firm the full reign of peace predestined at his birth” (9.308). While Hesper maintains that this reign of peace is inevitable, his illustrations can only show it to be potential and contingent on mankind developing an immunity to fear. Hesper thus affirms his belief in the inevitability of human progress towards peace and liberty, but his demonstration only shows it to be possible.

Columbus presents a more coherent argument summarizing his interpretation of history as cyclical rather than linear. He encapsulates the repeated tragedies he has witnessed over the course of the poem by concluding that “like a loose pendulum [man’s] mind is hung./From wrong to wrong by ponderous passion swung” (9.317-8). The pendulum image captures not only Columbus belief that history repeats itself but also his observation that each of the positive events exposed by Hesper contained in it seeds of subsequent tragedy, so that a swing in one direction rendered a swing in the opposite inevitable. Columbus, too, allows one caveat, that Hesper’s story of the American
Revolution represented "a steadier movement and a path more plain" (9.321). Unlike in the case of Hesper's caveat, this does not contradict Columbus' overall point, as he observes that the present era of prosperity may be soon superseded by one of decline. Columbus illustrates his schema using examples from antiquity. He describes each past civilization's rise to power using imagery of light: the "effulgent morn of Greece...dawns" (9.356), "Palmyra brightens earth's commercial zones" (9.389) in the Hellenistic era, and in Rome "all virtues long resplendent shone" (9.399). The image of light symbolizing prosperity and learning is apt, if unsurprising, for Columbus' purposes as any reference to the dawn implies the eventual onset of night. Columbus notes how each of these civilizations fell, ending with the "deeper darkness" (9.439) of the medieval period. He sees progress in his own era, but cautions that "faint and slow the niggard dawn expands" (9.449). Columbus' examples from history thus reinforce the interpretation he developed during Hesper's narrative of America's future, by exhibiting a failure to match each of history's triumphs.

The argument ends when Hesper resorts to his favorite rhetorical technique, revelation, and Columbus oddly accepts it. Hesper opens his response by reminding Columbus again of his mortal fallibility, declaring "so small the portion of the range of man/his written stories reach or views can span,/that wild confusion seems to clog his march" (9.489-91). This sentiment recalls many statements Hesper has made previously, for instance, when Columbus mourned the Aztecs. It denies that Columbus is even capable of producing a valid argument, simply by virtue of his mortal status, without giving any indication as to how his argument is wrong. It functions not as a refutation but as a denial that introduces Hesper's actual refutation. As a mortal, Columbus' range
is limited by his ignorance of the future, so Hesper attempts to refute him by showing him more about the future. This final argument thus follows the pattern foreshadowed in earlier debates on the origin of the Indians, the fate of the Aztecs, and the effects of North American settlers. Hesper reveals to Columbus a future with overwhelming scientific progress and, eventually, world peace. Hesper notes that modern scientific advancements occur in multiple countries simultaneously, while ancient science only flourished in one society at a time, “circumscribed in some concentrated clime” (9.511). Hesper implies that the diffuseness of scientific achievements ensures that no single trauma or war could impede them all. This statement ignores the fact that Columbus has already predicted a worldwide cataclysm, wondering if “a storm proportion’d to the lights they shed, / Veil both his continents” (9.464-5). Columbus has already postulated a “storm” wide enough to destroy the progress of arts and science in multiple countries. Hesper implies that this will not happen, but offers no proof or argument as to why not. Hesper has won yet another argument by revelation and by proclaiming himself the winner, rather than through logical discourse. This time, though, Columbus acquiesces.

Columbus responds to Hesper’s revelation by abandoning his characteristic skepticism, in a shift that defies logic but serves Barlow’s ideological agenda. Columbus remains silent as Hesper narrates future scientific achievements. He finally speaks up when shown the nations of the world uniting in a federation of peace, which excites in him tears of joy: “Let me behold her silver beams expand / To lead all nations, lighten every land” (9.707-8). Gone is the skepticism that led Columbus to challenge Hesper’s every assertion at the beginning of the epic, as Columbus now uses the light imagery from his criticism earlier in the book to express awe at mankind’s unstoppable
achievements. After viewing more progress in book 10, Columbus declares himself completely convinced, hailing the "interminable reign" of peace (10.510). This is a striking transformation, chiefly because it defies logic. Hesper's minimal arguments are sufficient to completely convert Columbus, and his latest revelations leave the explorer too stunned to question them, as Columbus has done with every previous revelation.

While this conversion may not be explicable in terms of rhetoric, it makes better sense when considered in the context of Joel Barlow's ideology. According to Blakemore's biography, Barlow supported the American Revolution for idealistic reasons and believed strongly in the cause of liberty. His introduction to the Columbiad makes the poem's ideological agenda explicitly clear: "The real object of the poem...is to inculcate the love of rational liberty" and "to convince the student in political science that the theoretical question of the future advancement of human society...is held in dispute and still unsettled only because we have had too little experience of organised liberty" (Works 2.382). Barlow's work thus portrays America as a new beginning, and a departure from the old order by virtue of its liberty. The conversion of Columbus represents this theme of new beginning symbolically. Just as the Columbus' repeated objections symbolized his cyclical view of his story, his conversion-by-revelation mirrors the historical new beginning that Hesper proclaims. America's clean break from the past's system of government explains Columbus' clean break from his adherence to an old-fashioned logical argument. Optimism wins against all odds.

Barlow presents a less nuanced view of the past than does Virgil. Barlow's poem advocates an outright rejection of the past, in order to hail his country's new beginning, while Virgil envisions an important but limited role for the past as providing a formal
framework for future innovations. Still, the two poets share their technique of representing their views on this issue by structuring their characters’ interpretive dialogue in a way that symbolizes their conclusions. Further, both employ these dialogues to present a view of the relationship between the past and the future that reinforces the dominant ideology of their times, in a manner that speaks to the universal power of epic in such disparate circumstances as Augustan Rome and post-revolutionary America.

Reading the *Aeneid* alongside the *Columbiad* calls into question just which character is the hero in the latter. On an explicit level, the answer is unambiguously Columbus, given Barlow’s copious praise in his Preface for the explorer, and the connection between Columbus and Aeneas suggested by Barlow’s proem (Kallendorf 191). Comparing Columbus’ relationship with Hesper to that of Aeneas and Anchises, however, Columbus evidences a pessimistic and backwards-looking that is hard to square with his status as a bold adventurer and hero. Columbus’ skepticism does not compare to Aeneas’ uncertainty because Aeneas is simply incapable of forming his own interpretations during the first half of the *Aeneid*. Columbus is persuasive and opinionated, yet ultimately wrong. These characteristics link him more closely to Anchises than Aeneas; yet Columbus cannot be a simple analogue for Anchises. Besides the impassive Hesper, Columbus is the poem’s only character. He must be its hero.

The complexity of Columbus’ similarities with Aeneas and Anchises demonstrates the message Barlow communicates by imitating, evoking and subverting the *Aeneid*. While Barlow’s praises Columbus lavishly and glorifies the explorer’s virtues (see *Works* 2.391, e.g.), in likening Columbus to Aeneas, the author reveals his own concurrent skepticism about Columbus’ character. Columbus was apparently bold
and adventurous, but also a conqueror who brought royal dominion to the New World, both attributes that are somewhat at odds with the republican and democratic character Barlow wishes to endow the *Columbiad* with (*Works* 2.377). By placing Columbus in dialogue with Hesper, and allowing Hesper the ultimately victorious stance in their argument, Barlow encourages his readers to contemplate collective possibility rather than individual. As the genius of the New World, Hesper's success in persuading Columbus represents the singular, individualistic hero submitting joyfully to the prospect of collective progress. In line with Barlow's criticisms of tyranny and autocratic rule (*Works* 2.378), his manipulation of the interpretive motif, played out through the dyad of Columbus and Hesper, reveals his message of hope, in which the New World will unite around an inclusive national identity, as opposed to an exclusive imperial government. His characters thus model the relationship between Aeneas and Anchises but also adapt it to a New World and a new political experiment. Their representation in the *Columbiad* exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between the Classics and their imitators, whereby classical works animate their successors, which in turn recreate and reinvent the characterizations, structure, and imagery of the classical text, and in doing so, reaffirm its continuing relevance.
Works Cited


