The epic poem *The Columbiad*—a seminal text on American civilization, published by Joel Barlow in 1807—narrates the birth and growth of the United States, defines its history and ideology, and delineates its imperialistic ambitions and objectives. The text thus gives voice to the Founding Fathers’ “state of fantasy,” that is—in Donald Pease’s words—“the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 1-2). Pease’s idea of a state of fantasy as an instrument that policymakers use to authorize and legitimate their policies elucidates the encompassing and trans-historical “Janus-face of American exceptionalism” (Pease, *New American Exceptionalism* 141). This theory has characterized the country since its founding phase and was expressed in imaginative terms in epic literature.
By concentrating on Book VIII of *The Columbiad*, this essay focuses on the section wherein Atlas (the Guardian Genius of Africa) and Hesper (the Genius of America) discuss slavery and emancipation in the United States in the light of American empire-building and exceptionalism. The article thus aims at backdating the idea of “state of fantasy” to the end of the eighteenth century in order to interpret the friction between the imperialistic identity of the new country and attempts at social and political emancipation. Barlow’s text is a case in point since epic literature represents a primary tool for considering the foundation and definition of the United States as an ongoing process strictly interconnected with the country’s cultural, political, and economic expansion. The fact remains, however, that expansion entails violence, suppression, and failed attempts at emancipation.

The patriotic texts written between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century—of which the most representative works are Timothy Dwight’s *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) and Joel Barlow’s *The Columbiad* (1807)—defined in literary terms the principles of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” However, they also celebrated the transnational and expansionistic dimension of the new country by re-elaborating the classical theory of the *translatio studii et imperii*. By combining new American themes and values and old European forms and styles, the New World epos aimed at recounting the foundation and aspirations of the United States in imperialistic terms.

The American poet and politician Joel Barlow (1754-1812) was a member of the “Connecticut Wits,” a group of intellectuals that was based in Yale University and that flourished in the seventeen-eighites and seventeen-nineties.1 Like many other American poets of the Early Republic, Barlow aspired to write a great epos in order to consecrate their ancestors’ undertakings and ensure a heroic past to the nation by emulating the works of Homer and Virgil. He claimed that if epic represented the apex of the European literary tradition, an American epos would asserted the cultural development of the United States and lay the foundation for its future expansion. In an attempt to place Barlow and his works within the context of American (epic) poetry, Roy Harvey Pearce writes:

Barlow was not alone in his time in wanting an American epic. But he is the only poet (or would-be poet) before Whitman who had enough conviction and ability to run the risks involved in striving to use traditional means and forms to break away from tradition itself (Pearce 68-69).

In 1807 Barlow published *The Columbiad*, which is an enlarged and revised edition in ten books of his earlier philosophical poem *The Vision of Columbus* (1787).2

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1 The “Connecticut Wits” were conservative federalists who attacked their political opponents in satirical verses. They also tried to write a distinctive American epic poem and Timothy Dwight’s *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) is commonly considered as the first attempt in this direction.

2 In the Preface, Barlow asserts, “The Columbiad is a patriotic poem [whose] subject is national and historical” (Barlow 375). Compared with the philosophical dimension of *The Vision of
By giving a panoramic account of American history — from the appearance of the first natives to the vision of a global world led by the United States — The Columbiad is a patriotic epic poem in support of Jeffersonian democratic idealism. In the text, Barlow sets out to prove that the discovery of America has been beneficial to mankind and that American history is a crucial stage in human progress toward a world of peace and harmony. The poem, in fact, hinges on the attempt by Hesper — the guardian spirit of the West and Barlow’s literary alter ego — to console Columbus, by then old, sick and imprisoned. Hesper attains this by means of two strategies: by giving Columbus a lofty vision of the New World he had discovered, and by describing to him the history of the Western world up to the early nineteenth century. According to the author, the poetic object of the action aims to relieve Columbus’s afflicted soul by showing him how his efforts, although not recognized by his contemporaries, have not been in vain: indeed, he is shown to have paved the way to civilization and mankind’s happiness. On the other hand, the real object of the poem is more far-reaching and, in Barlow’s opinion, concerns the attempt to instill the love of freedom of thought and remove the passion for violence and war by concentrating on “the future progress of society and the civilization of states” (Barlow 382).

In Book VIII, after talking about the victorious battles of the American Revolution, and before envisaging the constitution of a global empire led by the United States, the text relates how Atlas, the genius of Africa, “denounces to Hesper the crimes of his people in the slavery of the Africans” (Barlow 672). Hesper and Atlas are two classical and mythological Titans who link ideologically and culturally the epic history of the United States with the heroic achievements of the earlier European civilizations.

In the European tradition, Hesperia represents the West, in which Aeneas, instructed by Apollo, will found the second Troy; in The Columbiad, Hesperia becomes the symbol of the shift of cultural and imperial power to the American shores. Following the thesis of the translatio studii et imperii, Hesper, the son of the

Columbus, The Columbiad shows Barlow’s new literary purpose to write an epic text which is evident in the very title. In fact, it evokes Homer’s and Virgil’s epics, the Iliad and the Aeneid. The initial eight-line invocation to “Almighty Freedom” (I. 23) is a further example of the epic intention of The Columbiad: while it is a significant re-elaboration of the classical topos, an epic invocation is completely absent in The Vision of Columbus.

3 According to the text, morality, a good form of government and the hope for permanent peace must be based on the republican principles represented by the new American nation. Barlow recognized that the values of peace, progress, and freedom, which had been expressed in the Declaration of Independence, contrasted with those described and exalted in the epics of the past. In particular, war — a key theme of the epic tradition — was conceived as the symbol of the tyrannies of the Old World by a nation whose identity hinged on the virtues of agriculture, commerce and democracy. This notwithstanding, Barlow was convinced that the future of his country was tied to military conflicts. As suggested by Giorgio Mariani, The Columbiad takes into consideration war episodes and the characters involved, thereby reacting against a widespread tendency of eighteenth and nineteenth century American culture to bypass or remove war and violence from literary texts (Mariani 70).
Sun, becomes the guardian of the western continent. Barlow’s Atlas—the guardian genius of Africa—is shaped on the brother African Titan Adamastor. Adamastor is “a personification of the Cape of Good Hope and the guardian of the Southern gateway of Africa” in Camões’s The Lusiads (Os Lusiadas)—a text Barlow read in the English translation of William Mickle (Quint 128). Both Adamastor and Atlas foretell the extermination of a race, but—as noted by Steven Blakemore—if the former condemns Portuguese imperialism, the latter reflects on the deep contradiction within the American republic represented by the practice of slavery (233).

Book VIII is wedged between the celebration of the American heroes of the War of Independence and the optimistic celebration of an international and everlasting peace. In that passage, The Columbiad introduces a new theme and considers how slavery could represent the greatest threat to the future of the republic. These are Atlas’s first condemnatory words:

Enslave my tribes! what, half mankind imban,
Then read, expound, enforce the rights of man! (VIII. 223-24)

. . . Enslave my tribes! and think, with dumb disdain
To scape this arm and prove my vengeance vain! (VIII. 245-46)

Atlas declares that the concept of freedom in the Republic and the practice of slavery cannot coexist, and, as Adamastor did, he forecasts that disaster will ensue as a result of that practice in America: Africa takes its vengeance when Americans find themselves the prisoners and slaves of Barbary pirates. If the new American nation does not forego slaveholding—Atlas goes on—a cataclysm will punish it and its inhabitants:

Nor shall these pangs atone the nation’s crime;
Far heavier vengeance, in the march of time,
Attends them still; if still they dare debase
And hold in thrall’d the millions of my race;
A vengeance that shall shake the world’s deep frame,
That heaven abhors and hell might shrink to name. (VIII. 271-76)

Nature itself rises up in hatred against the American institution of slavery. As an intellectual of the Enlightenment age, however, Barlow distances himself and his readers from the curse of the Titan and his dire prophecy:

Fathers and friends, I know the boding fears
Of angry genii and of rending spheres
Assail not souls like yours; whom science bright
Thro shadowy nature leads with surer light. (VIII. 309-12)

Barlow is conscious that he himself and “You [the reader] scorn the Titan’s threat” (VIII. 319), but—as suggested by David Quint in his Epic and Empire—he is “anxious about the continuity of a kind of classical epic awe in a modern era increasingly skeptical toward poetic fictions, [and] vest[s] that awe in personifications
of the victimized” (130). In an age of reason and science, “Barlow’s Atlas launches another epic curse on the part of the victims of history, promising retribution on their oppressors” (130).

If the spirit of Enlightenment sought to dominate nature and, as part of nature, other human beings, nature might take a tremendous revenge. From this perspective, Atlas’s prophetic curse calls into question the United States leadership in a world empire. The Titan recommends ending slavery:

Complete their triumph, fix their firm abode,
Purge all privations from your liberal code,
Restore their souls to men, give earth repose
And save your sons from slavery, wars and woes. (VIII. 391-94)

According to Richard Buel, Barlow believed that the United States had to purge itself of the crime of slavery by eliminating both slaves and masters, if it wanted to prevent its republican experiment from failing. In addition, abolition would establish a solid foundation for the emerging empire of liberty (Buel 291):

Based on its rock of right your empire lies,
On walls of wisdom let the fabric rise;
Preserve your principles, their force unfold,
Let nations prove them and let kings behold. (VIII. 395-98)

In the last books of The Columbiad, the poet envisions a world globalized by the unification of all languages (or English as an international language), the establishment of a general congress with representatives of all the nations (a congress which inevitably calls to mind the United Nations), and the achievement of universal peace. Furthermore, Barlow seems to foresee the cultural, political, and economic development of the Western and Eastern hemispheres as dependent on free trade in goods and ideas (globalization). Art, science, and technology will promote freedom, democracy and commerce, and will define the ideological, commercial, and political coordinates of the new country, but also of a world that the author already envisages as a union of confederations.

Since, in the poet’s view, the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence would provide the foundations of this transnational project, the United States would play the main role in its realization. Obviously, Barlow’s utopian world rests on shadowy notions and misunderstandings, violence and oppression, conquerors and the conquered. The poet shares Atlas’ views and describes slavery as a barbaric and uncivil practice contrasting with the democratic principles of the New World. For all that, it supports the establishment of a United States imperialistic “state of fantasy” and considers the exploitation of Africans—as well as the conquest of other civilizations—an essential tool for its achievement.

Despite the fact that the United States had established its political independence by waging war against the British Empire, the Founding Fathers immediately began to imagine the potential value of a mighty empire in the New World.
In the early days, the colonies and, later, the Republic had to expand because their objective was the construction of a continental empire in North America. In line with the theory of the *translatio studii et imperii*, the idea of a United States empire was supported by the belief that “civilization was moving westward, and that the United States would be the next (and perhaps last) great incarnation of civilization” (Streeby 96). United States empire-builders viewed themselves as the heirs of the Roman, the British, and the Spanish empires, but also differentiated the newborn republic by considering that “exceptional American conditions would prevent the United States from sharing the fate of other empires…” (Streeby 96).

As an Early Republic politician and man of letters, Joel Barlow synthesized how the dominant political elite theorized such an imperialistic image of the United States. As a national narrative, *The Columbiad* not only defined the United States cultural and ideological identity, and its global role in a trans-national and trans-historical perspective, but it also outlined the foundation of a United States empire. From its very first experiments, the New World epos aimed at delineating the multilayered and continuous attempts of American civilization to define itself through the further conquest of other civilizations, and to conquer other civilizations through the further definition of itself. By forecasting the history of the United States as the global and definitive empire, *The Columbiad*, both in form and ideologically, re-elaborated the previous western epic models, outlining the national aspirations and the international authority of the United States in imperialistic terms.

In line with the Founding Fathers’ imperialistic ideology, these patriotic texts expressed the belief that the new country would not only imitate the development of the European nations, but would even actually surpass it. Yet, the large-scale structure of epic narratives—the level on which they delineate the birth and expansion of the United States—overtakes and somehow explodes United States exceptionality doctrines.

From both a literary and ideological point of view, the American exceptionality celebrated by these works of art in defining and describing the foundations and ambitions of the country echoed the various exceptionalities which had characterized Homer’s Greeks, Virgil’s Romans, Dante’s Italians, or Camões’s Portuguese.

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4 As argued by Amy Kaplan, an American studies critique of United States empire can make evident “how U.S. interventions have worked from the perspective of comparative imperialisms, in relation to other historical changes and movements across the globe” (Kaplan, “Violent Belongings” 6). American imperialism is thus not only the economic, military, and cultural influence of the United States on foreign countries, but also the strategy of obtaining and ruling colonies, which has already characterized the European empires.

5 In *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Kaplan states “imperialism has been simultaneously formative and disavowed in the foundational discourse of America studies” (Kaplan, “Left Alone” 5).

6 In the process, the United States epos found its originality—neither in the whole acceptance, nor in its complete rejection, but—in the ambition to modify and amplify the classical and European tradition by re-elaborating its constitutive elements.
the United States imperial ambition was “normalized” within a broader framework. Furthermore, by re-considering the darkest episodes in United States history—such as slavery or the Indian removal programs—epic literature narrated the development of the American civilization in analytical, and often critical, terms.

From this perspective, the originality of Barlow’s project emerges within a transatlantic literary framework. As suggested by David Quint, *The Columbiad* has to be considered in relation to the dichotomy between the “imperial” epic and the “republican” epic. The former is the linear and uninterrupted narrative of the winners’ history that justifies the empire and conquest. The latter is the suspended and episodic narrative of the losers that exalts their resistance to imperialist intentions (Quint 126-27). *The Columbiad* finds its place in an intermediate position inside Quint’s dichotomy: while it shares the ideology of Republican epics, it continues to have the linear teleological structure of imperial texts. In an attempt to find a place within the European epic tradition, Barlow compares himself in the Preface to Homer and Virgil—who are praised for their style but criticized for their morality—and also to Lucanus—who, on the contrary, is praised for his morality but criticized for his style. While attempting to emulate the classic models, Barlow thought they should be re-dimensioned from a moral point of view. As regards the works of Homer, Virgil, and Lucanus, Barlow claims that the theme of *The Columbiad* is much more important and imposing. To the author’s mind, the poem could be considered the founding text of the new American national and cultural identity.7

Barlow manipulated the models of the past and, for the first time in the Western literary tradition, constructed an epic in which the Americans, initially subjugated, rebel against the invaders and emerge triumphant. Thus, *The Columbiad* narrates the development of the United States and delineates its imperialistic aspirations. Although in the text the author presents benignly the country’s history, ideology and objectives, yet, he has to see beyond them on behalf of the empire enterprise. United States imperialism—according to Pease—is “a complex and interdependent relationship with hegemonic as well as counterhegemonic modalities of coercion and resistance,” which has contributed to define a “monocultural image of the national identity predicated on the active suppression of the specificity of race, class, and gender relations” (Pease, “New Perspectives” 23).8 Since the days of the early republic, imperialism has been producing

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7 This aim is reached through the two structural objects of the poem, which are, according to Barlow: “the poetical object”—that is “the fictitious design of the action”—and “the moral object”—that is “the real design of the poem” (Barlow 377). In the Preface, Barlow constantly stresses the importance of the moral sphere of its poem in relation to the Western epic tradition.

8 Kaplan interweaves the “domestic” and the “foreign” dimensions of American history in order to demonstrate how imperialism—from the United States-Mexico War of 1848 to the World War I—has profoundly influenced and shaped American social relations and cultural productions (Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*).
ideological, cultural, as well as political, social, and economic deadlocks that the United States is still trying to break. Atlas’s dream of the Africans’ emancipation was engrained in the very principles of the Declaration of Independence; at the same time, the Titan’s aspiration had to be domesticated, if not repressed, by a republic which aspired to transform itself into an empire shaped, for the most part, on European models.