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# *'The Last and Brightest Empire of Time': Timothy Dwight and America as Voegelin's 'Authoritative Present,' 1771-1787*

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Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) aspired to write epic poetry worthy of a great empire. At Yale College, he and his fellow "Connecticut Wits" intended, in historian Henry May's words, "to provide America and New England with a national literature, and in doing so to show the world that republicans were capable of wielding a correct and elevated style."<sup>1</sup> There was reason for doubt. Propponents in Europe of what became known as the "degeneracy theory" denied that the New World could ever produce an artist or author or academic of the first rank, a prejudice that stung Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and their generation.<sup>2</sup> Europe's critical reception of the Wits' most earnest and ambitious attempts at eloquence also gave little hope that much good could come from America's provincialism and old-fashioned literary taste. Still,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson responded to the charge in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Washington wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1788, "Although we are yet in our cradle, as a nation, I think the efforts of the human mind with us are sufficient to refute (by incontestable facts) the doctrines of those who have asserted that every thing degenerates in America" (W. B. Allen, ed., *George Washington: A Collection* [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988], 397). As evidence, Washington had partly in mind the poetry of Connecticut Wit Joel Barlow (396).

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Dwight and his circle at Yale pressed on, fully confident in America's future. Indeed, they portrayed their emerging republic as nothing less than the seat of the millennial kingdom. Dwight was at the forefront of this work of the imagination. His orations, sermons, and poems in the last third of the eighteenth century—during the critical years of the nation's founding—reveal a framework of thought that situated America as the endpoint toward which all prior history had been tending. Indeed, Dwight's presuppositions conform closely to the eighteenth-century philosophy of history that Eric Voegelin mapped out in his book *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, including especially the new doctrine of grace Voegelin called the "authoritative present."<sup>3</sup>

*The Enlightenment displaced transcendence as source of meaning with pride in man's material progress.*

Voegelin turned to the eighteenth-century French *philosophe* D'Alembert to piece together the internal logic of the authoritative present. In the preface to the first volume of the *Encyclopedie* (1751), D'Alembert constructed a selective genealogy of humanity's intellectual progress. The weight of factual evidence, as amassed in the *Encyclopedie*, was supposed to prove that man's present enlightenment surpassed every prior epoch. D'Alembert arranged this evidence into an intramundane story of linear progress. This thread of progress served as a substitute for an authentic transcendence and for the Classical and Christian anthropology that had once situated man within that transcendent order. Progress's preoccupation with power over nature and the accumulation of knowledge useful to that end displaced the *bios theoretikos* and destroyed the practice of contemplative history suited to that larger definition of man's nature and his place in the universe. Enlightenment utilitarianism placed a premium on Baconian transformation of nature and reduced a now truncated man to his material needs, denying him any telos higher or larger than mastery over nature.<sup>4</sup>

Having also reduced the meaning of history to mere finite, intramundane facts, the ideology of progress then constructed a new web of doctrine around those facts in order to "read" their ultimate meaning and to tell a purportedly universal story. The point the civilized world had reached in this imagined genealogy of progress was by definition superior to everything that had come before. The present (as embodied by the most advanced nation) became the

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<sup>3</sup> *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, edited by John H. Hallowell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-79 and *passim*.

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standard by which to judge the rest of the world's enlightenment. D'Alembert and other *philosophes* constructed stage theories of history to plot the world's gradual improvement, to tell an ersatz story of redemption. At this point, the *philosophes* imported their own eschatology. Not only was the present stage the most advanced in history, it was also the last, giving even greater authority to the present. The present stood as the endpoint toward which history had been moving. Western civilization and its emerging political, religious, and commercial freedom would never be superseded. History had stopped. It had ended by arriving at the authoritative present.<sup>5</sup> History as mere chronology would go on, but the future would be merely the further elaboration of the present.

*The present, viewed as both the most advanced and the last stage of history, became authoritative.*

The present, therefore, gave meaning and legitimacy to those parts of the past that prefigured itself, reducing the past to mere prototype or anticipation of the present. Likewise, individual human beings had meaning only as part of the *masse totale* that was undergoing collective, earthly redemption. In progressive ideology's worst manifestations in the twentieth century, individual human beings became merely "fertilizer" for the inexorable march of progress.<sup>6</sup> Read through the lens of the progressive mind, history lost its tragedy. Suffering became invisible in the triumphant story of progress. But short of this grim potentiality, the progressive ideology read the past (and still reads the past today) only in terms of the present (or of an imagined future as a perpetuation of that present). The authoritative present functioned, in Voegelin's words, as "a special doctrine . . . to bestow grace on the present and to heighten an otherwise irrelevant situation of fact into a standard by which the past and the future can be measured. This act of grace, bestowed by the intellectual leaders of Enlightenment on themselves and on their age, is the source of the genuine revolutionary pathos that animates the idea of progress. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

In short, the authoritative present limits itself to "an inner-worldly chain of human events," masquerades under a false universality that claims to have decoded the meaning of the whole, reduces the complexity of human civilization to a single thread of progress, announces that humanity is on that path of progress, and then anoints one nation as the Christ to lead the world out of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 104-05.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

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Nations  
became  
substitute  
"mystical  
bodies"  
of Christ.

darkness into light. By the eighteenth century, Voegelin argued, nations gradually became substitute "mystical bodies" of Christ. The new sacred stories they told about themselves became "genuine evocations of new communities which tend to replace the Christian *corpus mysticum*."<sup>8</sup> The *philosophes*, of course, anointed France as the obvious Christ among nations, the embodiment of the authoritative present. And yet for a time, the *americanistes* among them identified their trans-Atlantic brothers as the chosen people.<sup>9</sup>

There would be something comical in the idea of provincial America being history's "authoritative present" if Americans themselves had not been encouraged in this flight of fancy by such key figures as Turgot, Condorcet, and Richard Price. America's "misconstruction" of its Messianic identity came from domestic and foreign sources. It was both homegrown and imported. For a time, radical thinkers in France and England embraced the emerging American republic within the family of elect nations. Turgot, the most esteemed of the group, made the most modest claims. He limited himself to saying that if America, the "hope of the world," became sufficiently enlightened then it might well prove to be a "model," an "asylum," and "an example of political liberty, of religious liberty, of commercial liberty, and of industry."<sup>10</sup> Turgot's disciple and biographer, Condorcet, responded affirmatively in 1783 to the Abbe Raynal's smug question, "Has the discovery of America been beneficial or harmful to the human race?" Though expressing his frustration in this essay and elsewhere with America's failure to adopt absolute free trade and to end slavery, its use of religious tests on the state level, and its lingering fondness for complex government in the form of bicameralism, separation of powers, and checks and balances, Condorcet nevertheless praised America for extending the dominion of human rights and liberty.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 18.

<sup>9</sup> See Joyce Appleby, "America as a Model for the Radical French Reformers of 1789," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ser., Vol. 28, No. 2. (April 1971), 273.

<sup>10</sup> Turgot to Richard Price, March 22, 1778, in Bernard Peach, ed., *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Republic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979), 222. For a fuller account of the radical Enlightenment's contribution to the construction of America's messianic identity see my unpublished paper, "The Enlightenment and America's Messianic Identity," delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 31-September 3, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Condorcet's essay was published in 1786. See Durand Echeverria, "Condorcet's *The Influence of the American Revolution on Europe*," *The William and Mary*

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The discovery of America had indeed benefited the human race. Surpassing any secular millennial claim of the time, Turgot's English friend, the dissenting radical Presbyterian Dr. Richard Price, claimed in 1784 that the American Revolution took second place only to Christ's incarnation and that the colonies' independence was nothing less than "one of the steps ordained by Providence" to usher in history's "last universal empire," the "empire of reason and virtue."<sup>12</sup>

America's identity as history's "last universal empire" appeared in Timothy Dwight's poetry as early as 1771, well before Turgot, Condorcet, or Price ever flattered America with their praise. Dwight's fellow Wit and undergraduate at Yale, Joel Barlow, later read and quoted from Price's *Observations*, and the radical dissenter's economic thought seems to have influenced Dwight's hope for international harmony through peaceful trade. But Dwight's understanding of America as the authoritative present came from sources other than the *philosophes*. If anything, they possibly gave him only more reasons to believe what he already knew. He read and admired many Enlightenment figures, but his vision of America owed more to a set of presuppositions inherited elsewhere. From Homer via Alexander Pope's verse translations and from Virgil in the original, he inherited the epic tradition, from Milton the possibilities for a Christianized epic. From the Scientific Revolution he inherited his Baconian faith in man's capacity to bend nature to his will and conquer sickness and death. From his Puritan ancestors he inherited the assumption that America was a New Canaan for God's elect, an honor they had previously conferred on Reformation England.<sup>13</sup> From his grandfather Jonathan Edwards and from other New England divines, he inherited a complex way of decoding the prophetic mysteries of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation and the ability to see America as the millennial kingdom of God in such passages as Isaiah 60 (although Dwight never qualified his claims

*Dwight's understanding of America had sources other than the philosophes.*

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*Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan., 1968), 85-108. Another translation of part of this essay is available in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *Condorcet: Selected Writings* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 71-83.

<sup>12</sup> *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, in Peach, ed., *Richard Price*, 183-84.

<sup>13</sup> William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). For William Tyndale's editions of the Bible as an alternative source for the Puritan understanding of England as a chosen nation, see Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, Foreword by Robert N. Bellah (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 20-23.

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*Protestant  
adversaries  
of the Pope  
became allied  
with radical  
secularists.*

about America with the word “probably” the way his grandfather usually took care to do).<sup>14</sup> He also inherited his culture’s habit of reading history primarily as the warfare between Protestantism and Catholicism. For many New Englanders in the eighteenth century, as in the sixteenth century before them, the engine of history was the protracted global conflict between the true Church and the Papacy that would end only with victory for the completed Reformation. Dwight continued to see the Catholic Church in these terms and Protestant America, therefore, as God’s instrument for Antichrist’s defeat. In an ironic twist, Dwight and other sons of the Reformation made common cause with the likes of Tom Paine and European infidels to battle on the same side of history against the dark forces of tyrannical “popish principles” enthroned in church and state.<sup>15</sup>

Evident also in the matrix of Dwight’s thought are three inter-related presuppositions about epistemology and history that need to be mapped out in some detail before navigating his interpretation of American destiny. Dwight’s interpretation of the meaning of America required, first, that history be transparent; second, that history had reached the final stage; and third, that the partial history of one nation could tell a universal story. Described in this way, these unquestioned assumptions match Voegelin’s analysis closely and taken together comprise what he called a “doctrinal complex.” Transparency, finality, and universality determined the architecture of Dwight’s thought.

While Voegelin insisted that the “meaning of history as a whole is inaccessible,”<sup>16</sup> Dwight found history utterly accessible, its meaning transparent and intelligible. Astute mortals have the capacity

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<sup>14</sup> See the excerpt from Edwards’s treatise, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England,” in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, revised and updated edition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 54-58. George Marsden provides an important reminder about Edwards’ overlooked caution about naming America as the seat of the millennium in *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003) 263-267.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase “popish principles” is Paine’s. He also referred to America’s cause as that of the “visible church.” Britain, like all “lovers of arbitrary power,” found the Pope’s methods of oppression too tempting. Political and religious tyranny were one and the same thing. So, too, were political and religious liberty. On this much, the orthodox and the infidels agreed. See Paine’s “Thoughts on Defensive War” (1775), in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945) II: 52-55.

<sup>16</sup> *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 100.

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to “read” the pattern of events and to discern therein the work of God or Providence. History was not ultimately mysterious. In “reading” American history, Dwight engaged in what could helpfully be called an argument from design. He did so not to prove God’s existence or His wisdom, power, or goodness—these points of theology were not at issue—but to prove America’s “election” as a chosen people in the divine plan of history and redemption. In doing so, Dwight’s theology of history paralleled the habit of mind common among his Puritan ancestors. Spiritually, they looked for visible affirmations of their own election as saints and from the time of their earliest settlements in the New World looked for “special providences” that affirmed that God had indeed entered into a new national covenant with them. Their arguments from success amounted to arguments from design. Like them, Dwight selectively pieced together world history as an intelligible account of God’s special purposes for America. The Old Testament had traced the single thread of Israel’s role in God’s redemptive plan. The New Testament had extended that thread to the Church. Now modern history served as a sort of third testament, drawing out that thread one final length to its culmination in America. For Dwight, history’s intelligent design was indubitable. Indeed, his attempt to read God in history paralleled eighteenth-century natural theology’s attempt to read God in nature, as it had for an earlier colonial figure like Increase Mather. Creation and Providence together revealed God’s character and his hand in history.<sup>17</sup>

*For Dwight, history was not ultimately mysterious.*

More narrowly, Dwight also found it possible to know the precise point history had reached in the divine timetable, whether that meant nearing Bishop Berkeley’s final act in the drama of empire’s march from east to west; reaching the verge of the Sabbath rest of history’s seven-day “week”; or approaching the opening of the seventh “vial” or “seal” described in the latter part of St. John’s Revelation. Dwight relied on all of these secular and sacred images to read history, and in particular to read America’s place in the divine scheme of things. Puritan divines had been debating for two-hundred years over the right way to interpret the Book of Revelation’s prophetic chronology. They had puzzled over when the first vial had been poured out, how long each epoch between the vials lasted, and whether events now proved that history had

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), especially chapter 8.



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entered the fifth or sixth vial. In a sermon in 1798, Dwight himself calculated the time between vials at about 170 or 180 years, marking such events as the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, the conversion of the Jews, and the visible decline of Islam as proof that the seventh and final vial was about to be opened.<sup>18</sup> One can only wonder what a modern audience would make of this July Fourth oration. The striking thing in all of these arcane attempts to unravel the mysteries of Scripture is the telling consensus that the end was near. No preacher argued that, yes, these vials were the key to history, but that by his calculation the church lingered somewhere around vial one or two and therefore the end times were off in the distant future. Dwight's urgency was always palpable. The end was near, and transparent current events wedded to transparent prophecy proved it was so.

*Single "thread  
of progress"  
discernible  
only if history  
is read  
selectively.*

Dwight's construction of America's sacred history relied in the third place on a narrow principle of selection and exclusion for the historical evidence that would prove his case. The single "thread of progress" becomes intelligible only if a few chosen episodes, people, facts, and ideas are allowed into the story. As Voegelin described the process, "the historian [who constructs the new sacred history] selects a partial structure of meaning, declares it to be the total, and arranges the rest of the historical materials more or less elegantly around this preferred center of meaning."<sup>19</sup> This "preferred center of meaning" tolerates only one thread in history, denying meaning to any other thread. Voegelin wrote, "Once a strand of history is isolated and endowed with a sacred meaning, the tendency is irresistible to neglect all other structural elements of history as irrelevant. The 'sacred history' becomes a restrictive principle of selection for historical materials." Thus, this "restrictive principle of selection" functions automatically at the same time as a principle of radical exclusion. Ironically, the very scheme of history that claims to have the secret code that makes all of history intelligible serves in fact as a recipe for profound ignorance.<sup>20</sup> When Dwight applied these principles to America, he had no intention, unlike Voltaire and Turgot, to construct a radically secularist history, but his mind followed the same contours as theirs and

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<sup>18</sup> "The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 1363-94.

<sup>19</sup> *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 100, 101.



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may have led to something closer to their agenda than he could have realized. The Christian vocabulary he used may have made his sacred story appear to himself and others more orthodox and rooted in the Christian tradition than it in fact was.

Dwight's "preferred center of meaning" was of course America. He wove his sacred story from the single thread of America's experience in the world. In Voegelinian terms, Dwight was unwilling for America's finite story to be merely one "part of the profane structure" of history. He "hypostatized"—that is, he symbolized in concrete form—a mundane, finite story "into a process of universal meaning." If this application of Voegelin is correct, then Dwight helped construct a story for America that was false and disorienting. Moreover, he contributed to what in the nineteenth century would become a pervasive tendency in Europe and America to write history "with a view to legitimate an authoritative present."<sup>21</sup> Dwight's conception of America as the authoritative present can be drawn together sufficiently from his 1776 *Valedictory Address*, a sermon from 1781, and his major poems taken as a whole. This selection of documents leaves aside important questions about Dwight's contributions to American literary history, to theology, to Federalist polemics against Jefferson, and to the development of higher education in the new nation. But this partial estimation of the man provides an important insight into one phase of the construction—or misconstruction—of the American identity. These works reveal what had to be true about the world in order for Dwight to be right about America.

On July 25, 1776, three weeks to the day after the Continental Congress released the Declaration of Independence, Dwight delivered his *Valedictory Address* to the Yale graduates at a private ceremony. The oration's title gives modern ears the impression that Dwight was the top graduate in 1776. In fact, though barely in his mid-twenties, he was already a respected tutor and would soon join the Continental Army as a chaplain. Given the heady atmosphere of these days and the genre of a commencement address, it is not surprising that Dwight overreached a bit. He began with a flattering panorama of North America as the "favorite land of heaven." He noted the continent's physical grandeur, Edenic abundance, and superiority to every other land in natural resources and production. Secure behind the moat of the Atlantic Ocean, America

*America the  
"favorite land  
of heaven."*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

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was formidable and invincible—the current war being but an historical anomaly not to be repeated.<sup>22</sup>

*America  
viewed as  
world  
redeemer.*

But America's institutions, not its material greatness, truly marked it as "the greatest empire the hand of time ever raised up to view." Dwight attributed this greatness to America's profound unity in religion, manners, and language—a sort of reversal of the judgment against Babel—singling out in particular the twin effects of civil and religious freedom. Dwight offered Catholic Spain's degenerate colonies to the west and south as an instructive contrast, populated as they were by the "refuse of mankind" and subject to political and religious tyranny. But America would one day redeem these regions as well. He promised his audience that "the moment our interest demands it, these extensive regions will be our own; that the present race of inhabitants will either be entirely exterminated, or revive to the native human dignity, by the generous and beneficent influence of just laws, and rational freedom." Dwight could not have made America's civilizing mission clearer. Spanish America offered but a temporary obstacle to the "future greatness of the Western World."<sup>23</sup> Historian Ruth Bloch interpreted this speech, along with Tom Paine's contemporaneous *Common Sense*, as a fusion of "elements of nationalism and universalism . . . drawn together in a kind of passive political messianism, according to which American principles, not power, would ultimately prevail through the globe."<sup>24</sup> While Dwight certainly envisioned an ideological empire, he also just as clearly envisioned a physical one of grand proportions.

*Birth of  
American  
empire seen  
as coinciding  
with the  
perfection of  
all knowledge.*

The timing of the birth of the American empire struck Dwight as highly significant. Every other empire was rooted in medieval ignorance, but America emerged at the time of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, "when every species of knowledge, natural and moral, is arrived to a state of perfection, which the world never before saw." Taking a swipe at the enemy, Dwight derided the "boasted British constitution [as] but an uncouth Gothic pile, covered and adorned by the elegance of modern architecture." Its institutions bore the "gross traces of antient [sic] folly and savageness." Reciting what reads like an orthodox and formulaic

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<sup>22</sup> *A Valedictory Address to the Young Gentlemen, Who Commence Bachelors of Arts at Yale-College, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1776* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1776), 6-9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-11.

<sup>24</sup> *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 86.

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litany of Enlightenment prejudice, Dwight rejoiced that America was born when “mankind have in a great degree learned to despise the shackles of custom, and the chains of authority, and claim the privilege of thinking for themselves. Every science is handled with a candor, fairness and manliness of reasoning, of which no other age could ever boast.” “At this period,” he emphasized, “our existence begins; and from these advantages what improvements may not be expected?”<sup>25</sup>

*America associated with rejection of custom and authority.*

At this point in the address, Dwight turned to the themes of “last” and “noblest.” In 1726, the idealist philosopher George Berkeley wrote “America, or the Muse’s Refuge: A Prophecy.” It remained unpublished for a quarter-century until an extensively revised version appeared in his *Miscellany* in 1752 under the better-known title, “Verses by the Author on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.” Berkeley and his poem had an unlikely but long and intimate connection with Yale. The famous philosopher had come to America in the unfulfilled hopes of founding a college in Bermuda. He lived for a time in Rhode Island while he promoted the venture. In 1732 he gave his Newport home and farm to Yale as an endowment for scholarships. These “Berkeley Scholars” included the Connecticut Wit John Trumbull and several future college presidents. In 1733 Berkeley followed his bequest with the donation of a thousand books to Yale’s library, including works of philosophy, science, history, theology, and poetry, including his own *Alciphron*, an attack on modern infidelity.<sup>26</sup> Dwight wrote a preface to an 1803 American edition of *Alciphron*, and also in that year, during his tenure as president, Yale named its new dormitory Berkeley Hall.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Dwight included the entire “Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” in volume four of his *Travels* (published posthumously in 1821-22).<sup>28</sup>

Berkeley’s six-quatrain poem ended with a stirring prophecy repeated over the next century and a half by such prominent Americans as George Bancroft, Daniel Webster, Daniel Coit Gil-

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<sup>25</sup> *Valedictory Address*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 74-75, 83-86, 160-61.

<sup>27</sup> Charles E. Cuninghame, *Timothy Dwight, 1752-1817: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 185, 248; Leon Howard, *Connecticut Wits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 7, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Travels in New England and New York*, 4 vols. (London: William Baynes & Son, 1823) IV: 498-99.

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man, Charles Sumner, and Albert Beveridge:

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The four first Acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the day;  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.

*Empire seen as following the sun from east to west, where it would "rise and fall no more."*

In these lines, Berkeley gave enduring poetic form to the ancient belief in the *translatio imperii* (that is, that empire naturally passes from one successor to the next) and the equally ancient belief in heliotropism (that is, that the movement of empire naturally follows the sun's path from east to west).<sup>29</sup> The seventeenth-century English poet George Herbert applied the *translatio* and heliotropism to the Church's spread of the gospel.<sup>30</sup> These ideas were still prevalent in America at the time of the French and Indian War.<sup>31</sup> In 1773, the Scots immigrant William Smith reminded the American Philosophical Society that the "Progress of the Arts, like that of the Sun, [traveled] from East to West."<sup>32</sup> During the Revolutionary War, South Carolinian David Ramsay announced in a July 4th oration, "Ever since the Flood, true religion, literature, arts, empire, and riches have taken a slow and gradual rise from east to west, and are now about fixing their long and favorite abode in this new western world."<sup>33</sup> In 1778, Joel Barlow exulted that "Earth's blood-stained empires, with their Guide the Sun,/From orient climes their gradual progress run;/And circling far, reach every western shore,/"Till earth-born empires rise and fall no more."<sup>34</sup> Dwight's friend Jedidiah Morse used the *translatio* and heliotropism expansively near the end of his *American Geography* of 1789 (in a paragraph which matches stylistically a nearly identical passage in

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<sup>29</sup> See Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire*, translated by Herbert H. Rowen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 113.

<sup>31</sup> Theodore Frelinghuysen used these themes in a sermon in 1754. Mason I. Lowance, Jr., *The Language of Canaan: Metaphor and Symbol in New England from the Puritans to the Transcendentalists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 211.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in May, *Enlightenment in America*, 85.

<sup>33</sup> *An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence* (Charleston, SC, 1778). Excerpted in Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Nationalism and Religion in America: Concepts of American Identity and Mission* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 63.

<sup>34</sup> *The Prospect of Peace*, in *The Works of Joel Barlow*, 2 vols., introduction by William K. Bortorff and Arthur L. Ford (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimilies & Reprints, 1970), 11.

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Dwight's *Valedictory*).<sup>35</sup> And John Adams recalled in 1807 that there was "nothing more ancient in my memory than the observation that arts, sciences, and empire had traveled westward; and in conversation it was always added, since I was a child, that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America."<sup>36</sup>

Dwight had no doubt in the summer of 1776 that arts, sciences, and empire had made that leap. History had come to its last act. He designated America as the "last and brightest empire of time" and accepted the *translatio* and heliotropism as facts of history rather than as the dogmas of faith that they were. "It is a very common and just remark," he told the Yale graduates, "that the progress of Liberty, of Science and of Empire has been with that of the sun, from east to west, since the beginning of time." As proof, he rehearsed the movement of empire from the Assyrians to the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans and, most recently, to the British. The pattern of history required that America be next. But did it require that America be the last? Dwight had no doubt on this point either. America would not be superseded. "The Empire of North America will be the last on earth," he claimed. The circle had been completed; empire had nowhere else to go.<sup>37</sup> While Dwight may have thought history provided self-evident proof for these patterns, his belief that history somehow stopped with America required that he impose a doctrinal framework onto history. Even if heliotropism were somehow confirmed by human experience and not a pattern projected onto history by the human imagination, the leap to America as the *last* empire had no such empirical grounding.

*Doctrinal  
framework  
imposed  
on history.*

But America was not simply the last in the sequence of time. Berkeley's poetic philosophy of history also claimed that history's last empire would be the noblest. Dwight's similar adjective "brightest" mattered as much as "last." Disconnected from a philosophy of human progress, it would not have been enough for America to have been last in the sequence. Wedded to a philosophy of decline—say, from an age of gold, to silver, to bronze, to iron—America's status as history's last empire would have been cause for despair. Wedded to an ideology of human improvement, however, America's status as the last empire automatically made

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<sup>35</sup> *The American Geography: Or, A View of the Present Situation of the United States of America*, 2d ed. (London: John Stockdale, 1792), 469.

<sup>36</sup> John A. Schurtz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 97.

<sup>37</sup> *Valedictory Address*, 13.

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it history's "most glorious." It would not be surpassed because it *could not* be surpassed: "Here the progress of temporal things towards perfection will undoubtedly be finished. Here human greatness will find a period. Here will be accomplished that remarkable Jewish tradition—that the last thousand years of the reign of time would, in imitation of the conclusion of the first work [that is, the last day of the week of creation], become a glorious Sabbath of peace, purity and felicity."<sup>38</sup> Dwight hardly could have made more extravagant claims about America. But he did. Asking his audience's indulgence, he went "one step further." Both reason and the Bible testified, he said, that "this continent will be the principal seat of that peculiar kingdom, which shall be given to the Saints of the Most High." The millennium would begin in America, yielding only to the one kingdom that truly deserved to be the "last" and "greatest"—Messiah's kingdom foretold by Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah spoke of the "uttermost parts of the earth" and the "wilderness" because he had seen a vision of America.<sup>39</sup>

Historian Ernest Lee Tuveson, author of a landmark study of America's messianic consciousness, denied that Berkeley conveyed more than a hint of apocalypticism in his poem. Confined as it was to North America and serene in its contemplation of the future, the vision seemed to him too limited in scope for the universalism characteristic of millennialism and too calm to correspond to anything in the dramatic Book of Revelation.<sup>40</sup> Be that as it may, Dwight certainly found it easy to accommodate the poem to his own apocalyptic vision. Events in 1776 rushed toward the eschaton. Inspired by this millennial hope, Yale's graduates, he urged, should go out to serve America in their chosen professions of medicine, law, and politics. Physicians, for example, ought to bear in mind "that it is a peculiar mark of the millennial period, that human life shall be lengthened, and that the child shall die an hundred years old." With his closing words, Dwight "address[ed] the enraptured hymn of Isaiah" to America: "Arise, shine for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee! Nations shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" (Isaiah 60: 1, 3). In

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 94.

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Dwight's imagination, America's identity conflated Israel, Christ, the Church, and the newborn United States.<sup>41</sup>

There was little in Dwight's eschatology to distinguish it from that found among other postmillennialists in colonial, revolutionary, and early-national America. Countless poems, orations, and sermons of the day offered variations on these same themes. But one sermon on the millennium Dwight preached in 1781 opens a window into his entire way of reading history and interpreting America's meaning in that history. Dwight had left the army in 1779 and returned home to Northampton, Massachusetts, to be with his mother. Word had come that his loyalist father had died in self-imposed exile along the Mississippi. Dwight preached this sermon in his native Northampton on the occasion of Washington's victory over Cornwallis at Yorktown. He interpreted America's victory and independence in 1781 as nothing less than a landmark in the preparation for Antichrist's overthrow. In other sermons he might speak of close analogies between biblical events and the American Revolution, but in this sermon on Isaiah 59 he insisted that the prophet had had Europe and America in view when he spoke of the "islands" and the "west."<sup>42</sup>

Dwight positioned the American story within the larger context of what he called the "progress of earthly things towards perfection, which will one day finish the preparation for the commencement of the Millennium glory and happiness." The word "preparation" here matters. Christ's millennial reign itself would not likely begin until the year 2000. But the final stage of the world's preparation for that glorious event was now underway. America's independence had eternal significance. God had delivered America from the clutches of a decadent British empire for a special task, in order that "the work of Divine providence might be carried on, and a way opened for the arrival of scenes, which shall respect happier ages, and influence in their consequences the events of eternity."<sup>43</sup> The next step was for Antichrist to be defeated.

Dwight understood Antichrist to be an alliance of all tyrants

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<sup>41</sup> *Valedictory Address*, 15, 17, 18, 22.

<sup>42</sup> *A Sermon Preached at Northampton, on the Twenty-Eighth of November, 1781: Occasioned by the Capture of the British Army, Under the Command of Earl Cornwallis* (Hartford: Nathaniel Patten, n. d.), 11-12, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Dwight may have had his grandfather Edwards in mind as one of the "judicious commentators" who arrived at the year 2000. On Edwards's timing of the millennium, see Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 198-99.



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who arrogantly claimed to be the “supreme Head of the Church” and not just the Pope. This included princes. Protestant America had long been free of the Catholic Church, but with Cornwallis’s defeat it was now free from tyrannical princes as well. Antichrist’s time was short. The Jesuit Order had been disbanded (in 1773), the King of France had restored tolerance to Protestants, and God was using even the skeptical spirit of the age, contrary to the skeptics’ own intentions, to undermine the last vestiges of falsehood, bigotry, and prejudice. The advancement of knowledge, begun by the revival of learning in the sixteenth century and extended now in the “most enlightened [century] the world ever saw,” gave further evidence of God’s “great design.” Dwight declared, “It is the tendency of human affairs, unless interrupted by extraordinary incidents, to be constantly progressive towards what may be termed natural perfection.” In fact, these intellectual advances served as a sort of John the Baptist for a greater spiritual work. “In this progress,” he added, “they are preparing the way for the commencement of that moral perfection, which is the immediate effect of the Spirit of God.”<sup>44</sup>

Dwight knew exactly what great work the Enlightenment had done to defeat Antichrist. It had exposed Catholicism’s folly to the light of truth. It had “unfolded the ridiculous nature of the popish ceremonial; the absurdity of the peculiar tenets of that church; their inconsistency in adopting the Bible in pretence, and not in reality; the ridiculous nature of religious establishments; the injustice of prescribing creeds and making acts of conformity; the vainglorious folly of adding new forms of worship to the Bible; with innumerable other articles of the same ruinous tendency.” And if this age of wonders could produce a Montesquieu and Beccaria in Catholic France and Italy—the “gloomy regions of slavery and superstition”—just imagine the possibilities for human intellect in liberated times and places. Add to all this the cultivation of the human mind and temperament brought about by the civilizing effect of world commerce, and the future appeared bright indeed.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, Christian America ended up on the same side of history as modern infidels, united by a common hatred of the Roman Church. One did the Lord’s work knowingly, the other unknowingly, but both engaged the enemy to vanquish the dark ages. In the late

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<sup>44</sup> *A Sermon Preached at Northampton*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

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1790s Dwight would famously rail against the “triumph of infidelity,” but for now he thanked God for the infidels’ help against the adversary.

The “convulsion,” as he called the War for Independence in this sermon, made sense of all these tendencies. Echoing the rhetorical pattern of his *Valedictory*, he claimed that America had exhibited to the world

for the first time, an extensive empire founded on the only just basis, the free and general choice of its inhabitants. All others were founded on conquest and blood. Here, within a few years, the rights of human nature have been far more clearly unfolded, than in any other age, or country. Here, constitutions of civil government have, for the first time, been formed, without an invasion of God’s prerogative to govern his church, and without any civil establishments of religion. Here, at the present time, is opened an extensive and most interesting field of improvement, by which the mind, in a stage of society most friendly to genius, and with all human advantages at the commencement of its progress, is invited, is charmed, to venture far in every path of science and refinement.

Around the corner lay unimaginable discoveries, beyond the wonders of Benjamin Franklin’s experiments with electricity.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the “progress of science” would even prepare the “mind to the easiest reception of the grace of the gospel.” For a Calvinist whose doctrine of election denied that there was any such thing as a preparation for God’s grace, this was an odd connection to make between science and salvation. But these were the images Dwight held in his imagination in 1781. With this vision before his congregation’s eyes, he urged his fellow Americans humbly to thank God “for using [them] as instruments of advancing his immortal kingdom of truth and righteousness.”<sup>47</sup> This was America’s mission.

Americans viewed as God’s instruments for advancing truth and righteousness.

The principal themes from Dwight’s 1776 *Valedictory* and 1781 Yorktown sermon appeared in many of his best-known poems. He composed most of his poetry in the 1770s and ’80s while he was a tutor at Yale, an army chaplain, and then a pastor in Northampton and Greenfield. The chronology can be a bit confusing.<sup>48</sup> Much of

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<sup>46</sup> Franklin and David Rittenhouse appeared frequently in Dwight’s poems as evidence of science’s advancement in America. See especially *Greenfield Hill*, Book VII, lines 423-436 (in *The Major Poems of Timothy Dwight*, 519-520).

<sup>47</sup> *A Sermon Preached at Northampton*, 33-34.

<sup>48</sup> The dates for the drafts and publication of Dwight’s poetry come from Kenneth Silverman, *Timothy Dwight* (New York: Twayne, 1969), 21, 24, 40-41, 48, and 52. Silverman gives the publication date of the *Epistle to Colonel Humphreys* as 1794, but it appeared a year earlier in the anthology entitled *The Columbian Muse*.

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what he wrote in the 1770s was known only to his friends at Yale. His poem *America*, circulated in manuscript among the Wits in 1771, was published anonymously a decade later. He also began his sprawling epic *The Conquest of Canaan* in 1771, expanded and revised it during the Revolution, but saw it through to publication only in 1785.<sup>49</sup> He wrote his rousing patriotic song “Columbia” in 1777 but did not publish it until 1783. A draft of his *Epistle to Colonel Humphreys* dated from 1785, but it remained unpublished until 1794. This pattern continued with his most enduring poem, *Greenfield Hill*, begun in 1787 but not published until 1794. Although little or none of Dwight’s poetry appeared in print prior to the early 1780s, his earliest experiments in verse already indicated the trajectory of his philosophy of history. Cycling repeatedly through the same themes, conventions, metaphors, and diction, Dwight worked out his vision for American destiny.

Tuveson singled out the appearance in manuscript of Dwight’s *America* in 1771 as the likely answer to the question, “When did destiny become manifest?” This poem, Tuveson claimed, “is not merely a grandiose vision of future ‘glory’ but a developed historical myth, in fact the kernel of the idea of American millennialism.”<sup>50</sup> Even if Tuveson made too much of this poem as the first glimmer of Manifest Destiny—that honor belonging possibly to the *Valedictory* since it appeared in print several years before *America*—he was right to emphasize the poem’s millennial fervor. It opens with a grim picture of North America clouded over by the superstition and violence of savage tribes. Tuveson, following critic Leon Howard’s lead, misidentified this passage as a description of Europe’s Dark Ages, and there is much imagery in these lines to support this reading.<sup>51</sup> But the poet explicitly identified the Tartar tribes as crossing the “vast western ocean” to fill a land stretching from “Darien to the pole,” that is, from the Straights of Darien (Panama) to the North Pole, clearly designating the North American continent.<sup>52</sup> This realm, hidden from Europe for so many centuries (or

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<sup>49</sup> Silverman, *Timothy Dwight*, 24-25.

<sup>50</sup> *Redeemer Nation*, 103. Tuveson gives 1771 as the poem’s publication date.

<sup>51</sup> *Redeemer Nation*, 103; *Connecticut Wits*, 83.

<sup>52</sup> *America: Or, A Poem on the Settlement of the British Colonies; Addressed to the Friends of Freedom, and Their Country* (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1780), 3-5. Dwight used this same designation for North America in his *Epistle to Colonel Humphreys* (in *The Columbian Muse: A Selection of American Poetry, From Various Authors of Established Reputation* [New York: J. Carey, 1794], 44).

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“sequestered from the knowledge of mankind,” as Dwight said five years later in his *Valedictory Address*), had been settled by Protestant England. It became a haven of religious freedom for those hearty enough to brave the American “desart” for the sake of freedom and out of a zeal for truth and God.<sup>53</sup>

Dwight recounted Britain’s recent victory over Papist France in the French and Indian War and praised the sovereign God of history for the resulting spread of civilization, science, prosperity, commerce, the rule of law, and the reign of “Liberty.” He then praised America for its “rising glory,” a poetic convention that Howard called the “most overworked theme in eighteenth-century American verse.”<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the poet exulted that America’s “rising Glory shall expand its rays,/ And lands and times unknown rehearse thine endless praise.” But a mysterious woman then appeared to the poet, identified as “Freedom” by the inscription on her scepter. Like Anchises prophesying to Aeneas or the angel Raphael to Adam, she granted the poet a preview of the future, America’s future of “virtue, wisdom, arts and glorious power.” In this vision of glory, dominion, and expansion, war gives way to the reign of peace, bringing the rest needed for society to cultivate science, the arts, philosophy, religion, history, and rhetorical eloquence. Finally, the inspired poet saw “more glorious Romes arise,/With pomp and splendour bright’ning all the skies,” an empire (or perhaps a series of empires as the plural “Romes” suggests) complete with “Appian ways” and canals to subdue nature. In 1787, Dwight still had imperial Rome on his mind as a model. In his poem *Greenfield Hill*, the Muse exhorted the poet to “See Ap-

*America’s  
“rising glory”  
an overworked  
poetic theme.*

<sup>53</sup> Dwight’s fellow Wit David Humphreys made the same point about America remaining unknown to Europe: “America, after having been concealed for so many ages from the rest of the world, was probably discovered, in the maturity of time, to become the theatre for displaying the illustrious designs of Providence, in its dispensations to the human race” (quoted in Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 119). Back in 1742, Jonathan Edwards had written, “This new world is probably now discovered, that the new and most glorious state of God’s church on earth might commence there; that God might in it begin a new world in a spiritual respect, when he creates the *new heavens and new earth*” (in Cherry, *God’s New Israel*, 55). It is worth noting that the word “discovered” in the eighteenth century generally meant “revealed.”

<sup>54</sup> *The Connecticut Wits*, 100. In 1770, Dwight’s friend and fellow Wit John Trumbull wrote his “Prospect of the Future Glory of America.” Another Wit, David Humphreys, wrote “A Poem on the Future Glory of the United States.” Princeton’s Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge delivered their “Rising Glory of America” as a graduation address to the class of 1771. Howard, *Connecticut Wits*, 45; Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 119; Silverman, *Timothy Dwight*, 21-22.

pian ways across the New World run!/Here hail the rising, there the setting, sun:/See long canals on earth's great convex bend!/Join unknown realms, and distant oceans blend." All this splendor, however, was but a preparation for the end of history: the descent of God's universal kingdom, the resurrection of the dead, and the fiery Last Judgment.<sup>55</sup>

Based on this early literary experiment, John Trumbull predicted that "Mr. Dwight is to be our American poet."<sup>56</sup> In the 1780s, Dwight's 10,000-word epic, *The Conquest of Canaan*, gave the world ample opportunity to judge his talents as the American Virgil or Milton. Imitating Milton's *Paradise Lost* and affecting the great poet's word choice, metaphors, and syntax, Dwight retold and greatly expanded the story of Joshua leading the Israelites into the Promised Land.<sup>57</sup> Critics in England were unkind to the poem, and the poem has not fared well among modern critics either. Howard mischievously found the epic "full of eighteenth-century Americans with Hebrew names who talked like Milton's angels and fought like prehistoric Greeks."<sup>58</sup> Another literary historian called his "unfortunate" epic "a monument to misled ambition and energy."<sup>59</sup> Dwight, however, took his labors seriously and dedicated his poem to his hero, George Washington.

Central to the epic's tenth book is a lengthy section Dwight called the "Prospect of America"—a proleptic vision granted to Joshua that depicted America as a New Canaan. Echoing Milton's use of the angel Raphael to guide Adam through redemptive history, Dwight similarly sent a heavenly messenger to Joshua to show him the future in America: Eden restored, nature tamed by the advancement of civilization, the millennium of peace and plenty, and the end of history with the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment. Within this panorama, Dwight situated America's birth on the verge of the seventh day of history's week of days. Six epochs since creation had already passed, three symmetrical sets of two days each, stretching from the creation to Moses, from Moses to the Incarnation, and from the Incarnation to the dawn of the millennium—the Sabbath of the "world's great week." Joshua

<sup>55</sup> *America*, 9-12.

<sup>56</sup> Howard, *Connecticut Wits*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 67-69.

<sup>58</sup> *Connecticut Wits*, 93.

<sup>59</sup> Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America*, 175, 176.

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stood in the age of Mosaic law. But America appeared in the age of gospel light, toward the end of that epoch, in fact, as it approached the final, millennial day. Dwight knew the code of history's simple calendar.<sup>60</sup>

Much more directly related to America as the authoritative present, Dwight also used this vision in *The Conquest of Canaan* to mark America as "Empire's last, and brightest throne."<sup>61</sup> These themes of finality and progress, explored in detail in his *Valedictory*, preoccupied his thinking and recurred in poems other than the *Conquest*. His rousing patriotic song "Columbia" (1777) most memorably announced, "Columbia, Columbia, to glory rise,/The queen of the world, and the child of the skies!" But a few lines later Dwight also declared that America's "reign is the last, and the noblest of time."<sup>62</sup> In using the words "last" and "noblest of time," Dwight came the closest to quoting directly the famous concluding line of Berkeley's poem: "time's noblest offspring is the last." Ruth Bloch suggested that Berkeley's poem, well known and available in print in the colonies in the 1770s, "probably served as a model for the poems by Dwight, Freneau, and Brackenridge."<sup>63</sup> Dwight would give these themes poetic form yet again in 1785 when he envisioned America as the place "Where empire's final throne in pomp ascends."<sup>64</sup> He could not have made his longing for finality more evident.

After leaving the army and returning to Northampton, Dwight served twice in the Massachusetts Assembly, ran schools in Northampton and Greenfield, pastored a church in Greenfield, and then succeeded Ezra Stiles in 1795 as president of Yale. Returning to his alma mater, he found the rowdy upper classmen supposedly reading Tom Paine and calling each other Voltaire, Rousseau, and D'Alembert. His poems and sermons took up the challenge of unbelief and the cancer of Jeffersonian deism. His student Lyman Beecher, the source for the account of fashionable infidelity at Yale in 1795, recalled his beloved mentor Dwight as one of the wisest

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<sup>60</sup> *The Conquest of Canaan*, Book X, lines 555-576ff, in Timothy Dwight, *The Major Poems of Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) with A Dissertation on the History, Eloquence, and Poetry of Bible*, introduction by William J. McTaggart and William K. Bottorff (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), 275-76.

<sup>61</sup> *Conquest of Canaan*, Book X, line 556.

<sup>62</sup> *Columbian Muse*, 48, 49.

<sup>63</sup> *Visionary Republic*, 71.

<sup>64</sup> *Epistle to Colonel Humphreys*, 73.

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and dearest of men. His enemies may have called him “old Pope Dwight,” but to Beecher he embodied the best of Christian character and temperament.<sup>65</sup> Beecher the evangelical and millennialist, with his eye set toward the expanding western frontier, would go on in the nineteenth century to contribute his own take on America as the authoritative present.

*That history can be stopped by universalizing democracy's creed a “Satanic mirage.”*

No doubt Dwight would have found any similarity between himself and D’Alembert (or between himself and a pope for that matter) absurd. From one point of view, they did indeed operate within incommensurable universes of belief and unbelief. But from the perspective of Voegelin’s analysis of the spiritual pathologies of modernity, the two men may have shared a set of assumptions about history, universality, and national chosenness. At least there are enough resemblances to make the question worth asking and the implications worth speculating about. Voegelin himself did not hesitate to apply his categories to America. While reserving his most serious judgments for Positivist, Marxist, and Nazi regimes, Voegelin recognized the internationalist “revolutionary pathos” that pulsed even in the heart of someone of George Washington’s temperament. Voegelin quoted Washington’s prediction to Lafayette: “We have sown a seed of Liberty and Union that will germinate by and by over the whole earth. Some day the United States of Europe will be constituted, modeled after the United States of America. The United States will be the legislator of all nations.”<sup>66</sup> Addressing our present age, Voegelin warned against democracy’s delusion that it could stop history by universalizing its creed. “In our time,” he wrote, “this Satanic mirage has become one of the great paralyzing forces in Western politics in the form of the idea that democracy, at the phase which it has reached historically, can be stabilized and perpetuated by ‘stopping’ this or that—for instance, a Hitler or a Stalin.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps that mirage still paralyzes democracy whenever it tries to universalize itself by stopping “Islamofascism.”

American democracy would be spiritually healthier if it recovered what Voegelin called “contemplative history.” Doing so

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<sup>65</sup> *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher*, edited by Barbara M. Cross, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961) I: 240. Beecher was in his third year at Yale when Dwight became president. He also studied theology with him for several months after his graduation.

<sup>66</sup> *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 181-82.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 102.



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would require the recovery, or perhaps the telling for the first time, of a certain kind of American national history, one appropriate to man as *bios theoretikon* and therefore integrated with theology and philosophy. Not that the study of history can or ought to do the work of philosophy or theology. Disciplined within its own sphere of competence, history ought to be content to tell a finite story, one that does not close man off to transcendence, or trace false genealogies in the service of ideology, or construct substitutes for Christian universality. A modest version of American history would make more room for the mystery of God's providence; develop a greater capacity to see tragedy in the nation's past and present; refuse to accept its own partial history as key to the meaning of the whole; reject democratic ideology as an ersatz theology of history; and not assume that Western civilization has reached its highest and final form in American institutions. Misconstructed national narratives make contemplative history impossible. Without contemplation, true self-knowledge is impossible. And self-knowledge is as indispensable to the wise nation as to the wise man. Voegelin's concept of the authoritative present brings intellectual coherence to habits of mind that helped shape the American identity in the late eighteenth century, spiritual pathologies to which even a staunch anti-Jacobin Federalist like Timothy Dwight was susceptible.

*Self-knowledge  
as indispensable  
to the  
wise nation  
as to the wise  
man.*