

NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard

“I used to be funny,” Kurt Vonnegut informs us in *A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY* (Seven Stories, \$23.95), “and perhaps I’m not anymore.” This last bit is untrue, of course. In these essays from the pages of the radical biweekly *In These Times*, he is very funny as often as he wants to be. For instance: “My wife is by far the oldest person I ever slept with.” And if you don’t smile for at least a week at the friendly notion of the corner mailbox as a “giant blue bullfrog,” you ought to have your license revoked.



But, like Mark Twain, even when he’s funny he’s depressed. His has always been a weird jujitsu that throws us for a brilliant loop. As much as he would like to chat about semicolons, paper clips, giraffes, Vesuvius, and the Sermon on the Mount—“if Christ hadn’t delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn’t want to be a human being. I’d just as soon be a rattlesnake”—his own country has driven him to furious despair with its globocop belligerence, its contempt for civil liberties, and its holy war on the poor: “Mobilize the reserves! Privatize the

public schools! Attack Iraq! Cut health care! Tap everybody’s telephone! Cut taxes on the rich! Build a trillion-dollar missile shield! Fuck habeas corpus and the Sierra Club . . . and kiss my ass!” The novelist/pacifist/socialist/humanist who has smoked unfiltered Pall Malls since he was twelve is suing the tobacco company that makes them because, “for many years now, right on the package, Brown and Williamson have promised to kill me. But I am now eighty-two. Thanks a lot, you dirty rats. The last thing I ever wanted was to be alive when the three most powerful people on the whole planet would be named Bush, Dick and Colon.”

So, though he does mention Jerry Garcia, Madame Blavatsky, Rush Limbaugh, and Saul Steinberg (“who, like everybody else I know, is dead now”), besides wonderfully observing that “Hamlet’s situation is the same as Cinderella’s, except that the sexes are reversed,” he can’t help but notice that “human beings, past and present, have trashed the joint,” and that we are stuck in “a really scary TV reality show” called “C-Students from Yale.” Thus he reiterates what Abraham Lincoln said about American imperialism



in Mexico, what Mark Twain said about American imperialism in the Philippines, and what a visiting Martian anthropologist said about American culture in general in a novel Vonnegut hasn’t finished writing yet: “What can it possibly be about blowjobs and golf?”

Vonnegut reminds us that *Huckleberry Finn* was the first novel ever typewritten. From what Ron Powers suggests in *MARK TWAIN* (Free Press, \$35), that tap-tap-tap may have been the only agreeable interface of man and machine in Samuel

Clemens’s life, not counting the pilot with his paddlewheel. Certainly his experience dictating to a tube was a literary disappointment and his investment in typesetting a financial disaster.

What’s surprising about this fine new biography is how much more still remains to be said about the man in the white suit and red socks, after the Ken Burns public-television miniseries, Justin Kaplan’s psychiatric case history, and previous books by



Powers himself on Sam's boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri. Powers goes over a lot we already knew—the luckless father, the feckless brother, the steamboat, and his infamous “skedaddle” from the Civil War; the discovery in the Wild West of gold, silver, newspapers, frogs, vitriol, tall tales, and the demotic idiom; the shipping out to Honolulu and the Holy Land; the genteel marriage, Hartford mansion, and lecture-circuit hustle; losing a cherished wife and three children to spinal meningitis, diphtheria, and epilepsy; going broke and hating God—but Powers also has a thesis to push about the triumph of Western ruggedness over Eastern priggishness in American culture. And although this thesis oddly slights Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, and other possible rebuttal witnesses, it does invite us into such exotic worlds as nineteenth-century literary journalism in Boston, book publishing in New York, saloon society in San Francisco, the surpassing generosity of William Dean Howells at *The Atlantic*, and the expatriated soul of Henry James on the high sneeze.

Powers resists the consensus notion that it was all downhill for Sam after *Huckleberry Finn*, trying hard to make a case for such clunkers as *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. He is more persuasive on the novelist's gradual but progressive “un-learning” of his own racism, masterly in explications of dialect, “framing,” and word play in the novels, reproving on Sam's envy and resentment of Bret Harte, and downright scary in evoking Sam's dark side—those shadow-haunted dreamscapes where the Gemini twins were waiting, along with the fraternal guilt and the female phantoms. Maybe the white suit was to cover up the black thoughts—the disguise he wore to go out into the daylight world, like an ambulance or an ice-cream truck. And reading here about marriage to Olivia, seeing some of their letters, I have decided to stop complaining that Mark Twain never wrote a book about adult love. In effect, Ron Powers has written that book for him.



From what Mel Watkins tells us in his enthralling and revisionist biography *STEPIN FETCHIT: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF LINCOLN PERRY* (Pantheon, \$26.95), the comic actor and song-and-dance man might have arrived in Hollywood in the 1920s, if not from the nineteenth-century pages of Mark Twain, or from the nineteenth-century stages of black-face minstrelsy, then perhaps from an early Vonnegut novel, *Mother Night*, whose famous moral was that “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

Lincoln Perry, doing a riff on the “puttin’ on ole massa” shuck of the plantation trickster, pretended to be “The World's Laziest Man.” To get by in the white man's world, or the white man's movie studio, a black man needed a disguise. But it was precisely this disguise—a “majestic sham,” says Watkins; the Br'er Rabbit mask of a “crafty con artist”; a “near-hypnotic languidness” and “absentminded coon lethargy” turned all of a sudden into “the silken finesse of his dancing”—that ended up offending his own people, including Bill Cosby in a 1968 CBS special, *Black History—Lost, Stolen, or Strayed*, in which Perry was reviled as “an embarrassment to blacks,” “a mockery of upstanding Negro citizens,” “Hollywood's Uncle Tom,” and “the willing accomplice to Hollywood's systematic denigration of the black man.”

Bad enough that Perry was already “uppity” on the set, complaining about his stereotyped roles, disputing contract provisions, demanding star treatment, and then, while slyly promoting himself in the Negro press, misbehaving on the mean streets (marital problems, auto accidents, public brawls, lawsuits, jail time). He was in “a no-win position” even before his act began to mortify middle-class blacks and intellectuals: “He was criticized for the offensive parts he took, but if he complained and was rebuked by the studios, he was castigated as a trouble-maker” by a black theatrical community fearful of losing what little opportunity it had for screen time

as butlers, maids, stableboys, boot-blacks, and voodoo priestesses.

So the first black Hollywood star, who was once paid as much as \$3,000 a week, died broke and bitter. To get to that deathbed, Watkins goes back not only to Key West and the Caribbean-born hooper-father but also to the vaudeville road, the black-theater circuit, the tent shows, dance clubs, burlesque houses, carnivals, cabarets, race riots, and lynch mobs. *Stepin Fetchit* is a shadow history of performance as survival.

The Bulgarian-born, Viennese-cultured, exiled-to-England Elias Canetti fancied himself some sort of history-devouring Hegelian sage. At least his mother and his wife bought into this self-aggrandizement, and so did the Swedish Academy that gave him a Nobel Prize for Literature, and so, perhaps, did Susan Sontag, who called the polymathic author of *The Tongue Set Free* and *The Torch in My Ear* “a genuine hero, in the guise of a martyr.” You wouldn't believe a word of it if all you had to go on was *PARTY IN THE BLITZ: THE ENGLISH YEARS* (New Directions, \$22.95). Canetti's posthumously published memoir of his four decades as an unappreciated émigré in a country where, he was appalled to discover, only one man had ever read his only novel—and Iris Murdoch was a scandal and a drag.

Canetti, who refused to write for money or work for a living, has shrewd things to say here about class in England, and arrogance, and a want of honest feeling. But the sage himself is revealed in these pages to have been as cold, vain, and snotty as anyone he met at the many cocktail parties he despised. He is disdainful of Sigmund Freud, contemptuous of T. S. Eliot, malicious about William Empson, and misogynistic on the subject of every woman on whom he pounced whether or not he really wanted to. One of those women was Murdoch, who made gentle fun of him in several of her early novels, for which she is so viciously punished in these sour pages that I am beginning to regret I ever admired *Auto-da-Fé* and am almost sorry I even read *Crowds and Power*. n

WHITE KNEES

Zadie Smith's novel problem

By Wyatt Mason

Discussed in this essay:

On Beauty, by Zadie Smith. The Penguin Press, 2005. 390 pages. \$25.95.



Ever since a twenty-four-year-old Zadie Smith appeared on the literary scene in 2000 with her first novel, *White Teeth*, there has been little disagreement over the seriousness of her ambitions. While still an undergraduate at Cambridge, she planned and executed a 500-page novel that, with terrific humor, hopscotched over 150 years of history; told a multigenerational, multifamily saga of the intertwined friendships and amorous entanglements of its English Protestant, Bengali Muslim, Jamaican Jehovah's Witness, and Jewish geneti-

Wyatt Mason is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. His last review, "A World Unto Himself," appeared in the July issue.

cist principals; and collated postcolonialism, intermarriage, religious militancy, and the moral implications of genetic engineering. With nary an adolescent wizard and glaringly absent any ominous codes, *White Teeth* nonetheless sold more than 1.5 million copies to English-language readers and was translated into nearly thirty languages. Fellow writers and critics were similarly enthusiastic: Salman Rushdie offered that *White Teeth* was "astonishingly assured... the voice has real writerly idiosyncrasy," and hard-to-please platitudinarian Michiko Kakutani echoed that Smith had "an idiosyncratic voice entirely her own."

There was, however, at least one reviewer who took issue with the idea that

Smith's work was particularly original:

A twenty-three year old first time novelist is fortunate indeed if one out of every fifty sentences is truly their own. And by this I mean not only its subject, but its rhythm, syntax, punctuation, and should it aspire towards comedy; its punchline. To her credit, there are moments when Smith manages this... but often she doesn't and what we get in its place is some truly inspired thieving... Smith doing Amis, Smith doing Rushdie, Smith doing Kureishi, Winterson, Barnes, Auster, Virginia Woolf, EM Forster, Nabokov.... *White Teeth* is the literary equivalent of a hyperactive ginger-haired tap dancing ten year old; all the writing is ornamental in the extreme.... There is a damn good writer here struggling to escape the influence

of the big, baggy English novels of the Eighties; a little too eager to prove she can write herself out of, back into and around a paper bag.

This critic who took issue with Zadie Smith was, in fact, Zadie Smith herself. With Nabokovian cheek and intellectual bite, Smith had written a review of her own book for the short-lived magazine *Butterfly*. And for those who might think to dismiss Smith's mixed assessment of *White Teeth* as a mere stunt, a self-effacing pirouette on the runway of self-promotion, subsequent evidence accumulated to suggest that Smith wasn't buying into the hype around her.

Consider, for instance, the curious call and response soon after an examination of Smith's work by James Wood appeared in *The New Republic*. Although impressed by many aspects of Smith's "large and inventive book," admiring the frequent fineness of the writing ("her details are often instantly convincing, both funny and moving"), Wood also paid Smith a decidedly mixed compliment: her work prompted him to coin what has become the most mentioned and debated literary term since "deconstruction"—"hysterical realism":

Zadie Smith's novel features, among other things: a terrorist Islamic group based in North London with a silly acronym (KEVIN), an animal-rights group called FATE, a Jewish scientist who is genetically engineering a mouse, a woman born during an earthquake in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1907; a group of Jehovah's Witnesses who think that the world is ending on December 31, 1992; and twins, one in Bangladesh and one in London, who both break their noses at about the same time.

This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism.... The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked.

Next to Wood's "hysterical" set Smith's "hyperactive"; beside Wood's "overworked" place Smith's "ornamental in the extreme": Wood's objections paralleled Smith's own, so much so that she ventured a public reply. "Hysterical realism," she wrote in *The Guardian* after 9/11, "is a painfully accurate term for the sort of overblown, manic prose to be found in novels like my own *White Teeth*....

These are hysterical times; any novel that aims at hysteria will now be effortlessly outstripped—this was Wood's point, and I'm with him on it." Showing little defensiveness and much disarming candor, Smith professed her ambition to tame her manic instincts and write a novel that produced the same effect as those "that create a light in my head":

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*—a miniaturist tale of a bourgeois man dying a bourgeois death—every time I read it, I find my world put under an intense, unforgiving microscope. But how does it work? I want to dismantle it as if it were a clock, as if it had parts, mechanisms. I wonder . . . how is this book made? How can I do this?

Two years later, when Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man*, appeared, it was clear she had dismantled, rethought, and radically remodeled her novelistic impulses. Whereas *White Teeth* is panoramic in presentation, a maximalist depiction of northwest London's teeming diversity, *The Autograph Man* is decidedly more miniature in scope. Although the novel features a range of eccentric supporting characters—pot-smoking slackers, Hollywood has-beens, rabbinical dwarves—all are turned to face a single, central figure: the eponymous "autograph man," Alex-Li Tandem, dealer in celebrity signatures. As his surname suggests, twenty-seven-year-old Alex's ethnicity is two-wheeled: the son of a Chinese father and a Jewish mother, Alex is preoccupied by his hybridism. The very model of a new-millennial twenty-something hollow man, he is a pop-culture addict and committed TV-watcher. "He is," announces Smith on her book's first page, "one of this generation who watch themselves."

Despite much up-to-the-minute set-dressing—the novel contains charts and diagrams, pictures and playful typography—the spine of Smith's story is highly conventional, a bildungsroman. By book's end, Alex has begun a transformation, a moral shift away from celebrity worship and onanistic self-involvement and toward family history and immediate community—a transformation, readers and

critics agreed, that felt as cold and false as the intricate connections between families and friends in *White Teeth*, however hyperactive, had seemed warm and true. Clearly, with *The Autograph Man*, Smith was striving to write a substantial and substantively different book, one that dramatized how her generation, after marinating in a culture of trashy entertainments, was emerging into adulthood reeking of emptiness. But Alex, as the vessel for that void, the man under the "unforgiving microscope," remains more a collection of notes toward a character than a believable human being, and the novel in which he is set feels like a hollow example of what is wrong with the culture—superficial and hasty, crass and underthought—rather than a critique. Although Smith was to be applauded for daring to attempt so different a novel from *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man* was an instance not so much of Smith's seizing on something truly her own as of her grasping at an idea of a novel that failed to coalesce.

No self-effacing exegesis of her own novel was forthcoming, but Smith's activities just after *The Autograph Man* was published in 2002 suggested she was continuing to work out her ideas of what the novel could do. That autumn, Smith became a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University, enrolling in a variety of literature courses, such as "Austen, James, and the Novel of Strategy" and "Literary Theory and the Life of Literature." Although Smith's fellowship was in support of an intellectual project, a book of essays she was writing called *The Morality of the Novel*, one of the courses that she herself taught indicates a more practical application of her studies. If, as Dr. Johnson claimed, "a habit of expression . . . can only be acquired by a daily imitation of the best and correctest authours," Smith's own "20th-Century Reading for 21st-Century Writers" shared with her young charges a strategy that had served her, along with generations of writers, so well: the course was "an examination of the formal mastery of a clutch of 20th-century novelists concentrating on how their individual practices might assist aspiring 21st-century writers."

Given the recent lengths to which Smith has gone to study the novel's mechanics, not to mention that nearly a decade has passed since she began writing *White Teeth*, it would not be unreasonable to expect that her new book, *On Beauty*, could prove to be the culmination of her ambition to write a novel "truly her own." As Smith sets the stage upon which this novel's intimate family upheavals will unfold, she shows new writerly confidence and poise. There is less of the showboating prose that too often marred *White Teeth*, such as "Kelvin smiled; a big gash across his face that came and went with the sudden violence of a fat man marching through swing doors"; nor are there the profligate formal whimsies—boxed jokes, pop quizzes, chat-room transcripts—that crowded out character in *The Autograph Man*. In their place there is unaffected writing that reveals people and places.

At the novel's gravitational center is a white, fifty-six-year-old Englishman named Howard Belsey. Born to a "petty, cheap, and cruel" working-class London family, Howard has long been an untenured Professor of Aesthetics at Wellington College, a "half-decent American university" near Boston. When Howard teaches a class on Rembrandt—his scholarly focus and the subject of his long-delayed book, *Against Rembrandt: Interrogating a Master*—a student might hear Howard say, while staring at Rembrandt's etching *Seated Nude*:

What we're trying to . . . interrogate, here . . . is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human. What is it about these texts—these images as narration—that is implicitly applying for the quasi-mystical notion of genius? . . . To reframe: . . . Is this nude not a confirmation of the ideality of the vulgar? As it is already inscribed in the idea of a specially gendered, class debasement?

"Mytheme"; "ideality of the vulgar"; "specially gendered, class debasement": Howard—who, when presented with an etching of a nude woman, sees a "text"—is the very model of an abstruse intellectual. Smith's finely tuned ear consistently

bends Howard's academic English toward the authentically funny rather than breaking into caricature.

Smith also takes much pleasure picturing hapless, middle-aged Howard for us, as in this string of snapshots that hang on a wall in the Belsey home:

Howard in Bermuda shorts with shocking white, waxy knees; Howard in academic tweed under a tree dappled by the Massachusetts light; Howard in a great hall, newly appointed Empson Professor of Aesthetics; in a baseball cap pointing at Emily Dickinson's house; in a beret for no good reason; in a Day-Glo jumpsuit in Eatonville, Florida, with Kiki beside him, shielding her eyes from either Howard or the sun or the camera.

The prose here, in its eye for color and its appetite for alliteration ("white, waxy knees"; "tweed under a tree"; "Howard in a great hall") recalls the lyrical attentions of Nabokov, a writer Smith has aped in the past, but skips easily past mere imitation to serve not simply Smith's idea of pretty prose but our idea of Howard: we've seen his kind before, but not in this light.

The "Kiki" in the photo is Howard's African-American wife, "whom [he] had once, twenty-eight years ago, thrown over his shoulder like a light roll of carpet, to be laid down, and laid upon, in their first house for the first time," and who "was nowadays a solid two hundred and fifty pounds." Mother to their three children, intuitive Kiki is the counterweight to her academic husband, feeling "her way instinctively through her problem[s] ... grateful she was not an intellectual." Together, the couple live in a "fine middle class house" given to Kiki's grandmother by "a benevolent white doctor she worked closely with for twenty years."

Kiki and Howard's marriage, begun three decades earlier on a seemingly safe September 11, has lately come under attack from within: Howard has had an affair. When we first meet her, Kiki has decided to withhold her affections from Howard while weighing the wisdom of calling it quits after three decades and as many children. A major narrative question that hangs over the novel is whether Kiki will forgive her husband his indiscretion.

As their parents attempt to right

their listing relationship, the Belsey children are doing their best to lead autonomous lives. Jerome, twenty, their "friendless and brooding" eldest boy, a student at Brown, a practicing Christian in a family of nonbelievers, is a young man beginning to realize that, like his family, he himself is "full of liberal crap." Zora, their daughter, a sophomore at Wellington, is as comfortable living the life of the mind as she is uneasy in her imperfect body: for her, "going for a swim" means, "walk the pool, look at the athletes, sit down, put . . . toes in, get back up, walk the pool, look at the athletes, get dressed and leave the building." And fifteen-year-old Levi is a mama's boy who, despite his privileged upper-middle-class surroundings, has lately begun steeling himself by affecting a Brooklyn gangbanger's brogue, even when talking to his mother: "Man, why you gotta be all . . . I just ahks a question."

If the early sections of *On Beauty* are filled with unusually graceful stage-setting that quickly grounds the reader in the Belseys' believable world, the novel has Smith paying equal attention, and showing tremendous agility, weaving a plot so trickily intertwined that its complexity may only be suggested, and certainly not summarized, in a review. Nevertheless, the principal motor of Smith's story is fueled by the friction between the Belseys and another, very different, family: the Kippses. Monty Kipps, a Trinidadian-British neoconservative public intellectual, is Howard's perceived professional nemesis—perceived, because Sir Kipps, M.B.E., is in another class altogether. Internationally renowned while Howard can't even secure tenure, Kipps most recently has published a popular book on Rembrandt, one that liberal Howard—though finding it "retrogressive, perverse [and] infuriatingly essentialist"—cannot ignore as, in fact, "good." The truer connection the men share is a very personal one: Kipps's daughter, the beautiful Victoria, and Howard's eldest, Jerome, had a brief affair that took the boy's virginity and left him brokenhearted. When Kipps comes to Wellington to teach for the year, bringing Victoria and his wife, Carlene, with him, the wives become friends,

at
harpers.org
you can:

- * read
selected articles from
the Harper's archive
- * stay informed
of upcoming events,
readings, lectures
- * subscribe
to Harper's Magazine
- * buy
a gift subscription
- * access
your account status
- * pay your bill
- * renew online
- * change
your mailing address
or your email address
- * shop
for gifts from our
online bookstore

www. HARPER'S .org

See what
we're doing online.

the children remain estranged, and the husbands come into conflict on campus, crescendoing to an ultimate confrontation between Belsey and Kipps during a faculty meeting.

As events accumulate and complications mount, Smith packs *On Beauty* with a range of significant additional characters, all of whom come to bear on her plot. Among them are Kiki's best friend, Claire Malcolm, a petite white woman "neatly made with the minimum of material," who is, as it happens, "the American Poet Laureate"; Erskine Jegede, Howard's best friend and the assistant director of the Black Studies Department, "skilled in the diverse arts of false flattery"; Carl Thomas, a twenty-year-old rapper for whom Zora falls; a band of Caribbean street peddlers befriended by Levi; a collection of Wellingtonian faculty; and even Howard's own father—all in all, an imaginative horde.

The trouble, though, is this: as Smith unfolds her multifarious plot, catapulting her characters at and off one another, the people she so adeptly sketches at the outset become progressively smudged, blurred, and, in some cases, erased altogether. And it is not, as is lately the complaint leveled at so many contemporary novels, that *On Beauty* grows baggy or slack—not, as Smith herself wrote in 2003 of *White Teeth*, that "[it] was about a hundred pages too long." Rather, the inverse: *On Beauty* begins to feel not like a forced march but like an amphetamine-fueled sprint over emotional terrain one can't so summarily skip without a cost. Smith has put so many characters into the mix and made them dance through so many rooms that she succumbs—by way of trying to tidy her narrative tensions—to an ending in which her characters adopt attitudes so incongruous with what she has established for them, so emotionally unconvincing, that they instantly liquidate the steady deposits of belief Smith had earned early on.

The most disastrous loss in all this bustle is Howard himself. At first, we are invested in his muddled, uncertain, foolhardy exploits; as his behavior continues to degrade, attaining a peak of narcissism when he commits a second adultery with nineteen-year-old Victoria, his son's ex-girlfriend,

not unreasonably we expect the ethical implications of his actions to resonate in some sort of interesting way. And yet the other people in his world—his three children, who all begin the novel resenting his mistreatment of their mother; his friends, who look down on his shortsightedness; his wife, who refuses to sleep with him for a year—implausibly remain fundamentally supportive and nonjudgmental. His wife "leaves" him, but not really: when he prepares to deliver a lecture at book's end, one that could launch him on a new life, the wife he humiliated has come to show her support, smiling out at him from the audience. His children "hate" him, but they still live with him in the lovely home his wife has left him in; in a sitcom scene of "c'mon, Dad" tenderness, they help him find his keys. Of course, a scene featuring Howard being chased by torch-wielding villagers is not what the novel wants; rather, what is missing is any believable reaction at all, any real ambiguity and lasting depth, any sign of the seriousness of what has transpired.

For in place of emotion we get the spasms of subplots by which we, and Smith, are distracted. Many of these cluster around a painting belonging to Kipps's wife, Carlene. The painting takes on a tentacular centrality in the book's back half, connecting Kiki, Carlene, Kipps, the university, the Caribbean street peddlers, Levi, Zora, the revelation of yet another adultery meant to balance out Howard's, and so on. It is not that Smith doesn't spin this web with panache; she does, and it's fun, to a point. That point being how little, beyond seeing the juggler catch the twelve dinner plates she has in the air, it yields.

The source of this failure of focus, these odd narrative incongruities, is suggested in Smith's postscript: "My largest structural debt should be obvious to any E. M. Forster fan; suffice it to say he gave me a classy old frame, which I covered with new material as best I could." That "classy old frame" is Forster's *Howards End*, a novel that launches its story with the line, "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister," just as the first

line of *On Beauty* is: "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father." *Howards End* explores the conflicts that arise when Helen Schlegel, a young woman from an intellectual family, falls for Paul Wilcox, a young scion of a commercial family; *On Beauty* explores the conflicts that arise when Jerome, from a liberal family, falls for Victoria, from a conservative family.

And so, yes, a "Forster fan" can have further fun spotting what Smith has teased from Forster's yarn, threads of his plot she has knitted into hers: switched umbrellas become switched CD players, an inherited house becomes an inherited painting . . . But to what end? So many of Smith's choices for the plot of *On Beauty* owe their origin to Forster's novel that she has her hands full trying to provide meaningful places for them in her fundamentally different story. For at the center of *Howards End* isn't a man but a house, a house that is a symbol for England, and the entirety of Forster's novel is structured in such a way as to revolve around the question of who shall inherit England's history, its legacy: the intellectuals, represented by the Schlegels, or the capitalists, incarnated by the Wilcox family. Smith, whose "house" in her novel is Wellington University, apparently wants to do something like this, too: her title, *On Beauty*, alludes to a book by Harvard Professor of Aesthetics Elaine Scarry, whose *On Beauty and Being Just* asks whether the lovers of beauty or the political plaintives who scorn it will inherit academe.

Surely a novel could accommodate such a thematic underpinning, but Smith is trying to do too many things at once; she hasn't figured out how to borrow from Scarry's ideas and Forster's plot mechanics without creating the equivalent of a novel that has been debt financed. Naturally, there is no rule against a strategy of scrounging: as Ovid and Shakespeare and Joyce all proved, one may freely, and richly, import from the stories of others. The trouble is that Smith's borrowings do not liberate her story but bind it. By book's end, as Smith gathers her many seized threads together and ties them

fiercely into knots, all circulation is cut off to her once warm-blooded beings. We are left with clever machination, little of it meaningful.

This is not the first time Smith has tried to invest in an original work by drawing too deeply on the savings of another writer. Recall her early admission, regarding *White Teeth*, of “truly inspired thieving . . . Smith doing Amis, Smith doing Rushdie.” Consider, too, “The Trials of Finch,” a *New Yorker* short story published during her Radcliffe Fellowship. A riff on the rhythms and narrative temper of Nabokov’s *Pnin*, Smith’s story shuffles the professor of Russian at Waindell College with a lonely exile’s past into the capacious skin of a fat English lady living with a sad homicidal history, transposing *Pnin*’s “ideally bald” head onto Finch’s “harvest moon” bottom. Although it is an instance of Smith “doing” Nabokov, the story does indeed work over its eight pages, creating a viable world for Finch to inhabit outside of the literary womb. Nevertheless, in an accompanying interview, Smith said that she couldn’t imagine writing an entire Finch novel.

For a while, I’ve dreamt of writing some shadow of a type, like Updike’s Bech or Nabokov’s *Pnin*, and I gave that another shot with Finch, but my instincts are all the wrong way round. It’s something I’m going to have to learn very slowly. . . . It would be lovely to keep working away at someone like Finch until you could make her live.

Wouldn’t it be lovely indeed. Doubtless the range of distractions that might tempt an author of no small celebrity from “working away at someone like Finch” are of a different order and degree than those available to most writers. It would be emptily proscriptive to suggest that Smith invest any arbitrary amount of time in a creative project, particularly when temporal quantities rarely prove telling. Consider the story of another Smith, a banker named Horace, who published novels and poetry that no one now reads. On December 27, 1817, Horace Smith was spending an evening at the house of

a friend and decided to write a sonnet about a fallen monument of Ramses of which only the legs remained, prompting Smith’s host to sit down that night and write a poem on the same theme. In a scant ten minutes, Smith’s twenty-five-year-old friend, Percy Bysshe Shelley, gave the world “Ozymandias.”

Too easily one could draw the wrong conclusion from this parable of poetry: genius needs no time. In truth, however, genius spends time well. Among English novelists, Ford Madox Ford knew this best. Of his more than seventy books, only two remain dependably in print, and only one, *The Good Soldier*, is read with any regularity. Ford knew why, or said as much in a letter to his wife, Stella, about that single, lasting book:

Until I sat down to write [*The Good Soldier*]—on the 17th December 1913—I had never attempted to extend myself. . . . I had never really tried to put into any novel of mine *all* that I knew about writing. I had written rather desultorily a number of books—a great number—but they had all been in the nature of *pastiches*, of pieces of rather precious writing, or of *tours de force*. But I have always been mad about writing—about the way writing should be done . . . [and] I had even at that date made exhaustive studies into how words should be handled and novels constructed. So . . . I sat down to show what I could do.

As of now, Zadie Smith has yet to sit down to show what she can do. Instead she has shown who she can do—pretty much anyone. Smith’s latest novel shows, to great effect, both Smith’s talent for mimicry and the limits of such a talent. Recently, however, when Smith dispensed with the literary equivalent of karaoke, she hit upon the true thing, her thing; Smith doing no one, at last, but Smith. Appearing in *The New Yorker* last fall, her short story “Hawell in Hell” begins with an advertisement: “*I am looking to enter into correspondence with anyone who remembers my father, Mr. —— Hawell, who was living in the central Bristol area between 1970 and 1973. Any details at all will be gratefully received by daughter trying to piece together the jigsaw.*” The rest of the story is the

FPO
SHAMBHALA PUB.
AD TK
B & W

response to this ad, by one Clive Black, in which he describes a melancholy evening when two men, dispossessed, happened to connect and share their loneliness. The evening he recalls led to the sad apartment that Hanwell was readying for his daughters, he so hoped, to share. The story never enlarges on the matter of the “jigsaw”: we never learn more about Hanwell’s destiny, or the daughter’s, or the narrator’s. In the manner of the finest fiction, the story withholds such answers, giving just enough of plot along with enormous insight into a moment of one man’s need:

Here and there one could spot the sad, cheap family heirlooms that were all a man like Hanwell could claim of his endless English ancestry. A jug and bowl, both painted with a sentimental swan, sat incongruously in the nook of the fireplace, reminding one of the Hanwells of the past who did their ablutions in their bedrooms for lack of a bathroom. Hung over the back of one chair was a stringy fur with the little feet still attached, the kind of thing women used to wear over their shoulders before the war. His wife’s? His mother’s? . . . I wondered what would put Hanwell out of his misery or what would put me out of mine. The next thing I remember is smelling turpentine. I stood up and moved to the door. I had no idea what the door led onto. For all I knew, Hanwell’s flat bordered the edge of the world and by passing through this door I would simply fall into whatever hole contains forever.

Howard, too, in *On Beauty*, is a man Smith takes to the brink of forever but, by swiftly tying up everything that led him there, makes us know he can’t fall far. It is not that one wishes Smith had left him to dangle, only that she hadn’t been so preoccupied with all her pretty strings. With “Hanwell in Hell,” in the space of a few pages, Smith points nowhere but into a void, a dark place that leaves a bright light in a reader’s mind. Of course, the story is only a few pages long; to make a novel bear such weight, “to make it live,” would doubtless require “working away at it,” something Smith suggests she is reluctant to do. After having shown herself willing to try pretty much everything else, why wouldn’t she be willing to do that? n

AMERICA: THE OPERA

A gun-running French playwright, a transgendered dragoon, and the War of Independence

By Jeffrey Mehlman

Discussed in this essay:

A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America, by Stacy Schiff. Henry Holt, 2005. 488 pages. \$30.

French-American antipathy, the stuff of bestsellers on both sides of the Atlantic, is at times so perfect in its unpleasantness that the two nations seem even to have found opposite ways of disliking each other: the French, as one wag put it, hate America while liking Americans, whereas Americans, by and large, love France and despise the French. It is in the face of such mutual resentment that the utopian temptation periodically arises to rediscover a lost realm of Franco-Americana, in which the two cultures, so famously out of joint, might be shown to be deeply aligned. Consider the case of Giovanni da Verrazano, the Florentine explorer who first visited the harbor of what is now New York City in 1524. Throughout the twentieth century, politicians with an eye to a growing Italian electorate have done their best—a monument in 1909, a holiday in 1954—to unseat Henry Hudson from his Anglo-Dutch perch as discoverer of the country’s leading city, but only recently has attention been paid to the fact that Verrazano was in fact sailing under French colors on behalf of François I, and that he wanted to give New York the very French name of “Angoulême.” Whereupon one is inclined to dream what the East Coast of North America might have been had the Valois king responded to Verrazano’s reports with less indifference . . .

Jeffrey Mehlman is University Professor at Boston University and the author, most recently, of Emigré New York: French Intellectuals in Wartime Manhattan.

A second instance of Franco-American romance occurred during World War II, when the vice president of the International Pen Club, a Belgian poet in exile in New York, found himself transfixed by the discovery that the original seal of New Amsterdam read NOVA BELGICA. Before long he was speculating that the New York Dutch were actually Belgians, and more specifically French-speaking Walloons. His conclusion: Peter Minuit, the legendary purchaser of Manhattan in 1626, was as Francophone as his name plainly implied.

Stacy Schiff’s sparkling new volume is centered on Benjamin Franklin’s efforts to sell the implausible idea of a viable republic named the United States to France’s absolute monarchy, and it reveals her to be our most gifted virtuoso of matters Franco-American. Her first book, an absorbing biography of Saint-Exupéry, culminated in the pilot/novelist’s wartime stay in New York, where, among other activities, he wrote *Le Petit Prince*. In many ways, *A Great Improvisation* is the flip side of the same coin. Both Saint-Exupéry in New York during World War II and Franklin in Paris during the American Revolution were international celebrities famed for exploits in the sky: the taming of lightning in one case, the initiation of air mail in the other. Each had arrived in a foreign city at a time when his country was enduring the devastating effects of war, and each took it upon himself to lure his host country into the war that was going so poorly back home. Each suffered terrifically from the enmity of

his fellow countrymen—led most memorably, in the case of Saint-Exupéry, by his fellow émigré André Breton, and, in the case of Franklin, by his fellow envoy John Adams. Finally, each was attuned to what he took to be unprecedented savagery facing his compatriots: Saint-Exupéry, in suggesting with an open letter in 1942 that there was a risk of the imminent death of 6 million *Frenchmen* in Hitler's extermination camps; and Franklin, whose fanciful accounts from Paris of British-encouraged Indian atrocities in the colonies implied that the War of Independence was a war unlike any that had preceded it. Schiff's book on Franklin, for all its wealth of detail, is in some ways a companion volume to her one on Saint-Exupéry, and if that symmetry sounds almost too beautiful to be true, we should not forget that, as a storyteller, Schiff seems engrossed by the allures of reverse returns. As she puts it early in *A Great Improvisation*, with a wink at Horatio Alger, her ur-American story is one of an old man going east.

It is also the improbable story of a new republic being carried to the baptismal font by an absolute monarchy, and, more provocatively still, an account of the deep strain of dependence with which American independence was shot through. In one of Schiff's more striking formulations, the "Declaration of Independence" is in fact a misnomer: at its inception that document was an SOS addressed to France.

At the center of the book is the three-man commission dispatched to France by the fledgling nation seeking to negotiate a treaty of alliance. Its members were Silas Deane of Connecticut, Arthur Lee of Virginia, and the world-famous frontier *philosophe* from Pennsylvania, as the French were inclined to view him, Benjamin Franklin. (Voltaire, in a letter to d'Alembert, refers quaintly to the rebels in America as "Dr. Franklin's troops.") Part of the drama of Schiff's account is a function of the overwhelmingly dominant role assumed by Franklin in the delegation, less be-

cause of his activism than because of the French judgment that he alone, despite his apparent diffidence and lack of initiative, was worth dealing with. The silken Franklin did his best to disarm the resentments of his fellow delegates: when an American diplomatic triumph was celebrated with the arrival of a huge cake bearing the inscription "*le digne Franklin*," he had the grace to suggest that this was no doubt a misspelling of the names of Lee and Deane. But the net effect of Franklin's dominance was to unhinge his fellow envoys. Lee came to regard the Pennsylvanian sage as "the most corrupt of all men." (Franklin, who tended to ignore him, regarded him as a lunatic.) Deane was so distraught by the humiliations he suffered in the



course of what was, after all, the success of the American mission that he ended up supporting a return of the colonies to the British Empire.

It was John Adams, replacing Deane after his recall, who was most eloquent on what he took to be Franklin's unmerited prominence in the group. Adams's was the frustration of a man who rose early each day to learn French, to little avail, only to observe the nonchalant Franklin's

French, just as imperfect as his own, greeted with applause and appreciation at every turn. There was a melodramatic version of the War of Independence circulating in France that Adams, in his resentment, captured with characteristic venom: "The history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that *Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the Earth and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod—and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiation, legislatures, and war.*" In response, Dr. Franklin delivered a mordant diagnosis: the Duke of Braintree was afflicted with a "disorder in the brain; which, though not constant has its fits too frequent."

For all Franklin's eminence there is a kind of void at the center of Schiff's portrait of her protagonist, which is no doubt related to the taciturnity so resented by Adams. Yet it has less to do with either a flaw in the protagonist's character or a shortcoming in the biographer's craft than with the Pennsylvanian's signature suppleness as a diplomat. Franklin's accomplishment lay in sustaining inherently ambiguous situations, putting off their resolution, and capitalizing on whatever was to be wrested from that very irresolution. All this could pass for "sublime reticence" among his champions, "dawdling" among those less favorably inclined, and monumental "indolence" among his enemies. Franklin was a master of foot-dragging, and the lucid inaction of this first American ambassador, however Jamesian it may seem, was, in fact, the ruse of an American Talleyrand.

From the French perspective, the American venture represented above all an opportunity to avenge France's defeat in the French and Indian War. The difficulty in 1776 was that any overt intervention on behalf of the rebels would be construed as an act of war against Britain and consequently present the French with risk of a new military catastrophe. History's response to this dilemma took the guise of the

Jean Baréma

The Test

Living in the Shadow of
Huntington's Disease

"This moving memoir confronts head-on one of the hardest issues presented by new medical technologies . . . The agony surrounding the author's concern for his siblings mixed with an ever-present fear for himself is movingly evoked in this brief, intense book."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Buy online at www.harpers.org

>>
LIVE
EPS

HARPERCOLLINS
FRANKLIN
SQUARE
PRESS



New York

Distributed by Acorn Alliance

most remarkable Frenchman in Schiff's cast of characters (and, in his compulsive activism, a perfect narrative foil to the desultory Franklin), Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. The name will be familiar to many readers and opera lovers as belonging to the author of the plays *The Barber of Seville* (1775) and *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784)—and indeed those two works frame the action of Schiff's book.

Less well known is Beaumarchais's role as principal gunrunner for the rebels during the War of Independence. As Silas Deane reported to Congress in November 1776, Beaumarchais was the individual to whom the United States was "on every account" more indebted "than to any other person on this side of the water." To say as much, moreover, is not only to displace the dullard Marquis de Lafayette (with, as Jefferson put it, his "canine appetite for popularity") as exemplary French hero of the Revolution but also to offer a counter-narrative to the sentimental version of Franco-American solidarity that is occasionally invoked in opposition to the prevalent tradition of mutual distrust.

The problem for France, of course, was to stick it to the British while maintaining an official posture of neutrality, the kind of double dealing that the French call *double jeu*. Beaumarchais's solution was to set up a dummy corporation operating under the Hispanic name Roderigue Hortalez & Compagnie. That entity was nominally to engage in trade with the Spanish-speaking Caribbean but in fact served as a conduit for French arms and uniforms for the rebels of North America. It was the guns of Beaumarchais that were responsible for the key rebel victory at Saratoga and the defeat of Burgoyne's army. And it was the creator of Figaro, the resourceful deviser of that other "Spanish" invention, Roderigue Hortalez & Compagnie, who made it happen. Small wonder that Franklin, sensing the affinity between the playwright and his character, on occasion referred to Beaumarchais as "Monsieur Figaro."

Add to this configuration the enraged British ambassador to France, Lord Stormont, whose crew of spies allowed him regularly to denounce France's hypocrisy, even as the French

foreign minister, the Count de Vergennes, in effect declared himself shocked (*shocked!*) at every revelation of Beaumarchais's violation of official French neutrality. Such was the stuff of what Beaumarchais, inventing one more mock Hispanism, called the "Stormontian inquisition."

One of the exhilarations of *The Great Improvisation* is Schiff's delineation of how close this entire scenario was—in fact and in feel—to Beaumarchais's comic masterpiece of 1775, *The Barber of Seville*. In early December 1776, during the very fortnight the seventy-year-old Franklin was arriving in the Breton town of Auray, Beaumarchais was up the coast in Le Havre overseeing arms shipments (as per agreement with Silas Deane) to America. Working under the pseudonym Durand, he nevertheless could not resist re-emerging under his own name to receive ovations for the Le Havre production of the play. And in so doing, he jeopardized the arms shipments without which the rebel cause might well have been doomed.

Indeed, Schiff comes close to implying that Beaumarchais's play may well be the foundational fiction of the United States of America. Consider the plot of *The Barber of Seville*: Against a caricature Spanish backdrop, a horrendous old codger, Dr. Bartholo, holds his charming ward, the ingenue Rosine, captive, until the trickster-valet Figaro, soon to be immortalized as the factotum of Rossini's opera, arranges to deceive Bartholo into allowing Count Almaviva to steal Rosine away from him.

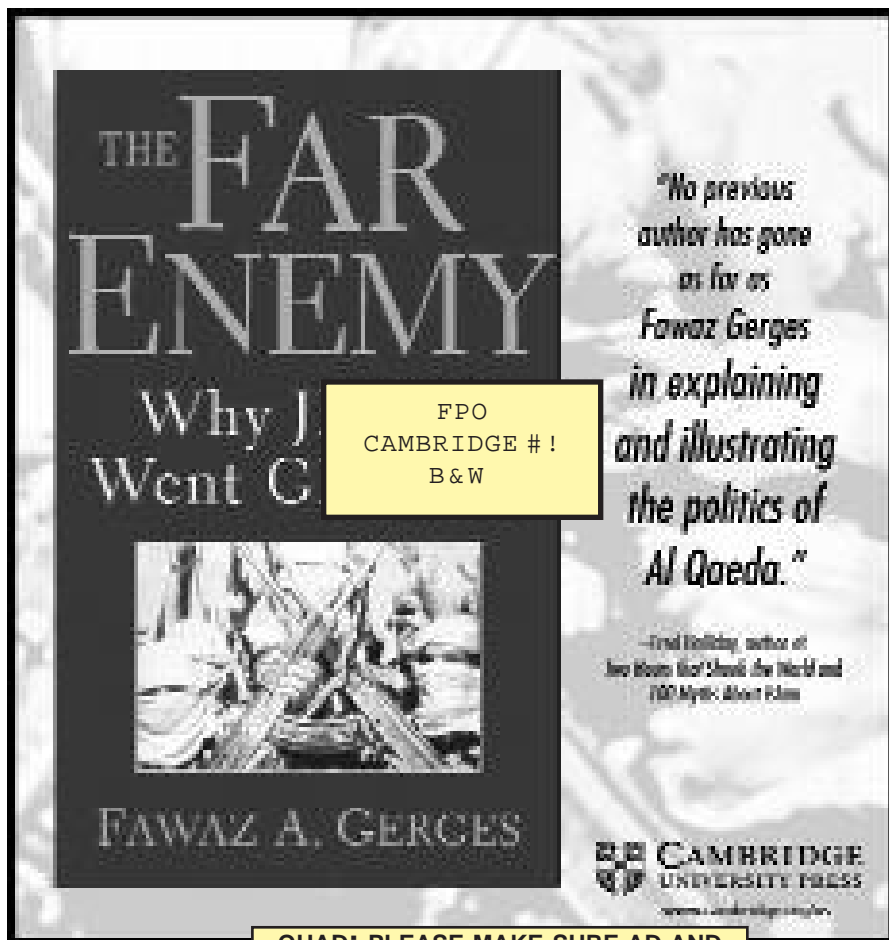
Switch now to America. Lord Stormont, the fulminating British ambassador, plays Bartholo; France's foreign minister, the Count de Vergennes, is the Count; and Beaumarchais is the double of Figaro the facilitator. As for the ingenue Rosine, her role is assumed by none other than the septuagenarian grandfather of American freedom and minister plenipotentiary of the fledgling republic—Benjamin Franklin. That last bit of casting, in its very preposterousness, is nicely underwritten by the metaphorical fabric of Schiff's text: in Paris, Franklin was "playing the belle of the ball," performing "his damsel-in-distress act." Franklin him-

self, moreover, claimed that “America had been forced and driven into the arms of France.”

Now consider Beaumarchais-Figaro as he carries out his *double jeu*. Pressed by Vergennes, with a wink of complicity one can only imagine, to take an oath that his flagship would not enter British colonial waters, Beaumarchais arranged to have his cargo of arms hijacked by North American “pirates,” hired out for the occasion, and brought to the British colonies (without any pledges being broken). The prearranged signal for the hijacking to begin was three cannon shots. Given the theatrical nature of the bogus attack, can anyone doubt that those three shots were a parody of the celebrated *trois coups* that introduce classical French plays?

It was Figaro’s fate to be victimized. Such, in fact, is the subtext of the second play in Beaumarchais’s trilogy, *The Marriage of Figaro*, whose reputation as a forerunner of the French Revolution is rooted in Figaro’s tirade on being abused by his aristocratic master. By 1793, however, Beaumarchais, who did not dare show himself at the Paris premiere of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, was on his way to joining the ranks of counterrevolutionary émigrés. The irony is compounded by the fact that, long before the Terror, the playwright felt himself to be the victim of another revolution, America’s War of Independence—a situation that Schiff recounts with genuine brilliance.

Beaumarchais’s humiliation at the hands of the Americans revolved around the question of just how “dummy” a corporation Roderigue Hortalez & Compagnie in fact was. If the assistance brought to the rebels were a gift of the French government, the return freight (rice, indigo) brought back to Europe would be no more than a piece of Beaumarchais’s ingenious ruse. It was Beaumarchais’s contention, however, that such merchandise was payment due for goods received and services rendered. He was convinced, that is, like Figaro in Act I of *The Barber*, that there was no intrinsic conflict between doing well and doing good, and no legacy of Enlightenment optimism could be more profoundly American than that.



QUAD: PLEASE MAKE SURE AD AND PUZZLE SOL HAVE THE SAME WIDTH

SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER PUZZLE

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D | G | U | S | K | R | S | A | T | R | A | P | |
| R | E | N | O | V | A | T | E | H | E | R | D | |
| U | R | I | N | A | R | Y | B | E | L | O | W | |
| N | A | T | O | | | | | | M | I | U | K |
| K | N | A | V | | | | | | W | A | N | S |
| S | I | R | E | | | | | | M | B | L | Y |
| Q | U | I | N | | | | | | I | L | E | A |
| X | M | A | S | E | S | I | N | S | E | A | M | |
| M | S | N | A | Y | S | C | C | T | N | R | B | |
| D | E | I | C | E | E | P | I | C | E | N | E | |
| L | U | S | H | D | E | G | A | S | S | E | R | |
| E | M | M | E | T | S | U | O | P | S | D | Y | |

<<
LIVE
EPS

NOTES FOR “TRISKAIDEKACODE”:

The code word is:
FLAMETHROWING
Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.
Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (*).

F L A M E T H R O W I N G

B C D J K P Q S U V X Y Z

ACROSS: 1. A(t)-zo(o)-res(t); 5. *; 9. re(novat*)e[k]; 11. homonym; 12. Ur-inary*; 13. be-low; 17. homonym; 18. *; 19. homophone, sigher; 20. a(ssem[rev.]bly; 22. qui(nte*)ts; 23. i-lea(d); 25. x(ma’s)es[rev.]; 27. *; 30. d(E)ice; 31. epic-ene(my); 32. (p)lush; 33. *; 34. stem-me(rev.); 35. outran*.

DOWN: 1. D(run)K’s; 2. *; 3. *; 4. hidden; 5. pun; 6. initials of four words; 7. *; 8. t(aver)n; 10. E-bro; 14. hidden; 15. se(ess-ess)a, rev.; 16. un(l)earned; 21. homonym; 22. H-I-J(ac)-K; 24. Am-be(r)ry; 26. homonym; 28. a-Che; 29. C(h)I(c)A(g)O.

Imagine, then, Beaumarchais's outrage upon discovering that Franklin, in the name of the United States, had laid claim to the return freight on the *Amphitrite*, a prize vessel in the Hortalez fleet. Thus begins the baroque drama of Beaumarchais's frustrated claim to compensation from the Americans. Franklin, America's most impassioned Francophile, was not beyond claiming that Beaumarchais, France's most energetic pro-American, was sending the insurgents "discarded muskets, which have become in our hands more deadly to those who carry them than to our enemies." Beaumarchais never did receive full compensation, and he died leaving his American bills as his sole inheritance to his daughter, Eugénie. An anecdote, which may be too good to be true, has it that during his 1961 state visit to Paris, John F. Kennedy was greeted by a descendant of Beaumarchais, who handed him an eighteenth-century I.O.U. signed by order of Congress and addressed to Beaumarchais in exchange for goods received by the United States. The president, delighted by the quaintness of the document, asked whether he could keep it and was told that that would pose no problem: there were plenty more where it came from.

Indeed, it was over the compensation of Beaumarchais that the American delegation had its principal falling out. Lee claimed that the French arms were a gift, and that Beaumarchais, in fact, owed the American government a considerable sum. Deane remained a staunch supporter of the playwright-gunrunner, and Franklin, characteristically, was capable of taking either side. Perhaps because an old friend of Franklin's, Jacques Dubourg, an aspiring *philosophe*, had hopes of being America's greatest backer in France and never forgave Beaumarchais for having preempted that role, America's premier would-be Frenchman tended to be tepid at best toward the most enterprising of France's would-be Americans.

The *Barber of Seville*, as suggested, may have been a foundational fiction of the United States, but Benjamin Franklin was not the only gentleman of the day to be cast, implausibly, in the role of Ro-

sine. For at the time Beaumarchais was launching his American campaign (and supervising productions of his play), that very campaign was jeopardized by another eighteenth-century original in an episode sufficiently operatic to provide us with a conclusion.

During the reign of Louis XV, when the humiliation of the French and Indian War was fresh and the will to revenge more immediate, a number of operatives were dispatched to London with secret plans for an eventual French invasion of England. Clearly, public knowledge of such plans would have damaged the more subtle policy of apparent neutrality and covert action that Beaumarchais espoused and Louis XVI came to support, and it was for this reason that Louis XVI opted to bring a number of his secret agents, along with their compromising written instructions, in from the cold. Of those agents the most colorful was surely the chevalier d'Eon, a master swordsman and captain of the dragoons, who nonetheless was so effeminate in manner that he once managed to infiltrate the court of St. Petersburg in the guise of a woman.

D'Eon also proved to be the loosest cannon aboard France's ship of state, and no sooner was he summoned back from London than he threw a fit, declaring—no Figaro he!—that he would not be ordered about like a domestic. Meanwhile, his curious demeanor resulted in a bizarre gambling craze in London over his (or her) actual gender. Panic was beginning to settle over Versailles, where d'Eon's irascibility, dire financial straits, and implicit threat to sell the invasion plans to the highest bidder were all matters of concern. Whereupon the king, faced with this threat to his announced policy of neutrality, dispatched Beaumarchais, in the spring of 1775, to find a solution.

It was while Beaumarchais was in London, on his mission to rein in d'Eon, that Arthur Lee (Franklin's fellow envoy and future nemesis) succeeded in "infecting" Beaumarchais with the American "passion," and it is tempting to speculate that this fever was colored by the peculiarly passionate circumstance surrounding its birth. For by the time

Beaumarchais arrived in England, the chevalier had declared himself a woman, and, to the astonishment of much of Europe, a romance appears to have ensued between the king's agent, Beaumarchais, and d'Eon the spy. In her letters to the playwright, d'Eon referred to herself as his *petite dragonne*, his lady dragoon, or perhaps his dragon lady. And it was in yielding to Beaumarchais that d'Eon cast herself in the role of Rosine: "I shall say to you like Rosine in your *Barber of Seville*: You are made to be loved and I fear that my most excruciating torture would be to hate you." Beaumarchais was, she told him, her "*libérateur*," which meant, of course, that the liberation struggle in which France's most significant partisan of American freedom was simultaneously involved was the transgendered plight of the skirted warrior whom a befuddled Voltaire was comparing to Joan of Arc. Indeed, in the detailed written request for instructions submitted by Beaumarchais to Louis XVI in December 1775, the transition from the subject of d'Eon to the matter of France's American policy is seamless.

On the basis of those instructions, a deal was brokered between d'Eon and the king: the invasion plans would be returned to the crown, and d'Eon would return to France with a generous pension, but would be obliged to live as a woman. The one concession to her past life as a man would be royal permission to wear her battle decorations on her dress—at least while in the provinces.

Here the agreement broke down. The chevalière d'Eon was mortified that her royal allowance for a new wardrobe was woefully inadequate. More galling still was her suspicion that Beaumarchais, whom much of Europe regarded as her fiancé, had revived the gambling fever surrounding the question of her sexual identity, and was offering himself as the authority who would once and for all settle the question that had much of London abuzz. At which point, with a gentleman organizing bets around the sexual identity of his fiancé(e), we have moved from *opéra bouffe* to

Continued on page 94

CLASSIFIED

TRAVEL & TOURISM

CRUISECENTER.COM #1
1"
PU 09/05, pg. 93

MATT BARRETT'S GREECE TRAVEL GUIDE: www.greecetravel.com Informative and Entertaining

CRUISECENTER.COM #2
1"
PU 09/05, pg. 93

FREIGHTERCRUISES.COM Find the ship and voyage that's perfect for you. (800) 99-Maris

CRUISECENTER.COM #3
1"
PU 09/05, pg. 93

HOTEL AND AIRFARE SAVINGS
www.BidonTravel.com

TRAVEL / EDUCATION

LEARN JUST ABOUT ANY LANGUAGE ABROAD—All ages and levels, homestay or hotel, one week to several months. Also: volunteer/internships, programs for professionals, families, teens, semester abroad. www.amerispan.com (800) 879-6640

UPTON TEAS
1"
PU 09/05, pg. 94

UPTON TEAS

VACATION RENTALS

READERS, WRITERS, LOVERS. Ruidoso, NM, 4-season paradise, www.bookwood.ruidoso.net

VIEWPOINTS

WWW.ANAGNOSTICCHRISTIAN.COM: reflections on religion, politics, society, and culture from an Agnostic Christian's viewpoint

WEBSITES

THERE'S ALWAYS TOMORROW!
www.sagacious-smartass.com
www.MysteryK.com, Sensuous Syllables & Promiscuous poems delivered to your mailbox.

PLANETARY BIRTH PATTERNS of achievement and eminence, www.cd-b.com

PERSONAL SERVICES

NEUROTICA Fantasy. Fetish. No limits. Provocative talk. Discreet. (888) 938-1004

FREE CATALOG! Uncensored Adult DVDs! FPXR, Box 191H, Montreal, Canada H3G-2K7 (catalog2005@total.net)

MEET INTELLIGENT, CULTURED SINGLES 100% FREE. Seeking a brainy counterpart? Visit Intellect Connect: <http://www.intellectconnect.com>

EROTIC, INTELLIGENT, imaginative conversation. Personal, experienced, and discreet. www.intellectconnect.com: (617) 661-3849

TAWNY FORD. Exquisitely erotic conversation. Live, personal, unhurried. (248) 615-1300

ADULT CONVERSATION with intelligent, erotic women. Visa/MC/Amex. (888) 495-8255

www.HARPERS.org
See what we're doing online.

Disclaimer: Harper's Magazine assumes no liability for the content of or reply to any personal advertisement. The advertiser assumes complete liability for the content of and all replies to any advertisement and for any claims made against Harper's Magazine as a result thereof. The advertiser agrees to indemnify and hold Harper's Magazine and its employees harmless from all costs, expenses (including reasonable attorney fees), liabilities, and damages resulting from or caused by the publication placed by the advertiser or any reply to any such advertisement.

For classified rates and information, please contact Irene Castagliola, Classified Sales Manager, at (212) 420-5756 or email irene@harpers.org

TEXT ADS: Minimum ten words. RATES PER WORD: 1X \$4.50; 3X \$4.35; 6X \$4.20; 9X \$4.05; 12X \$3.95. Telephone numbers count as two words, as do box numbers. ZIP codes count as one word. CLASSIFIED DISPLAY ADS: One inch, \$270; Two inch, \$520; 1/12, \$635; 1/9, \$755. Frequency discounts available. 15% agency discounts for display ads only. Closing dates: 1st of the 2nd preceding month. For example: August 1st for the October issue. Prepayment for all text ads and first-time display advertisers is required. Make checks payable to Harper's Magazine, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, or charge your ad to MasterCard, Visa, or American Express. Include telephone number on all correspondence. For size requirements and inquiries, call Irene Castagliola, Classified Sales Manager, at (212) 420-5756 or email irene@harpers.org. PERSONAL ADS: Minimum ten words. RATE PER WORD: \$4.50. Check, Mastercard, Visa, or American Express only. TO RESPOND TO AN AD: Harper's Magazine Personals, Box # (4-digit #), 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

REVIEWS

Continued from page 92

freak show—from *The Barber of Seville* to *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

Turn on the TV and you might hear the Wal-Mart ad featuring Rossini's "Largo al factotum" as its musical accompaniment. Figaro's celebrated aria, which, to extrapolate from *The Great Improvisation*, may have as much claim as "The Star-Spangled Banner" to be our national anthem, survives as a theme song for one of the nation's flagship institutions. Take a step back from Roderigue Hortalez & Compagnie to the d'Eon episode and you will have moved not only deeper into the strange prehistory of the republic but recklessly forward, into one of the wilder extremes of opera itself. **n**

October Index Sources

1 U.S. Government Accountability Office; 2 Linda Bilmes, Harvard University (Cambridge, Mass.); 3,4 U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs; 5 U.S. Department of Defense; 6 U.N. Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (N.Y.C.); 7 Marine Corps News (Arlington, Va.); 8,9 U.S. Department of State; 10 U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (Vienna); 11 Indem Foundation (Moscow); 12 Indem Foundation (Moscow)/Russian Ministry of Finance (Moscow); 13 U.N. Economic Commission for Africa (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia); 14 Tyndall Report (N.Y.C.); 15 U.N. World Food Programme (Rome); 16,17 Salary.com (Needham, Mass.); 18 U.S. Department of Education; 19 Catalyst (N.Y.C.); 20,21 Tony Nayani and Anthony David, Kings College Hospital (London); 22 Mayo Clinic (Rochester, Minn.); 23 Daniel I. Sessler and Edwin B. Liem, University of Louisville; 24 JAMA (Chicago); 25 Mark Knoller, CBS News (Washington); 26 The White House (Washington); 27 Harper's research; 28 Transportation Security Administration (Dallas); 29 Innocence Project (N.Y.C.); 30 The Humane Society of the United States (Washington); 31 City of Oakland Animal Services; 32 U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (Alexandria, Va.); 33 United Way of Greater Los Angeles; 34 Louisiana Supreme Court (New Orleans); 35 National Confectioners Association (Vienna, Va.); 36,37 SprookieBel (Gorinchem, Netherlands); 38,39 Institute for Biomedical and Pharmaceutical Research (Nuremberg).