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REVIEW ESSAY

# American Adventurers, Parisian Opportunities

*Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World*
RICHARD BUEL, JR.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011
433 pp.

*Gilbert Imlay: Citizen of the World*
WIL VERHOEVEN
London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008
299 pp.

*Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution*
PHILIPP ZIESCHE
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010
239 pp.

Discussing the phenomenon of the "lesser Founder," and Thomas Paine as a particular case, Jill Lepore has quipped that in "the comic book version of history that serves as America's national heritage, where the Founding Fathers are like the Hanna-Barbera Super Friends, Paine is Aquaman to Washington's Superman and Jefferson's Batman; we never find out how he got his super powers and he only shows up when they need someone who can swim" (61–62). Paine, in Lepore's view, probably deserves more, especially given the vast influence of *Common Sense* on Revolutionary-era readers, but his involvement in the French Revolution and his religious infidelity ruined his reputation in his lifetime; drink and depression, which prevented him from writing his own history of the age, left him to an ugly, anonymous death, and for much of the two centuries since then he has been regarded, in Bernard Bailyn's words, as an "ignoramus" who happened to write a "work of genius" (qtd. in Lepore 64). If such was the fate

of an international Revolutionary celebrity like Thomas Paine, what hope is there for even lesser historical figures like his sometime associates, Joel Barlow and Gilbert Imlay? If Paine is relegated to the Aquaman position in the Saturday morning version of American history, does that make Barlow and Imlay something more like Marvin, Wendy, and Wonderdog—or maybe their successors, the Wondertwins, if they're lucky? The comprehensive, meticulously researched recent biographies by Richard Buel Jr. and Wil Verhoeven—the first book-length volume on Barlow in fifty years, and the first ever biography of Imlay—would suggest that recent scholarly interest in the Age of Revolutions has helped broaden our gaze from the marquee names to sidekicks and bit players who can offer surprising insights into the intellectual, commercial, political, and literary networks that spanned the Atlantic in the post-Revolutionary Era. Together with a work like Philipp Ziesche's *Cosmopolitan Patriots*, the two recent biographies help us better understand that these and other Americans in Paris in the 1790s hold forth more than an expat's eyewitness account of the French Revolution. Rather, they offer an understanding of how American nationalism emerged from cosmopolitan encounters, even fraught or failed ones, as much as it did from the development of partisan political cultures at home.

Barlow and Imlay come down to us in these biographies as character types, as the books' subtitles would indicate. For Buel, Barlow is an American citizen who happens to have been launched abroad on business just as the French Revolution kicked into gear. Imlay, for Verhoeven, is less an American abroad than a citizen of the world, albeit one who played his "American" card—or better yet, his "Kentucky" card—shrewdly at times. Both men also took advantage of opportunities afforded by the events of the American Revolution to remake themselves in European contexts: as political radicals, as literary figures, and as economic actors. They repeatedly refashioned themselves, always with an eye on making their fortunes: "minding the main chance," in the parlance of *The Contrast*, the play by their contemporary Royall Tyler. In this they were not alone, of course. Benjamin Franklin was much more successful at this game, and on some of the same stages. Rather, Barlow and Imlay are useful to us as representatives of a generation in which many men—and some women—used a Revolutionary public sphere, including literary authorship, to garner private influence and, at times, personal wealth. For this reason they, like

Paine, have become figures of interest for scholars trying to understand the currents of the Revolutionary Atlantic, not simply relegated to niche studies of early New England poetry or frontier writing, or footnotes in biographies of more famous associates.[1]

Though Buel tends to think more highly of Barlow than Verhoeven does, and so doesn't overemphasize the similarities between him and his Parisian business associate Imlay, the men lived strikingly similar lives. Verhoeven, by contrast, argues that "there are so many extraordinary similarities in the details and the chronology of their biographies that Imlay and Barlow can be said to have led parallel lives for much of their adult years prior to the mid 1790s" (161). They were both born in 1754, Barlow in Connecticut and Imlay in New Jersey, to families of modest means with ambitions to get more. Both served in the Continental Army, but more importantly used their service as avenues to upward mobility. Both saw literary writing as an additional boost to these ambitions: Barlow in crafting himself as an epic poet of the American Revolution; Imlay, after moving to London, as author of a book on the Kentucky frontier, where he had spent at least three years as a land speculator. (While there he hoodwinked Daniel Boone and was in close proximity to James Wilkinson's attempts to deliver Kentucky to Spanish control.) Both put their literary energies to use in the cause of the French Revolution and the movement for liberty more generally—Barlow in political tracts and Imlay in his political novel *The Emigrants*. But in Verhoeven's telling at least, they also shared an even deeper interest in profiting from the French Revolution: by selling land in America to French émigrés, by plotting to help Girondin leaders reclaim Louisiana from the Spanish, and by serving—sometimes in partnership—as international smugglers, under the protection of the succeeding Jacobin regime.

Barlow has generally been of interest to Americanist literary scholars for his career as a nationalist poet, and to historians for his role as an American diplomat, mostly in Paris, from the late 1790s to his death in 1812. Imlay has engaged literary historians almost entirely on the basis of the relationship he undertook, in Paris, with Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom he had a child, Fanny, in 1794. When Imlay abandoned Wollstonecraft a year later, she twice attempted suicide, the second time after having traveled to Scandinavia on Imlay's commercial business. Neither Barlow nor Imlay enjoys an extraordinarily high literary reputation among schol-

ars or students today. (I'll confess that I've never been brave enough to teach Barlow's poetry; I have had some success, though, teaching Imlay's 1793 novel *The Emigrants*—using the Penguin Classics edition edited by Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy in 1998—in a graduate seminar on transatlantic Revolutionary writing.) While neither biographer attempts to resuscitate Barlow's or Imlay's literary standing, each does hope to counteract the prevailing ways in which they have been handed down to us. For Buel, Barlow is best remembered not "as a minor literary figure" but as a writer "of international renown for his vision of a republican future," one who "epitomized the character of his time better than did many of its most prominent heroes" (4–5). For Verhoeven, Imlay needs to be rescued from Wollstonecraft's shadow.

In attempting to do so, Verhoeven takes great pains to demonstrate the broad influence of Imlay's *Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (1792), which outsold *The Emigrants* by a handy margin and, unlike the novel, went into multiple and vastly expanded editions, some of them pirated, as well as being plagiarized by other geographical writers. The book, Verhoeven argues, "made a great impression on all those radical minds in Britain who considered their society to be hopelessly corrupt and their civil rights under serious threat from an outdated and despotic government" (148). It was seized upon by young British radicals—including S. T. Coleridge, Robert Southey, Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priestley, and many of their peers—who sought "the promise for a Rousseauesque return to nature in the pristine wilderness of the New World" (148). Even as these claims suggest the need for scholars of the period to become better acquainted with Imlay's two books, Verhoeven has bigger reasons for recommending a study of Imlay's life. He is, like Barlow and many of their American associates in Paris,

> a paradigmatic figure of his time. He belonged to that generation of Americans, born in the 1750s, whose lives were crucially shaped by revolutions in America and France—the two historical events that sent cataclysmic shock-waves through the late eighteenth-century circumatlantic world order and that, it is generally accepted, ushered in political modernity and marked the birth of the modern subject. (4)

If Barlow and Imlay led similar lives, the biographies written by Buel and Verhoeven likewise resemble one another to a certain extent. One

similarity in their construction is the extraordinary amount of archival work that has gone into each volume. Without doubt, these will remain the landmark works on these writers for a generation or more, and so all the better that the research is as exhaustive as it could possibly be. Both books make use of archival holdings on multiple continents, and both make special use of Archives des Affaires Étrangerès and Archives Nationales in Paris to reconstruct Imlay's and Barlow's political and commercial interactions with French Revolutionary officials. One additional challenge Barlow's biographers have all faced is that much of his correspondence with his wife while they lived in Europe was conducted in error-laden, archaic French, which they used to practice the language, and which is even harder to decipher than the maddening baby talk they used elsewhere in their correspondence.[2] Verhoeven in particular has gone many extra archival miles, consulting collections in the United Kingdom and Spain, small repositories all over the United States, and minor holdings in France, as well as tracking down Imlay family descendants for papers that helped him reconstruct the family's history.

Yet this thoroughness, while it lends extraordinary authority to these volumes, also makes both too detailed at times. Neither is a scintillating read, at least not until the drama of the Terror takes the action up a notch. And in spite of the fact that each biographer—especially Buel—seems to be deeply identified with his subject, neither Imlay nor Barlow is very likeable, and Buel's ultimate conviction of Barlow's status as "one of humanity's better angels" (369) is hard to swallow in the face of the evidence Verhoeven and others have assembled of his deep and abiding self-interest and the shady origins of the personal fortune he accumulated while in Europe. Barlow also comes off, even in Buel's book, as condescending to many around him, especially to his wife, Ruth. He seems to have fostered a bizarre emotional (and, as Buel acknowledges, possibly sexual) ménage à trois with his wife and the much younger artist and inventor Robert Fulton, precisely so he could offload some of his wife's emotional needs. Imlay we already considered a cad; Verhoeven's biography doesn't change this picture much, despite the biographer's sometimes troubling sympathies with his subject. Verhoeven's overidentification seems to bear out less in burnishing Imlay's character than in an unfair meanness toward Wollstonecraft, who appears here as so psychotically attached to Imlay, heaping on him all her fantasies of financial security and pantisocratic utopianism, that his decision to

abandon her seems almost understandable. (See esp. 180–81; by contrast, Verhoeven never really speculates about Imlay's own emotional states or motivations in quite the same way.)

Do these books deliver on the promises (1) that their subjects warrant all this extended attention and (2) that they are especially valuable representatives of key forces governing the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world? I think the answer to both questions is yes. For one, they make a compelling case for the contemporary influence each writer had—far greater than their subsequent neglect would suggest. Barlow's notoriety was such that Edmund Burke derided him in Parliament as "the prophet Joel"; it also earned him accolades from French leaders and entry into their revolutionary inner circles. Imlay's *The Emigrants*, Verhoeven argues, should be credited alongside Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1972) and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) with inaugurating the tradition of the Jacobin novel in Great Britain. His *Topographical Description* helped launch the British Jacobin obsession with the idyllic innocence of American wilderness.

But it's perhaps precisely because these figures are somewhat minor that they are so valuable to study. In Verhoeven's phrase, Imlay "acted as an interface between figures of much greater historical significance" (1). The same could be said of Barlow. As interfaces, they rubbed up against major figures of the Revolutionary Atlantic, who seem less to be nodal points on a network than major destinations in and of themselves. When he left for France in 1788, for instance, Barlow carried with him at least four letters of recommendation from George Washington, including one to Thomas Jefferson and another to General Lafayette, based only on his authorship of his epic poem *Vision of Columbus* and on one shared wartime dinner. When Imlay left London for Paris in early 1793 he carried a letter of recommendation from Thomas Cooper, a radical Dissenter and son-in-law of Joseph Priestley, to the Girondin leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville. Barlow, it turns out, was translator (if a rather loose and jingoistic one) of Brissot's *New Travels in the United States*, which had been printed in 1792 by Thomas Paine's London publisher. In Paris, both men entered Paine's circle and befriended prominent English expats and French intellectuals and political leaders. Barlow was granted citizenship in the new French Republic. He had probably already met Mary Wollstonecraft at her publisher Joseph Johnson's salon in London, and in 1792 he and his wife began

to cultivate a closer relationship with her, just as she began to gain notoriety for her writings on the French Revolution and on women's rights. The Barlows proposed taking Wollstonecraft's younger brother, Charles, with them back to the United States. When they delayed their departure and Joel returned to Paris, Wollstonecraft, who had also traveled to France to witness Revolutionary events firsthand, was instrumental in helping persuade Ruth to join them there. In April 1793, Joel wrote to Ruth that "I believe [Wollstonecraft] has got a sweetheart—and that she will finish by going with him to A[meric]a a wife. he is of Kentucky & a very sensible man" (qtd. in Verhoeven 179; in Buel 167–68). The interfacers had interfaced.

In spite of all efforts to prevent it, once Barlow and Imlay meet, Wollstonecraft does threaten to steal the show in both biographies. Buel devotes considerably less time to her presence in Barlow's life than does Verhoeven (or for that matter Lyndall Gordon, the Wollstonecraft biographer to pay closest attention to her American acquaintances); and Verhoeven works so hard to pull Imlay out of Wollstonecraft's shadow that he allows her to surface only in the book's final chapter. But in many ways it's the Wollstonecraft episode that best demonstrates the value of Imlay and Barlow as lenses for understanding the period. In their relationships with her they have their closest encounter with an English radical counterpart: a figure whose dramatic rise in station and influence occurred through the power of the political press and literary celebrity. Wollstonecraft also serves as a check on their "American adventurer" romantic self-conceptions, another of their shared characteristics. Wollstonecraft befriended the Barlows, but remained somewhat suspicious of Joel. She considered him "devoured by ambition" and was "disgusted" by the "cold" gallantry of his letters to Ruth (qtd. in Buel 152). She was especially skeptical once Barlow and Imlay's commercial ventures—blockade running—intensified under the Jacobin regime, though as Verhoeven demonstrates persuasively, she was probably privy to their shady silver smuggling, which provided the occasion for her travels in Scandinavia.

More than Buel, Verhoeven offers explanations for these relationships that reach out to and help open up the intellectual and cultural worlds of the Revolutionary Atlantic. Although her biographers have tended to emphasize her outspoken criticism of "commerce," especially when it threatened to take Imlay away from her, Wollstonecraft's stance on this point, as Verhoeven demonstrates, was quite nuanced. Like other radicals, what

Wollstonecraft rejected was "speculation commerce," which promoted monopoly and private wealth, rather than "commission commerce," which was seen as connecting the material progress of society with self-interest. Paine, for instance, argued in *The Rights of Man* that "[c]ommerce is no other than the traffic of two individuals, multiplied on a scale of numbers; and by the same rule that nature intended the intercourse of two, she intended that of all" (qtd. in Verhoeven 192). In Verhoeven's account, Wollstonecraft both sympathized with anticommercial agrarian radicals and resigned herself to the reality that "commission commerce at least satisfied real human needs without depriving people of essential commodities and could even foster harmonious relations between individuals and nations" (192). Such a hope—that financial solvency for Imlay might lead to happiness for her and an increase in their ability to contribute to radical literary politics, perhaps in America—may have led her to sign off on the schemes Barlow and Imlay cooked up, resulting in her Scandinavian journey.

The journey itself was not a success and her relationship with Imlay famously failed as well. Though her friendship with the Barlows seems to have soured at the same time, Joel wrote to Ruth from Algiers, where he was helping to negotiate the release of American captives, that she should check in on Wollstonecraft. Neither biography cites Joel's instructions to Ruth, which appear in a letter that enclosed his will in case he died during his mission:

> Mary Woolstonecraft [sic],—poor girl! you know her worth her virtues & her talents; and I am sure you will not fail to keep yourself informed of her circumstances. She has friends, or at least *had* them, more able than you will be to yield assistance in case of need. But they may forsake her for reasons which in your enlightened and benevolent mind would rather be an inducement to contribute to her happiness.

Whatever the nature of their frustrated commercial relationship, Barlow offered this final word on the friendship by rendering Wollstonecraft a sentimental object of Enlightened pity, a move William Godwin would also attempt, though unsuccessfully, a year later, when Wollstonecraft died following the birth of her second daughter and Godwin, the child's father, published her biography.

If Buel and, to a lesser extent, Verhoeven remain somewhat constrained by a conventional biographer's hewing closely, and perhaps too sympa-

thetically, to the individual subject, Philipp Ziesche demonstrates quite successfully in *Cosmopolitan Patriots* the rich possibilities these and other Americans in Paris during the French Revolution hold out to us for the practice of cultural or collective biography. Ziesche's monograph also offers an intellectual history of Americans living in Paris during the 1790s, with close attention to their public and private language and the nuances of both political and social theory. The result is a survey of the French Revolution from the perspective of prominent American expatriates, from Thomas Jefferson and Gouverneur Morris in the opening chapters through Joel Barlow and James Monroe in the middle chapters to the breakdown of American relations with France during the XYZ affair of 1798 and the sometimes tense relations between Jeffersonian America and Napoleonic France in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Though he covers some of the same historical terrain as Yvon Bizardel's *The First Expatriates*, Ziesche is less concerned than Bizardel with the day-to-day activities of his subjects. Rather, he puts a biographical narrative strictly to the service of intellectual history and argues that by focusing attention on the political activities, correspondence, and publications of the Americans in Paris we can see that what he calls cosmopolitanism—sometimes a synonym for universalism—was fundamental to the formation of American nationalism.

In making this case, Ziesche counters the historical commonplace that American cosmopolitanism (registered in early enthusiasm for the French Revolution) fell victim to the rise of nationalism in France and America, which caused Americans to recoil from the French Revolution's spectacular violence. He argues instead that cosmopolitanism and nationalism complemented one another in the 1790s by allowing the language of universal human ideals to unite diverse populations within each country, and by allowing nations to define themselves by negotiating membership in an imagined "society" that subsumed nations. As Barlow put it in his *Advice to the Privileged Orders in the Several States of Europe*, published in London by Joseph Johnson in 1792, "society" exceeds national boundaries, and "different portions of this society . . . call themselves nations" (qtd. in Ziesche 73). This is the cosmopolitanism referred to in Ziesche's title. As Barlow's friend Helen Maria Williams, a British expatriate in Paris, recalled about the early days of the Revolution: "This was not a time when the distinctions of country were remembered" (75).

Although Ziesche's study begins with Americans who were more prominent than Barlow—Jefferson and Morris—by the third chapter Barlow has emerged as a chief theorist of the cosmopolitan nationalism this study asks us to consider, and he remains a major force in the book to the end. More thoroughly than Buel or Verhoeven, Ziesche helps make sense of Barlow's major publications during his time in Europe, especially the four works published in 1792–93 and collected in a New York edition of his political works in 1796: the *Letter to the National Convention*, his *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, the French edition (first published in English in 1795) of *A Letter Addressed to the People of Piedmont, on the Advantages of the French Revolution, and the Necessity of Adopting Its Principles in Italy*, and the violent poem *The Conspiracy of Kings*. Ziesche makes the case that these texts are extremely valuable to modern scholars seeking to understand the cultural contexts for American nationalism in the era of the French Revolution. Though Barlow's writings lost him many friends among the Federalist circles to which he had once belonged at home, they resonated widely with supporters of the Revolution. They help us better understand the "uneasy coexistence" of multiple conceptions of the French Revolution, even in the thinking of supporters like Barlow: as an educational Enlightenment project on one hand and as a martial force, set to "Purge the earth of its tyrants," in Barlow's phrase, on the other (qtd. in Ziesche 79). Despite the events of the Terror having instilled in Barlow a deep aversion to violence and warfare, he never surrendered his basic faith in the regenerative force of democratic revolution: its ability to constitute "the people" as republican citizens rather than monarchical subjects.

As Ziesche's final chapters bear out, the "beautiful friendship" that had existed between American and French Revolutionaries came to an abrupt end during the Quasi-War with France of 1798–1800, though he insists that Barlow and most other American cosmopolitans in Paris didn't abandon their universalist ideals. Rather, after Jefferson's presidential victory in 1800, they revived their earlier interests in Louisiana—a territory Barlow and Imlay had both long fantasized about colonizing—and transferred their hopes to a westward-expanding American nation. Sentiment toward America in France also shifted following the negotiation of the Jay Treaty with Britain in 1795, which reopened America's commercial relationship with London. But French observers complained too, starting middecade, about the "scandalous commerce" carried on by a growing number of

American merchants in Paris (124). Ziesche does not consider Barlow's financial activities in nearly the same detail as Buel and Verhoeven, and like Buel he remains convinced of Barlow's basic goodness to the end. But Verhoeven's book would invite us to consider whether American adventurers like Imlay and Barlow might have been among or at least similar to those "American strangers" reported on by the Central Bureau of Police and the Ministry of the Interior in late 1796 as "engage[d] in the most flagrant *agiotage*," a term Ziesche glosses as "greed, usury, war profiteering, and parasitic and unpatriotic behavior" (125). If Barlow's early writing and oratory on the Revolution brought him into favor with the early leaders of the Revolution, and the blockade running he did with the blessing of the Jacobin regime kept him alive after his Girondin friends had gone to the guillotine, his financial ambition—shared by many—contributed to the growing French antipathy toward American expatriates during the reign of the Directory. That Barlow retained his confidence in the ideals of the French Revolution only estranged him further from former associates at home and prevented him from returning until Jefferson had assumed the presidency.

Barlow once wrote to Jefferson that "in order to form a proper judgment [of the French Revolution] it is necessary to combine many circumstances that cannot be well understood by men out of the country" (qtd. in Ziesche 80). His argument in favor of eyewitness, but also of displacement, is borne out by these books. The experiences of American expatriates do yield important insights into the earliest processes of American nationalism. Surely the current transnational turn in Americanist historiography is responsible for the rise in the number of studies of expatriate radicals, adventurers, and cosmopolitans like Barlow and Imlay. What we need now are works less invested in recuperating reputation and even more attuned to how such mobile and migrating figures belong to cultural, intellectual, and literary histories of which the American and French Revolutions are only a part.

## NOTES

1. In addition to the works under review here, see recent books by Cayton; Cotlar; and Giles; and articles by Jourdan and Funchion.
2. Cantor includes translations of some of these letters that are more reliable than those in Todd, but neither selection is exhaustive.

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