Heartfelt Thanks


Hundreds of thousands of people around the world have a special anniversary to mark next year: the debut in 1953 of the basic heart-lung machine used in open-heart surgery. Every year, some 750,000 Americans undergo such surgery, from relatively routine bypasses to more complex procedures; without it, virtually all would die. (Even so, heart disease...
Arts & Letters

The All-American Con Man


Some people consider William Claude Dukenfield Hollywood’s all-time greatest con man. But the man we know as W. C. Fields (1880–1946) would have taken that as a compliment. “He loved to cast a spell over an audience,” says Cantor, an English professor at the University of Virginia, but he “took equal delight in exposing his own magic as a fraud.” It was this peculiar mix of illusion and disillusion that allowed Fields to make the often difficult transition from his early days as a vaudeville juggler and comedian, through a successful middle period with the Ziegfeld Follies, and, finally, to modest success in the movie business with a string of hits in the 1930s and ’40s.

He was, in a sense, the first postmodernist. In Cantor’s view, “the construction of identity is the principle that unites Fields the man and Fields the artist.” His onscreen persona was “basically the all-American con man, part carnival Barker, part patent medicine salesman, part circus showman, part cardsharp, and part stockbroker.” This gave his comedy “a distinctly dark side,” says Cantor, and may also explain why he never matched the success of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. Unlike those other comedians, Fields “never developed a truly cinematic imagination,” and many of his movies “feel as if they are merely filmed versions of stage plays”—though, to be fair, he never had the creative control that, for instance, Chaplin enjoyed.

Films such as The Fatal Glass of Beer (1932) and The Bank Dick (1940) still afforded the comedian delicious opportunities to...