

A Look at the Novels of Mark Helprin

by James Como (September 2017)



They were the West, and they were fighting for the West. Though Peter and Stanhope were Africans and Marshall a Jew, they had suffered and their generations had suffered and died and worked for the West . . . They were taut and trembling as the cold air settled upon them and the clouds swept by. They were frozen as if in a photograph. Listening to the pipes, they felt the wide limitless glory of the West—Refiner's Fire

Soon we will have Mark Helprin's seventh novel, *Paris in the Present Tense*. It follows *Refiner's Fire* (1977), *Winter's Tale*

(1983), *A Soldier of the Great War* (1991), *Memoir in Ant-Proof Case* (1995), *Freddy and Fredericka* (2005) and *In Sunlight and in Shadow* (2013). With these he has become our love (that is, *agape*) poet in prose whose novels collectively constitute a sort of *commedia*, sometimes very funny to be sure, but finally profoundly happy, even redemptive (which is what Dante meant by his title), not least when elegiac. Withal, he sometimes comes close to mythmaking and to working in archetypes, and though long stretches are picaresque they are never merely that, not even in *Freddy and Fredericka*. (Note: the reader should expect no plot summaries here; those would triple the length of this essay, such are the riches and roaring tributaries of his stories—and you can find them at www.markhelprin.com.) His other fictions are the romance *A Kingdom Far and Clear* (a trilogy [1989, 1996, 1997, collected 2010] retelling the tale of Swan Lake, borderline as a novel), and three collections of short stories: *A Dove of the East and Other Stories* (1975), *Ellis Island and Other Stories* (which includes the title novella, 1981), and *The Pacific and Other Stories* (2004).

But Helprin is a man of parts. He has received honors foreign and domestic, holds appointments and memberships in societies and associations of prestige (both foreign and domestic), and is a highly regarded geo-political thinker and advocate for American values. His non-fiction bibliography is very long, my personal appreciation for the public intellectual growing considerably when, decades ago, I first read his alarums describing Chinese expansionism. At the time of its publication (1983), I did not know his *New York Times Magazine* piece endorsing the deployment of short-range nuclear missiles in Europe. According to Craig Lambert's "Literary Warrior" (*Harvard Magazine*, October 24, 2005), his agent told Helprin the article would cost him all awards for the rest of his life. "I was pilloried for that," Helprin said, "people refused to talk to me."

He delivers (as C. S. Lewis has put it) a realism of presentation, a high definition intensity of multi-sensory appeal, an imagism that, blurring (as do the Romantics) the line between exterior and interior, inexorably involves the reader in its vitality. Light, blue coldness and ice, but also heat, shimmering foliage, dramatic skyscapes, the ocean, the Hudson Valley with its precipices and bays and bordering towns and pastures, a predilection for knowing how tasks are done (and in detail) and how objects work—these are touchstones of Helprin's prose, these and a rhythmic, phonic drive. He surely writes for the ear. The style is further marked by analogy, by lists (they can make the man), and by hyperbolic wit (with every now and then a punch line). Freddy sees that Fredericka's teeth have somehow grown, now looking like a beaver's teeth, and feels the strong temptation to ask how many trees she has felled that day. And "of course," we learn of the young and drunken Marshall Pearl, hero of *Refiner's Fire*, as he enjoys his invasion of the private car of the owner of a railroad, "he always hoped to come across a naked girl reclining on one of the worn can seats, her arms open to him." Then, not much later, we are told that Marshall "could read maps with celestial perfection." Moreover, although "at an early age he had received full exposure to colorful images of copulation on bright beaches rimming the upward coasts of Helsingor . . . He preferred maps." (A *bildungsroman*, that first book, foreshadowing the five that follow.)

With the seventh novel about to be under his belt, *Memoir in Ant Proof Case* is Helprin's middle book. Here is a key passage from near the middle of it. The hero is looking back on a life of great mental and physical achievement (virtually unknown to the world) as he writes for his surrogate son, a Brazilian boy who lives with his youngish (beautiful) mother and the old hero, who has stolen a great quantity of gold bars, now hidden

for the boy eventually to retrieve. The passage explains an obsession—that is, a repulsion: he cannot abide coffee, its taste, its aroma, its presence, or people who drink it. The psychological roots of this distaste, though clear, are passed over briefly, almost cavalierly: the hero barely notices that origin. Rather he offers this to Constance, an earlier love lost to coffee: “Caffeine, Constance, is similar to the genetic code.” There follows the long chemical formula of caffeine. Then:

As you know, DNA duplicates itself, but caffeine interrupts this holy process like a typhoon blasting all the punts on the River Isis, and explodes the genetic system. Caffeine replaces adenosine at the receptor sites of the neurons . . . its attack upon the balance of nature, its liberation of the fire and light that serve as the battering ram of the soul, is a sin of the highest order. It causes sterility in insects.

This goes on for quite a spell, more and more preposterously, exuberantly, and hilariously. Sure, caffeine makes sperm more motile, but,

only the dullard sperm, the caffeine-using sperm, the addiction-prone sperm, get to use outboard motors . . . A weakling, a dullard, a dunce, a non-swimmer, a tailless basket case, a slovenly jerk that got upstream because it had an Evinrude strapped to its back . . . The greatest per capita consumption of coffee in the world is in Finland. True, they held back the Russians, but they’re the most nervous people on earth, no one understands their language, and they beat themselves with branches.

Thereafter comes another half-page, attributing the debaucheries of Catherine the Great to her coffee consumption. He ends, "Constance, listen to me. Trust me. I know whereof I speak and, in this, I assure you, I am totally unbiased." But the comedy is not buffoonery. Within the narrative is entwined the mystery of a horrific murder, and our hero will terrifically avenge the beloved victims.

Helprin's heroes are invariably heroic, capably martial, persevering mentally and emotionally, often under unspeakable duress, but longing for more than this world can offer. Many of them note that a life, like character, must be carefully crafted, and if they are romantics they do not know themselves as such. The next world may be nearby—in *Winter's Tale* it is imminent—and God, too, though obliquely and incognito. Time must be managed by memory, loved ones held present and protected. Salient here is Helprin's Jewish identity, frequently part of the fabric of his plots and characters, especially those of *Refiner's Fire*, though there are few rabbis or synagogues (except in *Ellis Island*). His women are beautiful and good (mostly, though not always understanding), his men ardent in their desires for a place and a love—above all, a family, in its many forms—to share it with; they are rarely at home or at peace, or, if they are, have paid dearly for both.

At the very end our memoirist tells us that the world is wrong in teaching us to serve glory, success, and strength. Rather, family teaches us

the measure not of power but of love; not of victory, but of grace; not of triumph, but of forgiveness . . . love can overcome death, and that what is required of you in this is memory and devotion . . . to keep your love alive you must be obstinate, and irrational, and true, to fashion your entire life as a construct, a metaphor, a fiction, a device

for the exercise of faith . . . With it your heart, though broken, will be full, and you will stay in the fight until the very last. Though my life might have been more interesting and eventful [another joke, that] . . . I can say I kept the faith . . . I was born to protect the ones I love. And may God continue to give me ways to protect and serve them, even though they are gone.

We could say that Helprin's novels are character-driven, if such workshop categories applied to him—and if his plots were not so epic, his story-telling not so *actual*, with all its jump-cuts of time, place and character (though not of voice), memories within memories, few characters (let alone locales) left unanimated. The stories range over continents and generations and involve teachers, friends, colleagues, fellow-warriors, lovers, beloved family members, deadly antagonists, single events and historical episodes delivered wholesale. Helprin himself is clearly a romantic, but his narrators are not (unless in the first person); rather, they remind one of Thornton Wilder's narrators: they know much but do not say all they know, because discovery matters, as though the great Mind beyond all minds wants participants in its adventure.

So even when we begin at the end, the end will turn out to be, as it does in *In Sunlight and in Shadow*, something other than it appeared at the beginning. "If you were a spirit, and could fly and alight as you wished," that novel begins, "and time did not bind you, and patience and love were all you knew," then you would see a note lying on a table left there by the departing hero. Seven hundred and four pages later, the love of that man's life will arrive and find and read that note. Between those two moments the hero will fight horrifically in World War Two, swim the Long Island Sound with preternatural endurance, suffer the slings of waspish anti-Semitism, and kill gangsters on behalf of his father. And you, the reader,

will believe every word of it, as the narrator does what Helprin's narrators do when they examine the lineaments of love: look both into the past and into the future. Along the way he will extol the virtues, but always he will be true to his opening invocation, of *Venus* no less (from Lucretius, that alluring atheist of *De Rerum Natura*): "You alone govern the nature of things. / And nothing comes forth into the shores of light / or is glad or lovely without you."

Motifs recur in Helprin's novels; the sea is one of those. But it is a different sort of sea than any beachgoer knows. Here is the opening of the novella *Ellis Island*:

In January, when the sea is cold and dark, crossing the Atlantic is for the brave. Seen from land during the day, the ocean is forbidding, but it is nearly unimaginable at night in a storm, far north. Where the ice tumbles down gray wave troughs like tons of shattered glass.

The awfulness (old sense) is just right. But from nearly the end of the story is a different view; rather than escaping with a hope of arriving, as at the beginning, the hero is about to make it to safety:

The waters of the harbor were translucent and aquamarine; they ran thick with shards of ice and white islands as big as polar bears. Ellis Island lay in the distance, its Byzantine domes and blood-red roofs glowing in the morning sunshine . . . the turning place of dreams . . . I had come to one of God's places.

(A digression: could anyone reading that ever be reminded of Hemingway?)

A second motif is The City, but not any city: New York City, lying at the end of the Hudson valley (another motif Helprin loves dearly) where its river empties into the ocean. Here are the opening words of *Winter's Tale*, Helprin's most commercially successful book and a triumph of Magic Realism:

A great city is nothing more than a portrait of itself, and yet when all is said and done, its arsenals of scenes and images are part of a deeply moving plan. As a book in which to read this plan, New York is unsurpassed. For the whole world has poured its heart into the city by the Palisades, and made it far better than it ever had any right to be . . . From our great height it seems small and distant . . . We are falling now [through the snow] . . . amid the clouds a lake of air . . . we are confronted by a tableau of winter colors . . . they call us in.

Much later, near the very end, this: "They rose far enough to see that the swirling gold was real . . . and then they were gently set down, in the heart of a new city that was all spring and sun." Helprin certainly understands *Sehnsucht* (as does, say, Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby* is about that very sort of longing, far beyond romantic love or a fondness for flash which, after all, are sorry surrogates for the real thing.)

On the other hand, Helprin's depths make those of Roth or Updike, purveyors of pedestrian contemporaneity, seem on a par with the moodiness of Woody Allen's jejune fussings. *A Soldier of the Great War* is Helprin's finest novel which, among masterpieces written by Americans, must rank with Wilder's *The Eighth Day*. An old Italian is on a bus chugging along a mountain road. The driver refuses to stop for a young man who

signals his wish to board. The old man is affronted, demands that the bus stop, and, in protest against the driver's intransigence, gets off. He will walk with the young man, who doubts the old man's ability, especially on such a rising, winding road, to go the distance. He will learn better, however, as the old man – with the young man's eager permission–tells him of life, his life, as endured during World War One, especially as a prisoner of war. Nearly eight hundred pages later the walk ends, the young man, and we, very much wiser (and tougher) than at its beginning.

As a prisoner, Alessandro had been pushed beyond his limits as a slave laborer, but he has a point to prove. His "clothes were soaked with sweat and blood. His eyelashes were struck to his eyebrows by drops of blood that had blown against his face like raindrops in a squall. He dropped the hammer and turned to the two sergeants. 'Is that the procedure?' he asked, and fainted dead away." Later he will decide to kill the bureaucrat who sealed his fate, one Orfeo. "Quite clearly, Europe had come apart and millions had died not because of the shifting of great historical forces or the accidents of fate or destiny . . . It was because Orfeo had slipped from his seat in the office of the attorney Giuliani and been carried upon the flood, like a corked bottle full of shit, until he had lodged upon a platform at the Ministry of War, where his feverish hand . . . had been directing the machinery of nations . . . Perhaps if his feet had reached the floor, or if he had no moles growing on his face . . . Europe would not have come to ruin." That is in the middle of things. Three hundred pages later, when Alessandro, wanting to die in the sun, has left Nicolo (the young man who so dearly wants to know more and to do more) the old man has an epiphany, one of a series of ascending epiphanies:

Gone were the embarrassments, and in their place was love;

love for the children, including himself, who had skipped lambs; love for all who were awkward; and love for all who had failed. The stream flowed on . . . all on its way to the sea . . . Alessandro followed the paths of single swallows in steep arcs rocketing upward or in descent . . . the unification of risk and hope.

Thirteen years ago I had occasion to speak with Helprin by phone. The conversation lasted perhaps forty minutes, during which he became less and less guarded, especially when I allowed that he is, in fact, a love poet in prose. Not long before the conversation I had read *Freddy and Fredericka*, a riotous take on Quixote and Sancho (or so it seems to me, with this wrinkle: each is both Quixote *and* Sancho)—a departure for Helprin in that its preposterousness was overt, unalloyed, and joyful. But it was his forthcoming book to which he referred after I made my love remark and had compared him to Dante. “I think you’ll like my next one [*In Sunlight and in Shadow*], beginning with the epigraph.” That would be “*Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlar*,” (“Love moved me and made me speak”), from *Inferno*, II. The conversation ended congenially, and in the event I did like the book, very much in fact, and it occurs to me that the Dantean line could be the motto for all Helprin’s fiction.

Not incidentally, that conversation was some dozen years before the publication of the Craig/MacDonald splendid *Recollecting Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’: the Novels of Mark Helprin* [2014], in which the authors offer *A Soldier of the Great War* as Hell, *In Sunlight and in Shadow* as Purgatory, and *Winter’s Tale* as Paradise. Their emphasis upon Helprin’s depiction of a natural moral code, of virtue, and of individual autonomy, especially as the bases of love, whether of another person, of one’s country, or of duty, is compelling. Nevertheless, if Helprin and I were to speak again

I would revise my own critical judgment. I would not retract the *Commedia* comparison: Craig and MacDonald are too authoritative, too *productive* (and apparently Helprin himself agrees with the comparison). Rather I would add to it. The Greek concept *psychagogia* (particularly as we meet it in Plato's *Phaedrus*)—the enrichment of the soul and its ascent through hierarchies unto goodness and beyond, to the divine—seems to me the ideal complementary prism. But there is more than enough metaphysical Helprin to go around.

In closing, and if only for the sheer pleasure of it, I offer the opening of *A Kingdom Far and Clear*.

Once, the mountains held within their silvered walls a forest so high and so gracefully forgotten that it rode above the troubles of the world as easily as the blinding white clouds that sometimes catch on jagged peaks and musically unfurl. Cold lakes scattered in the greenery ran so deep that soundings were of no avail . . . the forest was in its own way inviolable—a domain . . . of mountains clad in wind-buffed ice, of the thinnest air, of rivers running white and bursting with oxygen.

Well, maybe not merely for the pleasure of it but to bring home the point, which is this: reader, you will want to go wherever Helprin cares to take you, from the infernal to the celestial and to all the cities, jungles, quarries, blue-iced rivers, lakes, oceans, majestic cloudscapes, snowstorms gentle and blinding, salons, *favellas*, mountain aeries, harrowing cliffs, *bushkashi* (chabtal style!), and forests fraught and mild that lie between the two extremes, along with the mystifying, frightening, beguiling, brave, treacherous, loyal, admirable, and loving humanity that populates it all, for to read him (as C. S. Lewis said of Edmund Spenser) is to grow in mental—and, I would add, in moral—health.

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