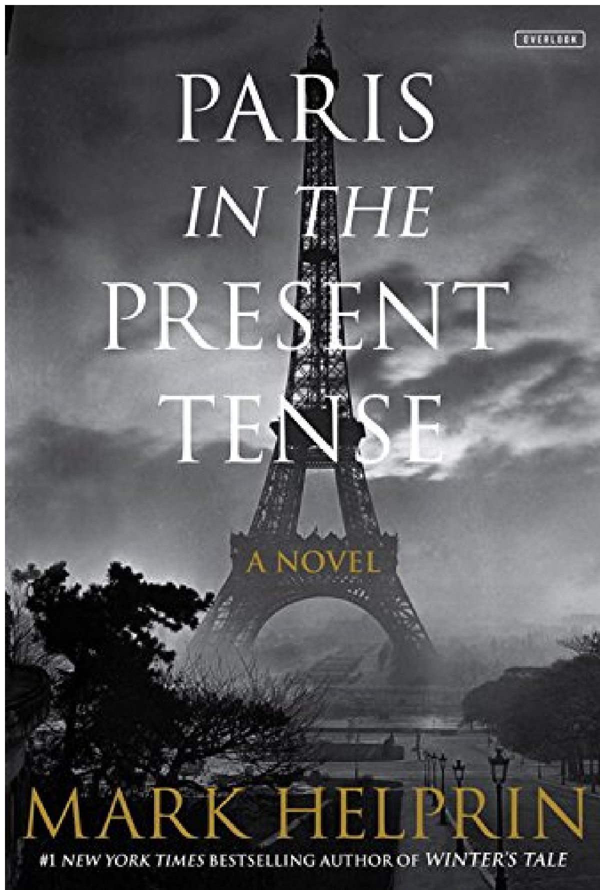
Valedictory: A Review of "Paris in the Present Tense"

by James Como (October 2017)



Paris in the Present Tense

Mark Helprin (Overlook, 394pp., $28.95)

This revenge tale, wrapped within a contemporary historical novel, provides a morphology of the type of mind that these days is too scarce. The mind belongs to an old man, with 'contemporary' in this case meaning the duration of his rich, utterly focused, consciousness. We learn that history by how the man sees and hears (in waves, especially waves of music, "the voice of God"), by what and how he loves, and by increasingly distant flashbacks (harrowing, poignant,

joyful). Helprin can multi-task with the best, moving fluently from one layer of time-space narrative to another, story-telling as three-dimensional chess. (And reader beware: there are few *minor* characters.)

The extraordinary Jules Lacour—driven? certainly; paranoid, certainly not—was a child of the Holocaust and a veteran of the Algerian War. Returning to Paris from Los Angeles, with a momentous stopover in New York, he seems done. But “with stars all around, the plane splitting a path through the night, rising and falling more smoothly than a boat on a gently rolling sea,” his plan to “save a life, and give his own” coalesces over Iceland. Jules knows himself thoroughly, elegiacally, but he is resolute. He had “been profoundly aware of oblivion since the retreat of . . . the SS through Reims [where he and his family were in hiding] in the summer of 1944”; now he thinks like soldiers “who fight with neither fear nor regret.”

When the plane lands nearly three hundred pages later (short by Helpriin’s usual standard), that disposition will seem practical, and morally perfect. Then the plot *really* thickens, and more rapidly than in Helprin’s other novels. Finality is looming.

Jules marks time as a music master at The Sorbonne. At seventy-four, frequently rowing on the Seine, swimming kilometers at a clip and running long distances, he is physically very fit, having long ago decided to stay sufficiently conditioned to defend himself. But now he endures the death of his wife, Jacqueline, whom he loved early and who, to his utter surprise, given her beauty of spirit, body and voice (“if he had to choose he would choose the voice”), loved him back. Alas, he may be about to endure a second, intolerable loss, that of his leukemia-stricken grandson, Luc, the one offspring of his beloved daughter.

As he seeks help from his best friend (from childhood no

less), Francois Ehrenshtamm, the most famous *philosophe* in France), we learn that the wellspring of his despair is the inability, particularly searing in light of Jules' own physical youthfulness, to save his family, a transcendent desire now irrupting urgently. For underlying the despair is a fear that heightens it exponentially. The rise of French anti-Semitism is an intensifying threat, intensely rendered by Helprin. Francois agrees and then some (both men know some current French history that the reader probably had not). Jules asks his presumably well-off friend for financial help; Francois cannot comply (too much alimony). But wherefore that need? Jules is determined to take his family to America, where Luc can receive the exact medical help he requires, and where there is relative safety.

So Francois offers an opportunity. One Jack Cheatham, an unfathomably rich American entrepreneur, needs a *jingle* and is willing to pay one million dollars. Jules meets "this Jack fellow" and though both dazzled and repulsed by the expenditures he witnesses he still rather likes the unpretentious moneybag and agrees – though the kicker is daunting. The man needs some version of the jingle the next day. Worse, Jack's boss, Rich Panda (married to Cheyenne) must approve. Jules thinks, "the prize was, perhaps, the life of his grandchild . . . But the judges of his success or failure would be people who . . . . flew around in giant airplanes, drank too much, had wives with names like Cheyenne, [and] were used to skinny assistants who wore ten-thousand-euro suits."

The music comes to him as he swims and soon after he records it with a group of strong music students (along the way falling in love with the young, willowy and requiting Elodi, a gifted, utterly self-possessed cellist: they are restrained). He sends the jingle to Jack, whose enthusiasm compels him to immediately send an email confirming the deal. Jules will leave for Los Angeles to conduct the piece and meet with Jack's board–after he kills two Arabs.

At night on a bridge he sees three men attacking a fourth, a man wearing a yarmulke. There rises in Jules an old urge, “to kill those who need killing.” He is with “no fear, because, as in war, the feeling that he was already dead freed him . . . a kind of joy at writing himself off.” He throws his body into the fray; the assailants, he sees, are merely bullies who don’t know how to fight. The surviving assailant throws the knife into the river and, in the presence of a couple passing by, shouts “raciste! raciste!” At that, having done the socio-judicial calculus very quickly, Jules slips into the water and with much cunning and effort escapes, at which point the narrative becomes, in patches, a police procedural, sometimes hilarious.

“Did he look like Gerard Depardieu?” “Are you kidding? He was an athlete. Gerard Depardieu is as fat as a hippopotamus.” When the surviving assailant, now a “witness,” allows that the Comedie-Francaise is a pornographic movie house, the slightly smarter detective says, out of the blue, “I don’t like oysters. They remind me of Dominique de Villepain: hard, abrasive, salt and pepper on the outside, soft and gutless on the inside” (bull’s-eye: Helprin has that way with a punch line).

When landing in Los Angeles Jules considers the nature of paradox, “the reconciliation of opposites within a theater greater than the world, within infinite time and infinite space, [the] solution to his dilemma.” By the time he is landing in Paris, Paradox, along with its sibling, Irony, will have called and raised, and we will know Jules’ reasons for wanting revenge as well as its targets, and we will cheer him on—even though we don’t yet know the plan. Eventually two disconnected characters sprinkled in earlier will assume great importance, both to the plot and to Jules personally. There will be mistakes, moves and counter-moves (one of those surely an ad hoc afterthought: a couple of plot elements seem a bit too on-the-nose), and a fuse will burn down. The denouement,

in what does and does not happen, shows both narrative cunning and genuine wisdom. Our gratification runs deep.

Here, in his seventh novel, Helprin is as keenly attentive, his images as surprising and exact, as in all his stories. Designs of plot and place are rich, like well-wrought tapestries; casual insights (psychological, social, historical) are *dulce et utile*, as when Jules explains why old people who have no dementia will forget small details; vivified characters simply do not go away. Within this particular quintuple helix—Paris, anti-Semitism, music, old age, and *eros* (if undiminshed certainly transformed)—he has woven his characteristic, polyphonic motifs: muscular Jewishness (with generous feelings for Catholic custom and belief), contempt for those complicit in the suicide of the West, the workings of providential grace, heroic protectiveness, a severe code of loyalty as an antidote to devastating betrayal, a prodigious, palpable love (above all of family, living and dead, immutable), and a metaphysic that . . . goes way beyond the scope of a review.

And there is this, an abiding question implicit in this book and others: can a long life be a work of art? Here is a suitably short, authoritative answer, Helprin's own. "Look, my job is to make the donuts, and your job is to eat them."

Bon Appetit.

James Como is the author, most recently, of