THREE READINGS OF MARK HELPRIN'S *WINTER'S TALE*

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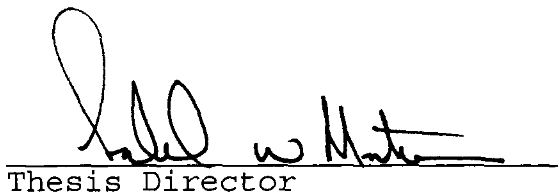
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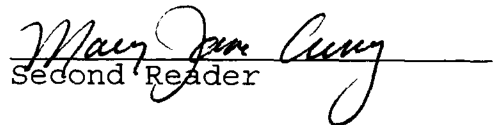
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For the partner.

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INTRODUCTION

Mark Helprin was born in New York City, in 1947, the son of Morris Helprin, a onetime spy, and Elanor Lynn, a Broadway leading lady. He holds undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard. He has served in the Israeli army, the Israeli air force, and the British Merchant Navy. Helprin is the author of two collections of short stories, four novels, a children's book, many editorials for the *Wall Street Journal*, and, recently, speeches for Bob Dole. He is definitely not an ordinary writer.

His first two published works, short story collections *A Dove of the East* (1977) and *Ellis Island (1981)*, were both very well received. The reviews for his second novel, *Winter's Tale* (1983), were mixed; people seemed either to love it or hate it. Helprin's genre-busting use of fantasy in *Winter's Tale* bothered many reviewers; they felt it weakened the novel. Robert Towers, writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*, sneered, "It is, of course, possible that *Winter's Tale* will become a cult object, embraced by those adolescents of all ages who are especially prone to magical thinking and to a craving for instant transformation" (123). Others, most notably Benjamin DeMott, who reviewed *Winter's Tale* for *The New York Times*, raved about the novel: "I find myself nervous,

to a degree I don't recall in my past as a reviewer, about failing the work, inadequately displaying its brilliance" (1). This dichotomy of opinion stems in part from Helprin's use of magical realism, the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality. However, other features of the novel could explain such reactions, including its commentary on history and social order and Helprin's willingness to express moral positions.

Winter's Tale is set in and around the city of New York. As the novel opens, the reader meets Peter Lake, professional thief and master mechanic, who falls in love with the beautiful, consumptive Beverly Penn. Her love changes him forever, and the ramifications of this love drive the novel. After her death, Lake enters a kind of dormancy, only to return later in the story and in time. In the second part of the novel, Hardesty Marratta and Virginia Gamely meet and fall in love, a century forward from Peter Lake and Beverly. Both work for *The Sun*, a New York daily newspaper run by the amusingly eccentric Harry Penn, Beverly's now-elderly brother. Jackson Mead, a mysterious figure from the past, reappears in Hardesty and Virginia's time. He is a builder who wants to build a great bridge that will be bigger and more amazing than any bridge previously built. In the third part of the novel, Peter Lake returns, without a memory but with a purpose, which reveals itself at the end of the narrative. He must sacrifice himself in order to effect the resurrection of Hardesty and Virginia's daughter, Abby.

This is the main storyline, but there are several subplots which include the magic white horse, Athansor; the Penns' rival, newspaper publisher Craig Binky and his associates who are named after the guide words on the spines of Encyclopedia Britannica; Pearly Soames, a criminal with "color gravity"; Jack, Mrs. Gameley's rooster that thinks he's a cat; and on and on, all described with pages of rapturous language. Critics often accuse Helprin of not knowing when to quit, but it is this seeming excessiveness, together with the reality of life in New York, that reflects the increasingly popular technique of magical realism.

Magical Realism is a post-structuralist narrative mode used by authors who find conventional realism too naive to shed light on an often bewildering and contradictory existence (Conniff 167). A realistic novel implies certain norms: a Cartesian world-view, the separation of subject and object, and the possibility of objective analysis (Kelley 161). A novel with these Enlightenment virtues rejects the medieval past: angels and archetypes (Porter 6). In *Winter's Tale*, Mark Helprin combines "magic" with "real life" to create a novel that challenges the readers' definitions of both terms.

What qualifies *Winter's Tale* as magical realism and not merely fantasy? According to Amaryll Chandy, the key element that distinguishes the two is "resolved antinomy," antinomy being "the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes within the text" (30). Both magical realism and the fantastic

have natural and supernatural elements. In the fantastic the supernatural elements are disconcerting to the characters and the readers because they create difficulties that must be addressed. The author "normalizes" them; they are explained away. In the fantastic, the author would have to tell the reader that a magician has enchanted the white horse, enabling him to fly, while in magical realism there is nothing to be explained since magic does not disturb the "implied reader," as described in Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Flying white horses are just accepted in the story as part of life, and the reader must, therefore, examine his or her views on whether flying white horses constitute normality or not. In the fantastic, the reader is "defamiliarized" (Simpkins 145) and brought back into the fold by the author. In magical realism, the reader must bring himself back into the fold. If this "refamiliarization" never occurs, the results can be profoundly disturbing. For example, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, an example of the grotesque, gives the reader no way to deal with the unexplained change in the protagonist. In his dissertation, *Magical Versus Marvelous Realism as Narrative Modes in French Fiction,* Charles Werner Scheel makes an interesting point about *The Metamorphosis*:

> The most obvious way in which Kafka's new narrative discourse applied to prose fiction what had hitherto been restricted to poetry is in its use of metaphors, which recalls Rimbaud's . . . It opposes a 'purely intensive usage of the language to any symbolic usage,' with the effect that 'language stops being representative in order to reach its extremes or limits.' . . . This for all intents and

> purposes, destroys the conventional use of metaphors: the text proceeds from a metaphor, rather than develops a metaphor toward allegoric or symbolic purpose. (44)

Helprin's *Winter's Tale* proceeds from several metaphors; chief among them is probably the cloud wall. The cloud wall acts as a dimension door--sometimes as an active force for good, other times as a passive barrier that challenges the characters to overcome it. Sometimes it is an agent of God; other times it is merely an agent of entropy. Characters disappear into it and return unchanged many years later. This characteristic of the cloud wall provides the text with the central Judeo-Christian metaphor of death and rebirth. Death is never really final, and believers will see the ones they love again. This, of course, is the traditional religious argument that began falling out of favor during the Enlightenment with the emergence of the rationalism of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) and Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762). Yet recently, in our post-modern, fragmented culture, the Enlightenment itself has been falling out of favor so that many "irrational" ideas are returning. For example, in their magical realist novels *Beloved* and *The House of the Spirits*, both Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende feature ghosts as major characters. The protagonists do not seem to find these apparitions troubling. Visions, dreams that come true, time anomalies--all are prominent features in *Winter's Tale* as well as other magical realist novels such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Magical realism acknowledges that there are many aspects of our daily lives that defy rational argument or logical explanation. Cruelty, random violence, and tragedy, as well as the miracle of unlooked-for kindness, stretch modern man's understanding of the universe. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a prominent practitioner of magical realism, spoke in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of "the want of conventional resources to make our lives credible" (Coniff 168). The magical realist uses unconventional resources--dreams, visions, ghosts, the magical and the miraculous--to bring some meaning to atomized, contemporary lives.

The magical white horse, Athansor, is another metaphor central to Helprin's text. Helprin makes the personified horse the first thing the reader meets when the narrative opens. The horse doesn't think, exactly, but he feels and perceives. He is curious about Peter Lake and chooses to help him. The horse sometimes acts in the manner of an animal guide from Native American mythology. Animal guides are often more than what they seem. For example, a buffalo seen on a vision quest represents the buffalo, the embodiment of buffalo-ness, a kind of Platonic buffalo. Athansor aspires to be this kind of horse, the essence of horse-ness. In this he symbolizes one of the main themes of the book: striving to overcome limitations. Magical realism often results from a cultural clash between a primitive society and a more technological culture. The simpler society is more likely to

be open to irrational ideas, to value dreams and visions, while the more complex society worships science. In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin uses the Baymen, a Native American tribal people who adopt Peter Lake, to give the hero a solid, pre-industrial upbringing. The Baymen have a special understanding of the cloud wall. They can outrun it, and they can take refuge in it without being swallowed up. It is the Baymen who give the white horse that saves Peter Lake from the Short Tails the name Athansor, a name from their mythology. Because the Baymen accept magic and magical horses as part of their world, the reader is encouraged to do so, too. Thus, the Baymen are important in shaping the implied reader and that reader's response to the events in the narrative.

Magical realism demands more mental energy than the fantastic from the reader; it is, therefore, uniquely suited to be a didactic narrative mode for adults. Helprin has a strong point to make. *Winter's Tale* is a very partisan novel, one man's contribution to the great debate that has raged in academia for thirty years about critical methodologies and the role of literature in society. One side--Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*), John Gardner (*On Moral Fiction*), Wayne Booth (*The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*)--favors the canon, evaluation, the possibility of, if not objective criticism, at least the idea that some subjective criticisms are more useful than others. The other side--Derrida (*Writing and Difference*), Jameson (*The

Prison House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism), Julia Kristeva (*The Revolution in Poetic Language*)--favors a plethora of criticisms: deconstruction, Marxist, feminist, new historicist and, most recently, cultural criticism. One side views itself as the beleaguered last defenders of truth and beauty, while the other side views itself as a grassroots movement uniting to throw the corrupt old guard out of power. These sides usually, though not always, correspond to the political right and the left, respectively. By its very nature, *Winter's Tale* invites readings from both sides, particularly a Marxist reading and one based on ethical criticism.

Recently, there has been renewed interest in value judgments of literature, i.e., the idea that some books are better than others. The word "moral" is frequently used in regard to literature, as is the more palatable word "ethical." While Marxists, feminists, and psychological critics would all agree that there is no such thing as an objective opinion--and that, therefore, any one person's idea of a good book will inevitably reflect his or her race, class, and gender--an "ethical" critic such as Wayne Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, might respond that there are ways to take race, class and gender into account while making decisions about which books are more worthwhile. Helprin would perhaps agree that regarding everything from Shakespeare to a

mass-produced romance as a "text" all equally worthy of study can become a bit absurd.

It is important to understand that Helprin's use of magical realism forces the reader to question basic assumptions about ethics as well as social relations. It follows that this technique would be most useful to those who have a specific point to make. Helprin, in contrast with most of the literary establishment, is interested in old-fashioned notions like truth and beauty. He says that he writes "in the service of illumination and memory" (Linville 199). John Gardner in his book *On Moral Fiction* says

> Metaphysical systems do not, generally speaking, break down, shattered by later, keener insight; they are simply abandoned--sometimes after endless tinkering and renovation--like drafty old castles. (10)

Many of the ideas in *Winter's Tale* reflect Gardner's thought: for example, the idea that art should instruct and hold up models for imitation was never decisively attacked and proved wrong; it merely fell prey to the shifting trends of literary theory. Most post-modern art would never presume to preach overtly; it reflects post-modern times: it is fragmented, ironic, and self-reflexive (Guerin 240). Helprin's grown-up fairy tale serves the same purpose as children's fairy tales: to instruct and uplift, to make a better world through better people.

Helprin shares his views on the purpose of literature with most defenders of the canon who also believe that art

influences character and behavior. Certain stories that have stood the proverbial "test of time" have shaped Western consciousness itself. Even the anti-canon forces do not want to destroy it completely, but they want it to include stories that reflect the experiences of women, African-Americans, and all others who have traditionally been silenced. This desire for inclusion points to an inherent contradiction in post-structuralist criticism. Deconstruction, for example, suggests that words only refer to other words, not to anything concrete. Language becomes a self-referential game, a closed system that cannot affect the outside world. If, however, the collective stories of a culture shape that culture just as much as that culture shapes them, then the canon remains important. David Parker, author of *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*, says,

> The strongly evaluative self-interpretation by which we constitute ourselves includes everything in which our selfhood is expressed, including what we feel, think, and say (or do not say) about books. At this level, there is an inevitable continuity between the distinctions of worth by which we define ourselves and those by which we make value judgments about literature. (7)

In other words, the self-image of a child is directly related to the stories read to that child. Children deliberately try to pattern themselves after heroes they admire, and so, Helprin is saying, do adults. People define themselves by the stories that are important to them.

> Our individual identity is embedded in communal stories, which helps us to see why the so-called literary canon, insofar as it has contributed to

> the shaping of Western culture, is so important for us. The narratives it contains are not simply external to us, imposed on us by authoritative others; they are part of who we are. The moral traditions these stories partly inherit and partly create are therefore important to us, not as things to seek, or to revive artificially, but to recognize as in some sense already within ourselves. (Parker 17)

Efforts to save the canon are efforts to retain those virtues that are not dependent on who is in power, to preserve basic ethics that benefit the whole tribe.

At one level, Helprin's *Winter's Tale* shows him in agreement with such views about literature and ethics. However, for someone who aligns himself so thoroughly on the side of the old guard, Helprin is not unaware of how the other half lives. *Winter's Tale* is no sugar-coated pill, disguising wholesome truth with verbal pyrotechnics. Any story set in New York City would be incomplete without the requisite insanity that large cities seem both to attract and create. There is poverty and cruelty; good doesn't always win; sometimes the hero dies. Probably the most important image of the book is that of a child the protagonist Peter Lake sees on his second morning in the city. The child is standing alone in a tenement hallway, starving and dying of consumption. This image, great injustice in the midst of great beauty, reappears throughout the book. The reader must resolve these economic and social contradictions just as he must "refamiliarize" himself in order to accept the magic within the real. A Marxist reading serves a similar purpose to a

magical realist reading, highlighting and then dissolving apparent boundaries.

Socio-political issues are inescapable in *Winter's Tale*, in relation to magical realism and in its presentation of ethical issues. To balance the magical, the real often takes on grotesque proportions. Even in the midst of the cloud wall and magic animal guides, Helprin does not shy away from the poverty, violence and suffering of the city. Both Peter Lake and Hardesty Marratta lose loved ones to illness; both are seeking justice, some kind of understanding and assurance that there is a reason for their losses. Both encounter the enigmatic phrase, "For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of the perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone." The perfectly just city, a utopia where no one is hungry or poor, and where no one dies before his or her time--this is a subject on which Marxist criticism can shed some light.

Peter Lake is the central figure that ties multiple readings together. As a hero of mythic proportion, he is an ideal locus for magical realism. He applies his heroism to social injustice, thus validating a Marxist reading. Marxism and magical realism both arise from contradictions: great wealth next to abject poverty forces readers to think about what they mean by justice; while flying white horses next to steam locomotives force readers to think about what they mean by reality. The work of resolving these contradictions

involves making choices that lead to new insights. Ethical criticism revives old standards that are useful to readers who must question their assumptions when such insights arise. Such criticism revisits the pre-modern idea that stories affect lives and that readers imitate heroes. *Winter's Tale* is rich enough to support all three readings.

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MAGICAL REALISM IN *WINTER'S TALE*

In his stunning second novel, *Winter's Tale*, Mark Helprin uses magical realism, a relatively new narrative mode, to give his readers an "old-fashioned" classical hero. Peter Lake fits the hero-myth paradigm closely; after his parents are forced to abandon him, he is adopted and raised by lowly people. As an adult Peter Lake experiences great love and great loss; he undergoes a metaphorical death and rebirth experience, during which he is profoundly changed (Segal xxiv). In his second life, he initially has no memory of his previous existence, but he has extraordinary powers that increase in strength as he puts his past back together. When he finally knows himself, his powers are at their height, and he must make a great sacrifice. To convey this idea of the hero's journey, Helprin uses magical realism to transcend the boundaries imposed by the mundane setting, thereby producing in the modern era an original version of the hero-myth tradition.

In magical realism, Amaryll Chanady's concept of antinomy, "the simultaneous presence of two conflicting codes within the text" (30) allows language to go beyond strict representation. In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin uses unresolved antinomy, wildly improbable and downright impossible people

and events in tandem with the more mundane elements of life in order to shock the reader into reassessing his views on reality. The flying white horse, the mysterious cloud wall, and Peter Lake's magical powers contrast with the ordinary workings of a daily newspaper, a hospital, and a city government. Magical realism also serves as what D. Emily Hicks calls "border writing." The border subject "has a multidimensional perception: the ability to see the orders inherent to two or more cultures which intersect to form this cyborg subject" (qtd. in Kelley 133). Peter Lake "becomes" a hero because he sees life from a "border subject" position. If the potential hero were fully integrated into any one society, he would have no reason to be discontented, no reason to set out on his journey of discovery.

Peter Lake is adopted and raised by the aboriginal Baymen, who find him as an infant floating in a model ship. He learns how to fish, canoe, and respect the cloud wall. As an adolescent, and after leaving the Baymen, he is apprenticed to the master mechanic Mootfowl, and he learns the workings of machines. As an adult he spends time in a street gang before falling in love with Beverly Penn and becoming, for a short while, an assimilated patrician. Peter Lake is a part of all these cultures, yet at home in none. These disparate aspects of his past give him a unique perspective and make him an ideal locus of magical realism when he reappears in his "second" life.

Helprin's story begins in the autumn of the year 1899, in the city of New York. The first thing the reader sees is a white horse who has escaped from its owner. Helprin tells the reader that "the horse was crazy, but, still, he was able to worry about what he had done" (4). The horse has a "mysterious intelligence" (4) that compels him to go from his stable over the new bridges "which had married beautiful womanly Brooklyn to her rich uncle Manhattan; had put the city's hand out to the country; and were the end of the past because they spanned not only distance and deep water but dreams and time" (5). The reader knows immediately that the author is not using traditional realism. Horses' motives are not generally mysterious, and bridges do not cross time. Helprin is telling his readers that his world is not what it seems and that they will miss important truths if they trust their sense perceptions alone.

After reading the first several pages of *Winter's Tale*, the reader is already struggling with the idea of a mysteriously intelligent horse and a bridge across time. Helprin encourages the struggle. There is no explanation, no normalizing story along the lines of, "well, the horse was enchanted by a magician." There is no magician. This is, ostensibly, the real world. Chanady calls this withholding of information "authorial reticence" (30). The author fails to give the full details until it suits him to do so. In the absence of a story, the reader is forced to make up his own,

"to run multiple, simultaneous simulations" (Kelley 153). This feature of the text makes magical realism a more interactive narrative mode than is "normal" realism. The reader is engaged more directly than if he were just passively taking in a mimetic novel.

Into this tranquil early morning scene bursts the hero, Peter Lake, running away from the nefarious Short Tails gang. They chase Peter Lake, a former member, into a dead end street. The Short Tails are "perfectly criminal in appearance, with strange bent faces, clifflike brows, tiny chins, noses and ears that looked sewn-back-on, and hairlines that descended preposterously far--their cruelty projected from them like sparks jumping a gap" (8). The horse hears the noise and approaches from a side street. Peter Lake begs the horse "Horse! Please!" and the horse comes over to help him. Peter Lake jumps on the horse and easily out-distances the Short Tails. The description of the Short Tails is one of stereotypical villainy; the reader almost expects them to start twirling their mustaches. The vivid language used to describe their appearance stretches the reader's mind and prepares the reader for something out-of-the-ordinary. This scene would not be out of place in a fairy tale, but it is not generally expected in a postmodern novel. The potential hero acquires an animal guide, a symbol of a pre-modern era. The animal guide increases the hero's chances of success and shows

him to be superior to the villains who are not deemed worthy of trust by animals.

Peter Lake, a former member of the Short Tails gang, had turned away from them several years before when their criminal plan involved killing the Baymen, the aboriginal people who raised him. When Peter Lake escapes with the white horse, he decides to go hide out with the Baymen in their domain, the Bayonne Marsh. He feels safe with the Baymen because "No one had been able to subdue them, for . . . their realm was only half-real and anyone entering it without their approval was likely to vanish forever into the roaring clouds which swept over the mirror-like waters" (16). This description of the marsh immediately puts the reader in the realm of the transcendent. It evokes Avalon, the mysterious isle that appears and disappears at will and becomes King Arthur's final resting place. Peter Lake grew up in the Bayonne Marsh; he came from this "mythic" place, so the reader begins to expect improbable things from him.

Magical realism often occurs when a primitive culture clashes with a more technological one. Examples include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which describes the clash between modern and traditional aspects of Indian culture, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, in which African American folk ways contrast with those of the surrounding culture. The Bayonne Marsh provides fertile ground for magical realism and comic relief. When Peter Lake was growing up with

the Baymen, they taught him everything they knew, how to survive on the Bay, how to outrun the cloud wall, how to fight and when to run away. These skills are not as useful as the Baymen thought they would be to Peter Lake when they send him to the city. Abandoned again at the age of twelve, he is completely unprepared for the enormous, impersonal, rapidly mechanizing city. When they send him to the city, they give him "a shell crown and a feather necklace (their symbols of manhood) a good broadsword, a new net, a bag of fish wafers, and a jug of clam beer" (53). These items indicate the values of the Baymen. They are a simple, pre-industrial people, they have their own mythology, and their society is based on mutual aid against outsiders. The city Peter Lake is about to enter has a different, more Darwinian, set of values and new symbols of adulthood. Peter Lake learns very quickly about money, one such symbol, and what can happen without it. He is, of course, soon relieved of his Bay treasures when he reaches the city. He realizes that he must adjust his perceptions; in order to survive, his world must grow wider.

On his first night in the city, Peter Lake encounters some kindly teenage girl pickpockets. They let him stay with them for the night, and they take him to where they sleep, the basement of a dilapidated tenement building. In the morning, Peter Lake wakes up and begins to explore his new surroundings. He comes upon a sight that stays with him forever, even into his second life, a child in the late stages

of a wasting disease, left to die in a hallway. Peter Lake is about thirteen years old, still a child himself, so he can do nothing for this child. This experience, one which is crucial to Peter Lake's development as a hero, makes him realize how different this world is from the marsh where he grew up. The child represents another kind of magical realism--the grotesque (Danow 80). A child dying in a hallway, unloved and unremembered, is not a supernatural event, and yet it is profoundly disturbing. The scene is so far removed from the way the world *should* be that it has the same effect as if were supernatural. David K. Danow, in speaking of World War II, explains this phenomenon:

> . . . we can more or less understand the world before the war; but since that cataclysm, as a result of the preponderance of horrific information embracing that virtually all-encompassing experience, we are at a loss to explain our own *after*. (81)

Similarly, Peter Lake tries to understand this experience for the rest of his life. His mind grasps for an explanation, but, of course, there is none (Danow 81).

Peter Lake finds his true calling when he is apprehended by the police and taken to "Reverend Overweary's Home for Wayward Boys." There he is apprenticed to the Reverend Dr. Mootfowl, a brilliant mechanic. Peter Lake, newly arrived from the marsh, has an unusual view of machines. "At first, Peter Lake thought they were animals who had learned how to dance in one place" (62). Under Mootfowl, Peter Lake becomes a skilled craftsman, a master of the new machines that are

just starting to drive the city. Helprin uses the machine as a metaphor for the city itself. The city is made up of different parts that, ideally, work together for a common purpose. Evil and good are necessary parts of the city, just as friction is sometimes required for a machine to produce energy.

Peter Lake's childhood on the marsh, together with his adolescence as an apprentice mechanic, gives him a unique perspective on life in turn-of-the-century New York. He was raised in two cultures, so he takes the things he learned on the marsh, dreams and myths, as seriously as he takes the laws of physics. Toni Morrison maintains that this open-mindedness is true of African-Americans:

> I want my work to capture the vast imagination of black people . . . We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all parts of living are on an equal footing. Birds talk and butterflies cry and it is not surprising or upsetting to them. These things make the world larger for them. (Quoted in Kelley 181)

In a similar way, Peter Lake can integrate the white horse and the cloud wall with ordinary mundane existence. He mates the divergent strains of his life to produce what Robert Thomas Kelley calls a "hybrid reality" (180), i.e. another form of magical realism, a new breed of thought. This creative capacity distinguishes the hero from ordinary mortals.

When Peter Lake meets Beverly Penn, the great love of his life, they teach each other many important things. She is seventeen and dying of consumption. Peter Lake's love for

Beverly changes him, moves him out of childhood. He begins to understand the necessity of sacrifice as a component of adulthood. He tells Beverly's father, Isaac Penn, "When we drove across the lake this afternoon and Beverly held the little girl (her sister) in her arms, I felt a responsibility far more satisfying than any pleasure I have ever known" (150). Peter Lake's thoughts up to this point in his life have been about survival, learning, and running from the Short Tails. Now he realizes that love is more fulfilling and more demanding than anything he has experienced so far. This experience is vital to Peter Lake's experience, his hero quest, because in his second life, made possible and believable because of the use of magical realism, he follows the example set by Beverly Penn.

Peter Lake's unusual background makes him a fitting partner for Beverly. She has been on the border between life and death for so long that she often speaks like an ancient prophet: "She felt as if she knew the stars, and had been among them, or would be" (99). One morning she wakes to find the notebook by her bed filled with equations. She takes them to the puzzled planetarium lecturer who asks her what they mean. She replies, "They mean to me that the universe . . . growls, and sings. No, shouts" (100). When she is near death she tells Peter Lake,

> There are animals in the stars, like the animal you describe, with a pelt of light and deep endless eyes. Astronomers think that the constellations were imagined. They were not imagined at all.

> There are animals, far distant, that move and thrash smoothly, and yet are entirely still. They aren't made up of the few stars in the constellations that represent them--they're too vast--but these point in the directions in which they lie. (181)

Peter Lake had been telling Beverly about Athansor. Beverly has a unique capacity to understand literal metaphors. She, herself, is a metaphor, an embodiment of love and a gateway between the worlds. Athansor has this dual quality. Magical realism allows him to be two things at once--an extraordinary yet earthly horse and one of the mystical animals in the stars that Beverly talks about. Peter Lake has this dual quality also. He is a multi-talented, but otherwise ordinary, human being, and he is a living symbol of the city itself. His life is connected to the path the city takes.

This idea of the protagonist as a literal embodiment of some larger theme of the novel is a characteristic trait of magical realism. In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the main character, Saleem, is born at the exact moment of Indian independence: midnight, August 15, 1947. Rushdie uses this device to keep the fortunes of the character connected to the fortunes of the country throughout the novel. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the ghostly title character is meant to be a representative of the "sixty million and more" Africans killed during the unspeakable middle passage. In the same way, Peter Lake is both a microcosm of all the stories of nineteenth century immigration, and like the gradual

disintegration of Rushdie's Saleem, Peter Lake's rise and fall is connected to the city's (Kelley 229-245).

After Beverly dies, Peter Lake dies too, or at least he falls into the cloud wall. Book II begins nearly one hundred years later, in the late twentieth century. The four chapters of Book II each tell the story of a young character who comes to New York seeking something: Hardesty Marratta accepts a charge from his father to seek "the perfectly just city"; Virginia Gamely is a resident of the Lake of the Coheeries, the same small village in upstate New York where the Penns had their vacation house. She travels to the city with her infant son Martin to seek her fortune. Ashbury Gunwillow's grandfather swears that certain engines have souls, and he sends his grandson to New York to find them. Christiana Friebourg comes to New York looking for a certain white horse she saw as a child.

Magical realism plays a role in each of these characters' lives, but particularly in establishing the narrative structure that brings them together and joins them to Peter Lake's hero journey. Virginia's home, the Lake of the Coheeries, like the Bayonne Marsh, represents a premodern time when most people lived in small villages. In this novel, both the Lake of the Coheeries and the Marsh appear to be getting less and less real as they recede in time. In trying to describe it to curious New Yorkers, Virginia says,

> The Lake of the Coheeries isn't really in New York State... It's not on the map, and mail never gets

> through unless one of us picks it up in Hudson. It's hard to explain. You can't, well, you can't just go there . . . You have to be a resident. (239)

The Lake of the Coheeries, like the Bayonne Marsh, is set in stark contrast to the very real city of New York. Hardesty Marratta, in comparing New York to his native San Francisco, thinks,

> This was a hard unforgiving city, strong on suffering, punishment, and murderous weather. Its climate and population were a scythe that swept relentlessly until even the strong fell before it, and the weak in their great numbers vanished from the streets forever and died unremembered in the cold and dark. (306)

The Bayonne Marsh and the Lake of the Coheeries are like the mythical Brigadoon or King Arthur's Avalon; they are remnants of a simpler past that clash with the hard, modern city of New York. Another character, Praeger de Pinto, in replying to Hardesty's view of the city tells him,

> The anarchy will hold you . . . it contains all the possibilities you seek. And you must know as well, that the very fact that the city survives and remains on its feet implies an equilibrium, which, in turn, implies the presence of a high and opposing force for each category of degradation. (305)

The reader can see a strong sense of balance in magical realism. It is the Marsh and the Lake of the Coheeries, both separated from the city by the mysterious cloud wall, that stretch the mind and allow the reader to accept the more complex contradictions of the technological city.

In Book III Peter Lake returns one hundred years after he falls, fatally wounded, into the cloud wall. After being

released from the hospital, he wanders the streets, sane, but without a memory. He comes upon the twentieth-century protagonists, Hardesty and Virginia, having dinner with the rest of the senior staff of *The Sun*, including editor-in-chief, Harry Penn, the now-elderly brother of the long dead Beverly. They realize that he is not crazy:

> Nor did he act like one of the many men of the street who were caught up in hopeless lunacy. To the contrary, raggedly dressed, sun and windburned, both gaunt and strong, he looked at them without a blink, in the chilling fashion of a man who is trying to place familiar and haunting faces that he knows he cannot identify. Rising and falling in intensity like pulsating stars, his eyes fixed precisely on Jessica Penn, and seemed to be sweeping over her like harrows. (414)

Of course, they do not know who he is, and Harry Penn does not recognize him, but Peter Lake sticks in their minds. Peter Lake is now in the wandering stage of the hero's journey. As he struggles to regain his memory, he undergoes hardships that will prepare him to meet his final challenge. He gets a job as head mechanic, tending the engines of *The Sun*. Some of the machines are so old that the young mechanics do not know what to do when they break down. Peter Lake, trained by the mysterious Mootfowl, can fix everything. He becomes a teacher of sorts, and the other mechanics hold him in awe. As Book III progresses, other characters from the nineteenth century reappear: Pearly Soames and the Short Tails; Jackson Mead, the mysterious builder of bridges; and Athansor, the white horse, now held captive in Brooklyn.

In Book IV, Helprin uses magical realism's capacity to integrate disparate elements to weave the three different plot threads together, producing tight suspense and a surprising ending (Chanady 21). Peter Lake slowly acquires more and more self-knowledge as, one by one, he meets Christiana, Ashbury, Hardesty and finally Virginia. Abby Marratta becomes ill during a visit to the Lake of the Coheeries, which has now been spoiled by the Short Tails. Her condition worsens and she eventually dies. Jackson Mead sails an enormous ship up the Hudson. He is very secretive about it, but he tells a few people that it contains building materials for a wonderful bridge that he plans to build, a bridge that will pierce the cloud wall. News of the bridge creates a furor in the city which leads to a great fire.

As the millennium draws nearer, Peter Lake recovers more and more of his memory. One night he has a vivid dream, in which he is taken up by some force and plunged through the earth. He is taken on a tour of the graves of the world:

> He was unmoved, and he did not feel compassion, for he was far too busy and his eyes too darting and quick. There was much to be done. He had to know them all. And, in his mad and breathless flight, he did not miss a single one, but worked as if he had been created to be their registrar--the mechanical mole, the faithful observer, the gleaner of souls, the good workman. (484)

Helprin uses this unusual dream to show Peter Lake's development as a hero. He is beginning to realize that he has been brought back for a reason. After this dream Peter Lake acquires definite magical powers. He can dispatch the Short

Tails with a wave of his hand. He has completed his quest for self-knowledge and, thus, arrives as a hero.

The three plot threads central to Book IV reach a climax at about the same time. Peter Lake realizes who he is, the fire burns the city, and Abby dies. In finally achieving self-knowledge, he reaches full hero status. He has already experienced death and rebirth; now he must die again so that Abby and the city can be reborn. The lessons of his first life give him power in his second life, and magical realism makes all this plausible.

Like the mythic King Arthur, whose health mirrored that of his kingdom, Peter Lake has a symbolic connection to the city. Peter Lake realizes that he must sacrifice himself for Abby. He causes Abby to wake up, and then he goes to meet the Short Tails. He lets himself be caught in the ruins of the Maritime Cathedral. He could defeat the Short Tails if he wanted to, but he understands that the price of Abby's life is his death:

> You see, it works. The balances are exact. The world is a perfect place, so perfect that even if there is nothing afterward, all this will have been enough. Now I see, now I'm sure of what I must do. And it must be done quickly. (682)

He understands also that he is connected to the old city, the city that just burned. Abby is connected to the new city and the new millennium.

Peter Lake's journey as hero comes to an end when he realizes two things--who he is and what he must do. His hard-won self-knowledge comes from the conjunction of his past

lives; especially important is the nineteenth century Peter Lake who loved Beverly. Love reminds him of what is required of a lover--sacrifice. The hero is the one whose love encompasses more than one other person; it covers the whole kingdom. Love for the tenement child enables Peter Lake to save Abby Marratta. Love for Beverly enables him to redeem the whole city with his death. Self-knowledge and self-sacrifice come together to produce a hero for the modern world. Helprin uses magical realism to lift his protagonist out of the modern age, connecting him to the timeless hero-myth tradition, and making *Winter's Tale* a novel with an ethical core both timely and timeless.

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A MARXIST READING OF *WINTER'S TALE*

Mark Helprin would probably be dismayed if he knew someone had undertaken a Marxist reading of *Winter's Tale*. Signs of the implied author are everywhere in the novel; they show him to be a deeply religious Jew, conservative on some issues and liberal on others, who wants his novel to instruct and uplift his readers, but the reader finds no overt Marxist ideology emerging. In fact, *Winter's Tale* gives hints of divine providence that point to a supreme being. The novel illuminates the city of New York, capital of the capitalist world. Neither of these visions evokes the image of Marxism. Nonetheless, Helprin creates Peter Lake, a classical hero for the post-modern age, who uses the hard-won class consciousness from his first life to effect great changes for good in his second life. Thus, despite Helprin's stated conservatism, his ideas about justice in *Winter's Tale* lend themselves to a Marxist reading.

The hero paradigm in literature is a close relative of the "great man" theory of history, as described by G. W. F. Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and popularized in the English-speaking world by Thomas Carlyle in his series of lectures, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. The great man theory suggests that certain

individuals represent the forces of their age and drive history forward. The hero paradigm represents the pre-modern era of literature, while the great man theory represents the pre-modern era of history. Both invite the reader to identify with the hero or great man. Post-modernism, on the other hand, emphasizes the fact that identity is constructed; the hero, the great man, and the reader are not born in romantic isolation, but are products of their environment. Helprin has often stated his belief in the destructiveness of post-modernism, yet the socio-political details of *Winter's Tale* suggest that he might be more aware of the role of history and class consciousness in shaping identity than he admits. Helprin uses the socio-political details of *Winter's Tale* to take its timeless and transcendent aspects and focus on a moment in history, thus bringing them back to earth.

Marxist criticism has a unique relationship to history; it interprets history in terms of an ongoing class struggle, and it acknowledges that literature cannot be segregated from history. Marxist critics, such as Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton, recognize that all literature contains elements of propaganda and that any attempt to treat a novel as a purely "aesthetic" object will necessarily omit a great deal (Bennett 96). Both history and the aesthetic play an important role in *Winter's Tale*. Because of Peter Lake's time travel, the book covers approximately one hundred and thirty years in the history of New York City. The reader begins with European

immigration and the bustling, rapidly industrializing, nineteenth-century city and finishes with the late-twentieth-century, present-day city.

In Book I, Helprin contrasts the slum poverty of street children with the upper-class life of Isaac Penn. Penn is an unusually benevolent "robber baron," one of a group of late nineteenth-century industrialists who secured unprecedented fortunes in the emerging industries of oil, steel, and rail transportation. To contrast with this image of capitalist success, Helprin gives the reader plenty of "thick description" of the social conditions of New York as background to the story:

> On several score thousand miles of streets were many cataclysmic armies interacting without formation--ten thousand prostitutes on Broadway alone; half a million abandoned children; half a million of the lame and the blind; scores of thousands of active criminals locked in perpetual combat with as many police; and the vast number of good citizens, who in their normal lives were as fierce and rapacious as other cities' wild dogs. They did not buy and sell, they made killings and beat each other out. (54)

Despite this apparently bleak numerical hyperbole, Helprin finds the city exciting, filled with possibility.

While the New York of the nineteenth century is promising, with great potential for growth and change, the late-twentieth-century, post-industrial city is decadent. The reader sees the modern city through Peter Lake's nineteenth-century eyes when he wakes up in the hospital. Gone are the Baymen and the Marsh. In their place is a city of plastic

that has replaced the city of wood and steel. As the characters approach the millennium, the city, though still marvelous and awe-inspiring, is in decline. Helprin gives his readers an apocalyptic end to history by burning the city down and allowing everyone to start again. Harry Penn, speaking of the burning city, says "Let's just say, that a lovely child I once knew has grown old and hard and is now dying an ugly death" (654). As a general rule, capitalists yearn for a previous golden age, implying that the past is always better than the present. They see change as further decay (Eagleton 8). Marxists, on the other hand, believe the golden age is yet to come and that the corrupt past must be jettisoned.

This dichotomy of outlook is reflected in Peter Lake's "first-life" experiences with class consciousness, with wealth and poverty, which ultimately lead to his sacrifice in his second life. His training as a young pickpocket, an apprentice mechanic, a Short Tails gang member, and an independent thief give him as thorough a knowledge of the bottom of society as Isaac Penn has of the top. Penn advises him not to tinker with the workings of the divine plan:

> Who said, that you, a man, can always perceive justice? Who said that justice is what you imagine? Can you be sure that you know it when you see it, that it can be manifest within a generation, within ten generations, within the entire span of human existence? What you are talking about is common sense, not justice. (154)

Penn questions the "common sense" definition of justice as simple equality. Like the wise King Solomon, Penn advocates

some higher idea of justice, one that takes the long view into account; age and wealth allow him to take such a detached view. Peter Lake's love for Beverly precludes such disinterested musings. By the end of the novel, when Peter Lake has completed the hero's journey, he feels confident enough to ignore Isaac Penn's advice. In saving Abby, he shows his belief that a man can recognize justice and, more importantly, injustice. Peter Lake realizes that perhaps Isaac Penn's position hides the truth from him and that his own hard-won self-knowledge makes him better qualified to make moral decisions. He ultimately intervenes in the divine plan and alters the course of history.

The Marxist approach to history holds that social relations are based on economic relations. Marxists label the economic structure of a society the "base" and the resulting social system the "superstructure" (Eagleton 5). People who make their living the same way address each other as equals, while people who make their living in different ways will feel unequal. This perception of inequality is the beginning of class consciousness. Marxist theory holds that class struggle, man's search for economic justice, is the driving force in history (Eagleton 5). To some degree this applies to Peter Lake, whose first-life experience seeing the dying child motivates his second-life decision to affect history by saving Abby.

Just as Marxist theory envisions the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (Marx 24), so Helprin sends his characters searching for "the perfectly just city." Hardesty Marratta twice encounters the enigmatic phrase, "For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of the perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone?" (254, 299). The perfectly just city seems to be the goal of Jackson Mead as well; he intends his bridge made of light to pierce the mysterious cloud wall and connect New York to the heavens. The newspaper Penns, father Isaac and son Harry, lead the *Sun*, a cultural bastion of old-fashioned virtues that inveighs against the banality of the *Ghost*. The Penns hope to lead the city to a golden age of justice. Despite the fact that Helprin calls himself a "Roosevelt Republican," Helprin's characters share with the Marxists an interest in Utopia (Guerin 310-319).

The Marxist path to Utopia shares some characteristics with Helprin's road. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels recognized the extent to which the nineteenth-century industrial working class was being exploited and described the changes they hoped would occur. Workers around the world, joined by their common interests, would unite and put an end to middle-class hegemony. They would seize the "means of production," and a brief "dictatorship of the proletariat" would ensue; then, with the revolution firmly installed and economic justice finally achieved, the state would no longer be necessary. Implicit in this critique of industrial Europe

was the romantic implication that the rural past was better--that under feudalism, people had duties and responsibilities to each other, while under capitalism all social relations were reduced to their monetary value (Elster 12).

In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin uses nostalgia for the past in a similarly romantic fashion. His middle-class, present-day characters love the city but they also recognize that injustice and decay are all around them. Helprin's solution is to invoke the past: the rivalry of Peter Lake and the Short Tails, the magical possibility embodied by Jackson Mead. By bringing the spiritual back to a secular age and restoring strong ideas of good and evil, Helprin hopes to achieve in his novel a balance between past and present that will lead to a transcendent future.

For Isaac Penn, balance transcends equality. Goodness, wisdom, and wealth could not exist without evil, ignorance and poverty, and justice arises from a struggle amid complexities and contradictions. Peter Lake has trouble accepting these tenets. The child he saw in the tenement haunts him forever; twenty years afterward, he relates the incident to Penn, the father of his beloved Beverly:

> The child I once saw in a hallway was barefoot, bareheaded, dressed in filthy rags, starving, blind, abandoned. He had no feather bed. He was near death. And he was standing, because he didn't have a place to lie down and die. (153)

Penn replies that the poor are part of a plan and that man cannot always perceive the justice in that plan. Peter Lake protests that man cannot just ignore injustice. Afterwards, Isaac Penn delivers his major speech about justice:

> Justice is higher and not as easy to understand--until it presents itself in unmistakable splendor. The design of which I speak is far above our understanding. But we can sometimes feel its presence. No choreographer, no architect, no engineer, or painter could plan more thoroughly and subtly. Every action and every scene has its purpose. And the less power one has, the closer he is to the great waves that sweep through all things, patiently preparing them for the approach of a future signified not by simple human equity (a child could think of that), but by luminous and surprising connections that we have not imagined, by illustrations terrifying and benevolent--a golden age that will show not what we wish, but some bare awkward truth upon which rests everything that ever was and everything that ever will be. There is justice in the world, Peter Lake, but it cannot be had without mystery. (154)

Helprin does not have him mention God here, but the plan Isaac Penn speaks of would seem to be divine. Penn's justice is "higher," and it will ultimately present itself in "unmistakable splendor." These are words usually associated with God. Perhaps, in this secular age, Helprin thought his readers would accept magic, but not religion. A Marxist would point out that Isaac Penn, a late nineteenth-century capitalist who made his money in whaling, espouses an ideology that conveniently serves to preserve his preferential social status. The religious mysticism Penn describes is part of the superstructure of a society based on capitalist exploitation of the workers. His tangible compensations greatly exceed

those of the poor he describes. Yet Penn's speech is not that of a crass materialist. Penn is the wise old man who, through Beverly, has gained both humility and a new perspective on spirituality. God is everywhere implied in the preceding speech, but never explicitly mentioned, perhaps because Helprin feared completely alienating modern critics. The mystery mentioned in the last sentence conceals the workings of an elaborate plan that gives meaning to all human events which contribute to its unfolding. This apparent contradiction is the same as that of all people who have deep religious feeling and yet believe that human suffering is part of a plan. If suffering is part of a plan, human beings are not obliged or exhorted by conscience to do anything to relieve it (Eagleton 5).

Human suffering is not inevitable for the reporters of Isaac Penn's newspaper, the *Sun*, however. Like Helprin himself, the *Sun* has a curious mix of political positions. The twentieth-century *Sun* advocates a high minimum wage, but rails against welfare for the able-bodied. All employees of the *Sun* get exactly the same wage and benefits package, certainly an effort to effect a system that is consistent with certain Marxist ideals. Incentive comes from a system of shares that increase with seniority and merit. Helprin somewhat defensively points out:

> And the *Sun*'s remarkable, equitable and effective social system originated not in the barrel of a gun, nor in any cruelty, nor in the French Communes, nor with revolutionary violence, nor in

> the imagination of a reader in the library of the British Museum, but in the nineteenth-century American whaling ship. (393)

Helprin is preaching to his fellow baby boomers about the folly of the sixties and the excesses of naive liberalism. The reference to history is interesting. He explicitly rejects Marx (the reader in the London library), social revolution, and reverence for the political systems of other countries. Yet Penn has some fairly Marxist ideas about the workers:

> The oddest thing about the elite--of which, I suppose, I am now one--is that they rule so . . . daintily. The great mass of people, in which one finds brave soldiers, firebrands, geniuses, and inspired mechanics, is paralyzed in the face of these human delicacies with their garden parties, their unprotected estates, their inebriated stumbles, their pastel clothing, and their disempowering obsessions with disempowering things. When a workingman moves among them, he is most amazed: amazed at their frailty, amazed that they are yet invincible, amazed that he, a bull, is ruled by a butterfly. (163)

The *Sun*'s system combines the best of both worlds. The idea that everyone is paid the same salary is almost socialistic, but the system of shares plays on the venerable capitalist notion that no one will work hard without monetary incentive.

The reader ultimately finds Helprin's ideas, Marxist or otherwise, captured in the metaphor of the city. Justice is in short supply, and human suffering is acute as the city burns down in the apocalyptic end to *Winter's Tale*. The ending troubles many readers and critics: how can Helprin just let all those people die? The answer lies in Helprin's sense

of balance, which comes into play again. The forces of chaos and violence, as represented by the Short Tails, give the protagonists something substantial to fight against. Praeger, as mayor, directs his efforts against arsonists and looters. Harry Penn works to keep the metaphorical light of knowledge burning at The *Sun*. A Marxist might say that the characters are given something external to fight against in order to distract them from the inequities of class, as represented by Isaac Penn. Peter Lake, however, is coming together while everything else is falling apart. He saves Abby and offers himself to the chaos in her place. This selfless act seems to be what is required, not only to save one child, but to redeem the city and to make it eligible for the golden age.

The fire may be purifying, the city destroyed, and the other characters fighting for their ideals. But what is significant is Peter Lake's sacrifice, and this is in part possible because of his learning the price of poverty and from Beverly the capacity for love. He has learned that a humble man may be wiser than a great man and that time need not be linear and inexorable. Just as the past informs the present, the dead influence the living. If Abby can be saved, then perhaps Beverly can, too, and the suffering of the tenement child will serve a purpose.

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ETHICAL CRITICISM AND *WINTER'S TALE*

Back before the coming of formalism, in the nineteen-thirties, most critics practiced a kind of ethical criticism (Booth 25). Educated people read Aristotle's *Poetics* and the *Ars Poetica* by the Roman philosopher Horace which taught that good literature should instruct and delight. In his essay "My Books," in the *Literary Examiner,* nineteenth century Romantic poet Leigh Hunt called certain works "friends," "teachers," and even "lovers" (qtd. in Booth 171). Parents and church authorities worried about young people who read questionable books; the literary "wrong crowd" might lead the virtuous into danger. Censorship flourished in this climate; the Church had its Index, a list of damaging books to avoid, while the Academy had the Canon, a list of nourishing books to consume. No one doubted that stories influenced people's behavior, for better or worse.

Over the past sixty years, successive waves of critical theory have dethroned ethical criticism, each adding new insight to the interpretation of literature. The criticism that was "new" in the nineteen-thirties became passé. The Southern Fugitive Poets, who became the New Critics, looked away from the author's history and biography and taught a whole generation of students to practice close reading of the

poem itself. New Criticism was followed by Structuralism, which was followed by post-Structuralism; but now, according to Wayne Booth, author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), ethical criticism is making a comeback. As the success of former Reagan cabinet member William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* attests, the once obvious, then heretical, idea that literature affects life, that people are changed by books, is being reexamined by ordinary readers and literary critics alike. Somewhere between Shelley's "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (*A Defense of Poetry*) and Auden's "Poetry makes nothing happen" ("In Memory of W. B. Yeats"), noted critic Wayne Booth stakes out a middle ground in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Booth acknowledges that poetry does indeed make something happen. His book describes the variety of ways in which literature can motivate and inspire. Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale,* with its moralistic bent, embodies this old-fashioned view of literature.

Helprin's strong opinions on the purpose of literature pervade his writing. In an essay published in *The New Criterion* in 1988, Helprin rails against "minimalists," his generic term for post-structuralist novelists he doesn't like:

> Why are so many minimalist stories about despicable people in filthy unkempt garden apartments filled with ugly bric-a-brac, where everyone smokes, drinks, stays up all night, and is addicted to coffee? Why are the characters almost uniformly pudgy, stiff, and out of shape, even if they are in

> their twenties? Why do they watch so much television? Why do they have so many headaches? ("Canon Under Siege" 40)

Helprin's protagonists are the opposite of those derided here. Improbably, they are all strong and brave, with clearly-defined quests and great hardships to overcome. They are not small people with small lives. In the age of the anti-hero, Helprin brings back the hero. He writes in this more traditional fashion because he, like Aristotle and Horace, believes that art should instruct and delight. The response to *Winter's Tale*, both positive and negative, seems to validate Helprin's view. *New York Times* reviewer Benjamin DeMott, tellingly, refers to *Winter's Tale* as "a great gift in an hour of great need" (1), implying that the post-modern landscape cries out for a hero. However, in a rather condescending review for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Robert Towers says, "It is of course possible that *Winter's Tale* will become a cult object, embraced by those adolescents of all ages who are especially prone to magical thinking and to a craving for instant transformation" (123). Towers implies that "real" grown-ups have outgrown the need for moral guidance, ethical heroes, and magic. The reason for *Winter's Tale*'s mixed reviews becomes plain: reviewers disdain fantasy because it is not "serious" and because it reminds them of children's literature which is overtly didactic. Americans, a famously rebellious tribe, dislike being preached to. Helprin, an adult in a nation of eternal adolescents, believes his readers

still need moral guidance and offers such direction in *Winter's Tale*.

In the early chapters of *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth discusses some of the reasons why ethical criticism fell out of favor. Elementary forms of ethical criticism usually depended on an absolute standard. Here, Booth lightly mocks current absolutes that praise "open" endings:

> Needless to say, other "open" works "insist" that art as play is of supreme importance, the only real value; or that the universe is empty of value--an opinion that implies a most impressively omniscient author; or that the ultimate emptiness of texts is our best clue to the nature of God; or that God is dead and we must love one another; or that apathy is what kills us; or that only in this or that meditative practice can we find our peace; or that in our frustration we should join the revolution; or that life is beautiful in its rich open-endedness. (67)

Booth is saying that many readers practice ethical criticism whether they know it or not. As does the average reader, the literary critic applies an "ethic" to what he or she reads. The new, post-modern ethic may be quite different from the old, God-centered ethic, but it presents just as absolute a picture. Booth advocates a more sophisticated ethical criticism; he uses the term "ethical" not as a synonym for "good", but rather to describe any *ethos* or "collection of habitual characteristics" (8). Booth uses *ethos* as a synonym for *character*, "whatever in a person or society could be counted on to persist from situation to situation" (8). He describes ethical criticism as "an attempt to describe the encounters of a story-teller's *ethos* with that of the reader

or listener" (8). The reciprocal nature of this definition is interesting. It is not a decree from on high, but a negotiation between two different modes of thought. David Parker, in paraphrasing Barbara Herrnstein Smith, gives a definition that agrees with Booth's. He points out that "[v]alue is not the property of a subject or an object but the product of a system . . . a system that transcends both naive objectivism and dismissive skepticism" (24).

In describing this negotiation, Booth coins a new term--*coduction*--from *co* (together) and *ducere* (to lead, draw out, bring out):

> Coduction will be what we do when we say to the world . . . "Of the works of this general kind that I have experienced, comparing my experience with other more or less qualified observers, this one seems to be among the better (or weaker) ones, or the best (or worst). Here are my reasons." Every such statement implicitly calls for the continuing conversation: "How does my coduction compare to yours?" (73)

At first glance, Booth's "coduction" differs little from an ordinary "reading," but in fact his neologism allows open literary preference, which has been effectively "outlawed" for years. An old-fashioned, ethical critic might say, "Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* is a better book than Nabokov's *Lolita* because the first lauds self-sacrifice while the second portrays perversion." A new ethical critic might say, after Booth, "Of the novels I have read, comparing my experience with other qualified readers, Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* seems to be among the better ones. Here are my reasons: in

Peter Lake, Helprin gives us a hero worth admiring who takes a journey of growth, discovery, and sacrifice."

In his first life, Peter Lake exhibits a varied collection of ethics. Even though he spends a part of his early life as a thief and a gang member, his eventual sacrifice is foreshadowed by that of his parents, immigrants who are turned away from Ellis Island because of disease. They put him in a model ship and abandon him to the sea rather than take him back to certain death in their own country. Their act may seem cruel, but it is the same kind of pragmatic "tough love" that allows the author of *Winter's Tale* to burn down the city in order to purify it.

The orphaned Peter Lake embarks on a series of larger-than-life adventures. Like James Fenimore Cooper's icon, Hawkeye, Peter Lake is adopted and raised by Native Americans. The Baymen of the Bayonne Marsh teach him the *ethos* of a simple hunting-and-gathering society: hunting and fishing, self-defense, and their myths and legends, including that of Athansor, the white horse. The Baymen are not simple ciphers for good, nor are they fully realized characters; they create for Peter Lake a beginning place, a kind of pastoral womb. For Helprin, the Bayonne Marsh represents an early stage of development in societies and in individuals:

> This was a mysterious place of unchartable tangled channels and capacious bays that exploded into sight after issuing from narrow water tunnels--a topography that had a life of its own, and was constantly altered by the busy engraving of the cloud wall. (44)

However idyllic it may seem, the Marsh lacks the potential to be "the perfectly just city" because it lacks enough contradictions and enough tests of character, and, therefore, Helprin has Peter Lake leave this sanctuary so he can have the necessary experiences to stimulate growth.

When young Peter Lake gets to the city, he quickly learns the city's *ethos*. In the turn-of-the-century city, money and machinery are important, and these two realities, impressed upon him early, lead to his two careers, mechanic and thief. There are three moral tests that serve as turning points for Peter Lake in this section. The first and most profound test comes when Peter Lake sees the child near death in the tenement hallway, which leads to his later sacrifice. The second test comes when, after several years as a Short Tails gang member, he learns that their latest scheme requires the destruction of the Baymen. Peter Lake leaves the gang, warns the Baymen, and helps them defeat the Short Tails. Loving Beverly is the ultimate test--he risks abandonment by falling in love with a girl he knows to be dying of consumption. He takes on the huge responsibility of loving someone, of being the cause of her happiness. These three trials complete the first stage of his adventures, making him a true adult. He is still a thief, but he is becoming more aware of himself and realizing that changes need to be made.

In creating a character who is forced to make large-scale moral choices, Helprin shows his belief in the strong effect

that literature has on readers' lives. He hopes that the choices his readers make about his narrative will reflect the choices his characters make. In relation to this, Booth uses the old idea of authors as potential friends. Some authors have a genuine interest in connecting with their readers and in offering them their books as gifts to be appreciated. Other authors may seem genuine and may use various rhetorical tricks to try to gain readers' confidence but, in fact, they are just interested in turning out a product and making money (Booth 169-181). In writing *Winter's Tale*, Helprin trusts that his book will inspire his readers to change their lives. He hopes that, like Peter Lake, his readers will understand their limitations and transcend them.

Peter Lake's second life begins in Book III, but meanwhile, in Book II, all roads lead to the city for Hardesty and Virginia. Hardesty's journey mirrors that of Peter Lake. While Peter Lake becomes a *great* hero and a living symbol of the city itself, Hardesty becomes a workaday hero who does not chase his destiny, but settles down and waits for it to come to him. Hardesty's story begins with a profound moral choice: his rich father's will decrees that all the money will go to one son and a golden family heirloom will go to the other. The will further states that Hardesty will choose which son gets which inheritance. Helprin tells us that Hardesty's brother Evan is a corrupt and venal man:

> His mother's sudden death had made him a master of calculated greed, dissolute behavior, and

> indiscriminate cruelty, and he lived only for what he could extract from his father, who loved him despite this. (247)

The heirloom is a salver inscribed in Italian with names of four virtues: honesty, courage, sacrifice, and patience, as well as the phrase "For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of the perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone" (254). Hardesty chooses the salver, recognizing it as a charge from his father to live a virtuous life and seek the just city, a better way of living. Hardesty, like Peter Lake, sets off on a series of adventures; however, his future will contain no flying white horse and no second life. Hardesty falls in love with Virginia Gamely, but he feels that his duty to his father prevents him from staying with her. Of course, he is also afraid of commitment. Virginia tells him,

> Churchmen . . . burn themselves up in seeking, and they find nothing. If your faith is genuine, then you meet your responsibilities, fulfill your obligations, and wait until you are found. It will come. If not to you, then to your children, and if not to them, then to their children. (338)

Hardesty eventually recognizes that choosing a different destiny is not the same as giving up. He, too, must make ethical choices. He learns, as Booth puts it, "to desire better desires" (271).

Hardesty and Peter Lake continue to be connected throughout the novel. During the *Sun* staff dinner at Petipas, when Abby steps through the fence and jumps into Peter Lake's arms, Hardesty almost feels jealous of Peter Lake's destitute freedom:

> And as Peter Lake handed the sleeping child through the bars to her father, Hardesty felt a strong desire to see what Peter Lake had seen, to go where he had gone. Hardesty Marratta, a prosperous family man, a man with all the proper joys and privileges, was nearly about to pledge himself to a lost derelict. It made no sense, unless one were to consider an eternity of things that fly in the face of the proper joys and privileges. (415)

Hardesty, for a moment, wishes he had chosen the path of high-profile heroism. He recognizes that as an outsider, someone not "proper," Peter Lake is capable of things that he is not. Perhaps Helprin is uncomfortable giving the reader a saint for a protagonist. Instead, he creates both: Peter Lake, an almost Christ-like hero, and Hardesty, an everyday hero.

Hardesty is a protagonist with whom readers can identify. He is an ordinary man who does the right thing, gets the girl, and lives happily ever after. He is a more pedestrian, more accessible version of Peter Lake. The early losses Peter Lake suffers and the sacrifice required of him make it difficult for readers to want to imitate him. Perhaps Helprin is offering us a range of virtues here. Both Hardesty and Peter Lake are seeking transcendence, but because Hardesty has Virginia and Peter Lake only has the memory of Beverly, Hardesty marries and Peter Lake wanders. Thus, in the end, Peter Lake becomes the agent of transcendence, while Hardesty's reward is merely to be near it. Helprin is saying that there are many ways to be a hero and many paths to transcendence.

The same duality appears in the juxtaposition of Virginia Gamely and Beverly Penn. When Beverly is introduced, she is already half out of the world; dreams and prescient visions are part of her everyday existence. Helprin refers to her as "A Goddess in the Bath," in the heading to Book I, Chapter III. Like Virginia, she comes from Lake of the Coheeries, a magical, pre-industrial town. Helprin gives both women non-human, metaphorical lovers; for Beverly, the stars, and for Virginia, the city. Virginia has a life to live in this world, but for Beverly there is only the next. Significantly, Virginia is a grown woman with children, while Beverly is a girl of seventeen. Virginia's happy life with Hardesty is a taste of what Beverly and Peter Lake could have had if Beverly had not died of consumption shortly after they met. As with her husband, Virginia is a more accessible heroine because her life is not as hard.

Just as Peter Lake is connected to Hardesty, he is also connected to Praeger de Pinto, the editor of the *Sun* who in Book IV becomes the mayor of New York. Praeger, like Hardesty, is another mirror image of what Peter Lake might have been, if he had not had such an extraordinary life. Praeger is in love with Jessica Penn, Beverly's niece. Because he knows the city so well, in both lives, Peter Lake is figuratively referred to as "the master of the city," a role that Praeger takes on literally as mayor. In a parallel scene to that at Petipas, Peter Lake comes to a political

rally for Praeger, who has been running a highly unorthodox campaign:

> Praeger never talked about garbage, electricity, or police. He talked only about winter and the countryside. He spoke almost hypnotically about love, loyalty and esthetics. (502)

Obviously Praeger is a candidate after Peter Lake's own heart. Peter Lake is the sole participant in a rally which Praeger scheduled for dawn. Praeger's speech reminds Peter Lake of the events of his past. Like Peter Lake, Praeger is an active hero, someone who aggressively pursues his destiny. Praeger wants to be mayor because he perceives the city is in decline. He says several times that he wants "to lead the city as it falls so he can lead it as it rises" (479). During the great fire, Praeger, as mayor, works to "make islands and keep them safe," while Peter Lake, the master mechanic, works to keep the light burning at *The Sun*. Both Praeger and Peter Lake share a love of the city and a feeling of being connected to its destiny.

Peter Lake devotes his second life to the quest for self-knowledge. When the crewmen of a ship pull him out of the harbor, still wounded from his battle with the Short Tails at the beginning of Book I, he has forgotten himself but remembers the city. As he roams the city, he recognizes that certain places have a strong effect on his memory. He calls them "holy places": the Maritime Cathedral, the alley outside Petipas where Abby jumped into his arms, the Five Points tenement where he first saw the dying child. Each of these

places has a story connected to it, a story that reveals some fragment of his past life. The Maritime Cathedral was where he went to pray for his old teacher, Mootfowl. Abby's jumping into his arms at Petipas recalls the "drive hard" scene on the ice (148), where Peter Lake gets out of the sleigh and hands little Willa to Beverly, her sister. This was his first experience of near-fatherhood, and it affected him greatly. The scene with the tenement child also moved him. In a way, it gave him another sense of fatherhood, instilling in him at a young age the idea that he was born "not to be protected, but to protect" (151).

Peter Lake's holy places slowly reawaken in him the feeling of responsibility he learned from Beverly. He is forced to make choices, forced almost against his will to recover his identity. His amnesia was partly self-inflicted; remembering Beverly was too painful. Peter Lake finally chooses to reassume his identity as master/savior of the city. He remembers his duty to the tenement child, to Abby, to the machines of The *Sun* and finally to the city itself. Responsibility leads to self-knowledge, the end of the hero's journey.

Peter Lake's holy places tie together the past and the present. Helprin makes the connection in order to remind his readers not to discount the influence of the past on the present (Booth 18-20). The past informs the present, just as stories influence readers' lives. Helprin gives a second life

not only to Peter Lake, the hero, but also to Pearly Soames and the Short Tails, the bad guys. The battle has to be refought again and again, in every century. Several characters, like Harry Penn and Abysmillard, have improbably long lives that stretch across centuries. The reappearance of old friends and enemies calls into question what Peter Lake thinks he knows about death and time. He had thought he lost Beverly forever, but as Book IV progresses, his certainty is breached. The growing possibility that he may see Beverly again helps him to remember who he is.

The great ethical dilemma of the last two chapters of *Winter's Tale* lies in the fact that Helprin burns down the city he has spent six hundred pages describing in loving detail. The fire is the direct result of the moral choices the characters have made throughout the book. The clash between good and evil produces a rising tide of chaos that destroys the Lake of the Coheeries and eventually sparks the fire. Jackson Mead and his cohorts could have stopped the fire before it got out of control. Their otherworldly distance from the situation allows them to see it differently. They see the fire as a proving ground, a battle where heroism may flourish. Praeger fights the fire itself; Peter Lake battles Pearly and the Short Tails.

Harry Penn has to show Peter Lake a portrait of Beverly before he finally remembers his past. "And you will know exactly who you are, forever, by knowing what it is that you

love" (652). Peter Lake reaches the height of his borrowed power by figuring out who he is. The knowledge enables him save Abby. The burning city and the death of the hero complete what Helprin sees as the cyclical nature of time. Time, in *Winter's Tale,* is not a steady progression towards a specific end; rather, it is like a great painting that must be observed from a distance in order to be understood.

> Time, however, can be easily overcome; not by chasing the light, but by standing back far enough to see it all at once. The universe is still and complete. Everything that ever was, is; everything that ever will be, is--and so on, in all possible combinations. Though in perceiving it, we imagine that it is in motion, and unfinished, it is quite finished, and quite astonishingly beautiful. (368)

Ultimately, Peter Lake and the old city both must die for the greater good--the resurrection of Abby Marratta, the freeing of Athansor, and the rise of the new city, led by Praeger de Pinto into the new millennium.

Throughout *Winter's Tale*, Helprin has his characters face ethical choices. Using the four old-fashioned virtues inscribed on Hardesty's salver--honesty, courage, sacrifice, and patience--Peter Lake enacts the hero's journey of self-discovery. The reader follows him through two lives, death, rebirth, and, ultimately, redemption. Peter Lake and the others learn to limit their own options and to act to benefit others rather than themselves. Ethical criticism gives the modern reader a way to analyze a text like *Winter's Tale* without discounting it as hopelessly naive. Helprin gives his readers a classical hero for the modern age.

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CONCLUSION

Magical realism, Marxist criticism, and ethical criticism connect in several ways. Magical realism puts fantasy next to reality in order to force the reader to reexamine his or her views on what is "real." Marxist criticism puts the rich next to the poor in order to produce class consciousness, and the reader is forced to reexamine his or her political views. Ethical criticism revives the old contention that stories affect lives and that any reexamination of beliefs can, therefore, encourage readers to change their lives for the better. Magical realism is a narrative mode to be observed while Marxist criticism is a tool to be used. Magical realism is concerned with means while both Marxist and ethical criticism are concerned with ends.

In *Winter's Tale*, the reader is asked to believe several glaring impossibilities, not to mention plenty of improbabilities. The white horse, the cloud wall, and Peter Lake's second life, all these are designed to defamiliarize and delight the reader. The fantastic elements of the story take the reader away from the known, while the ordinary aspects brings him or her back. Helprin lets his readers know that they are not in the "real world," while reassuring them that the story world is enough like their own to be

recognizable. Magical realism can paradoxically seem more real than realism because rapidly advancing technology makes the fantastic seem commonplace. For example, on his first day in the city, Peter Lake must constantly readjust his world view, but he finds integrating concepts like money and machinery more difficult than accepting magical horses and cloud walls. Realism seems inadequate to describe the constantly changing world, while magical realism's elastic view of the world can more easily encompass change.

Magical realism in *Winter's Tale* acts as a stylistic effect. The narrative mode affects our perception of the characters. Our understanding of Peter Lake is shaped by his relationship with the white horse. Our understanding of Virginia and Mrs. Gamely is shaped by their skill at manipulating the cloud wall. The conventions of magical realism--the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, authorial reticence, the cyclical nature of time, the clash of cultures--all of these serve to create an atmosphere of possibility, a sense that anything could happen. Mysteries, love stories, fantasies--these usually follow well-established patterns. By throwing the fantastic into the mix, magical realists serve notice that the story that follows will break boundaries and weave the literary forms.

Magical realism allows Peter Lake to evolve as an archetypal hero. The most obviously fantastic thing in the novel is Peter Lake's death or dormancy and his second life.

In his first life he learns about magic, suffering, love and death. He is basically a passive observer, unable to change things for better or worse. In his second life, his quest for both literal and spiritual self-knowledge allows him to become an active participant in the world around him. Although he could not save Beverly or the tenement child in his first life, the fact that he had been through so much and had acquired wisdom allowed him to save Abby and redeem the city in his second.

Both magical realism and Marxist criticism involve the juxtaposition of dissimilar things. While magical realism is apparent everywhere in the novel, the reader has to dig to find the elements that justify a Marxist reading. Helprin would perhaps deny any Marxist content, even though social justice is a strong theme in the novel; therefore, a Marxist reading, in some sense, goes against the grain of the story.

In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin accurately depicts the late nineteenth-century city by giving his readers great wealth next to abject poverty. In Book I, he contrasts wealthy newspaper publisher Isaac Penn with the destitute street child that Peter Lake sees in the tenement. In Books III and IV, Helprin contrasts the wandering Peter Lake with middle-class characters Hardesty Marratta and Praeger de Pinto. As Peter Lake slowly becomes aware of class disparity, he begins to see that wealth does not guarantee wisdom. He begins to trust his own power, knowledge, and experience. In the end, the power

over life and death is given not to Harry Penn the editor, or Praeger de Pinto the mayor, or even to Hardesty Marratta the father, but to Peter Lake, the mechanic, the representative of that class which Marxists would argue are the vital moving force in all significant events. Thus, Peter Lake, the transcendent hero, becomes one of the moment; the timeless archetype becomes timely.

In a way, Marxist criticism is one kind of ethical criticism. A Marxist critic comes to a text with a very definite idea about what texts should do or say. He or she believes that stories can be used for a particular purpose. Marxists reject the idea that a text is an isolated work of art, like the proverbial well-wrought urn. For Wayne Booth, Marxist criticism is just one of many different kinds of ethical or programmatic criticism (5). He attempts to define, and apply, ethical criticism as a broad umbrella that covers several critical endeavors.

Ethical Criticism revives the idea that stories affect readers' lives and that one story may be better or more effective than another at promoting an agenda. Ethical criticism explicitly connects literature to life; good books make better readers. In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin gives his readers characters who must make ethical choices. Helprin expresses his belief in the value of choosing the greater good over personal benefit by showing Hardesty settling down with Virginia and Peter Lake saving Abby. Helprin's ethical

program is fairly traditional; he believes that literature should instruct and uplift; he is not interested in creating an anti-hero who teaches by negative example. Rather, his whole agenda is to create a hero, give that hero timeless qualities through the agency of magical realism, make that hero timely by addressing issues at the core of twentieth-century politics, and giving that hero a life and death decision.

Peter Lake is an old-fashioned hero for the post-modern age. The reader watches him grow and change as he falls in love with Beverly, learns about wealth and poverty, and finally achieves transcendent power in his second life. His rise and fall parallels that of the city itself. He has great adventures, endures great hardships, and, finally, sacrifices himself for the life of a child. Many of Helprin's contemporaries would find his purpose in creating such a flagrantly heroic character almost laughably ambitious--he is trying to change the world, one reader at a time. *Winter's Tale* is indeed, as one reviewer put it, "a great gift, in an hour of great need" (Demott 1).

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