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Stairway to Heaven: Mark Helprin and the Architecture of the Impossible in *Winter's Tale*

Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* was poorly received by many contemporary critics following its publication in 1983. Attention was focused on the fantastical, often Dickensian aspects of the novel—both in its thematic structures and in Helprin's use of language—and largely ignored what I consider to be the most important aspect of the novel: that the concept of the *City* exists and survives as an inspirational source of both hope and salvation. In this paper, I will argue that Helprin's vision has been thus far critically misinterpreted. Although presented in a manner that is at times challenging and difficult, *Winter's Tale* is consistent with a larger "New York City" tradition that can be directly traced to such relatively disparate works as Hart Crane's "The Bridge" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

"History," Stephen Dedalus comments in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 35). In *Winter's Tale*, Helprin conspires instead to make history a *dream* rather than a nightmare--a promise, an illusion, and finally, an imaginable possibility. In this attempt, Helprin appropriates the past and the future; it is from this merging of time, fact, and the fantastic that *Winter's Tale* as text becomes an object for Helprin's manipulation, and ultimately, for the reader's interpretation. By combining the real with Helprin's conception of the nearly possible, *Winter's Tale* concludes as a tale of curious hope, buoyed by the possibilities of human technology as a redemptive catalyst. In this paper, I will examine the role of tangible structure as central object, as character. New York City as concrete

object, with its buildings and bridges and other architecture designed and constructed by its citizens, ultimately becomes a central and critical component in the outcome of *Winter's Tale*. In particular, Grand Central Terminal becomes a symbol for faith and renewal, a heaven on earth, and a paradigm for salvation.

I. The Beginning of the Story

Winter's Tale is many stories within one, a dazzling collage of images that weave and interact and coincide with certain intimations of connectivity and hints of coherence that slyly and seductively propel the narrative to unexpected conclusions. Despite the often frantic and sometimes apparently random pacing of the novel, there is a mathematical precision to the design and construction of the diffuse elements of the story. As part of its ambition to be many different sorts of fictive experience simultaneously, *Winter's Tale* deliberately unfolds with a pyramid-like subtlety. Blocks of episodes and description and conversation are linked together and developed upon in a foundation-like manner, certain themes and images and threads are established and then echoed and re-echoed in ways that are lyrically evocative, singular in and of themselves, but that serve ultimately part of the greater whole of the novel itself. This triangular development culminates with a rather remarkable combination of the disparate components into one over-arching summation, a conclusion that can be considered emotionally breathtaking, and considered critically stunning.

The story introduces itself with a potentially disingenuous, fable-like simplicity in New York City at the beginning of the 20th century. A simple thief (who is also a master craftsman) named Peter Lake is on the run, pursued by a notorious gang, the Short Tales, to which Peter Lake had once belonged. Aiding Peter Lake in his escape is a miraculous white horse that may possess mysterious powers. Once escaping the Short Tails, if only momentarily, Peter Lake resumes his life of crime. But first, he finds the perfect hideout.

That he knew precisely where to go and how to get there was a benefit of his iron-working days. The best refuge was above the barrel of the sky, atop the glowing constellations. To get there, they went miles and miles, through snow-covered streets, until the violet evening made sleep dance in their eyes. (80)

Peter Lake has found refuge in the hidden superstructure of Grand Central Station, a landmark building opened in 1912:

A forest of silver struts and perforated metal arches surrounded Peter Lake, who reclined comfortably in a bent and fruitless grove, where riveted limbs were lit here and there by the backwash of small electric lights on the floor. The floor itself was a great half-barrel, the ceiling a grid of steel. All this was warmed by nearly visible streams of air rising above the lights, which were the stars of the constellations in the great vaulted roof of Grand Central Station—recently built with the notion of installing the sky indoors to shine permanently and in green. Peter Lake was one of the few who knew that beyond the visible universe were beams and artifice, a homely support for that which seemed to float. And he had returned by craft and force to the back of the sky, where once in another life he had helped to forge the connections between the beams, to rest now amid the props of the designer's splendid intentions. (80)

Peter Lake has chosen a man-made heaven for his hideout. Grand Central Station is established as a touchstone for both Peter Lake and for the novel. Helprin calls the structure “an umbilicus” of the city (Helprin, telephone interview), and it acts, importantly, as such in the novel, particularly for Peter Lake. But it is also important that Peter Lake, moving as he is now

from “another life” does not remain hidden in this ethereal neverland, but instead soon ventures out into the reality above the “barrel in the sky:”

Peter Lake climbed an iron ladder to the outside roof. It was covered with knee-deep snow. The real stars blazed like faraway white flares and put to shame the imitations in the station ceiling: there were pinwheels of fire, round phosphorous spirals of light. Peter Lake leaned into the wind while all around him the snow swirled in sparkling chains, their motion suspended and stilled, as in the stars. Deep within the blazing tunnels, motion and stillness met and fused. The wind shrieking across the drifts on the station roof turned the snow to white vapor that flattened into spinning vortexes. Seen from afar, the city’s pulsating lights were like stars, and the distant avenues and high plumes of steam that curled and twisted were like the star roads themselves. (85)

As “one of the few who [knows] beyond the visible universe,” Peter Lake is able to escape from his cocoon, to emerge from the barrel, the “umbilicus,” and move again into the light and snow. The city thus continues as a viable reality, as does Peter Lake’s engagement with it. Grand Central Station is first used as tangible touchstone, as refuge—“the umbilicus” of Manhattan—but then evolves into talisman as well.

Architectural critic Kenneth Powell has written that as “one of a handful of structures which are universal symbols of New York, Grand Central Terminal stands at the true heart of Manhattan” (4). “It exemplifies the ideals and aspirations of a great American city conspicuously emerging as a world metropolis,” Powell continues. “The Terminal has, of course, shaped the destiny of Manhattan, but it is equally the foundation of a positive and

optimistic urban philosophy which is one of New York's greatest contributions to twentieth-century life" (4).

The origins of the station co-exist with the rise of one of New York's first great families. As railroads became both cultural and commercial symbols of economic power across the country, shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, the "Commodore," schemed to appropriate the hub of New York rail traffic. In 1871, the original Grand Central Station was opened; located on the then-undeveloped 42nd Street, and was part of the ongoing Vanderbilt plan to establish a far-flung dynasty in the city. As Kenneth Powell writes, "To many, the location seemed peripheral, even remote, badly placed for the commercial heart of the city. It was, however, close to the newly-fashionable residential streets; the Vanderbilt family itself was colonizing the area of Fifth Avenue below Central Park, spending (it was claimed) \$15 million on four houses" (6-7). Powell continues to point out that the success of the original station revolutionized New York real estate, essentially establishing the precedent for the future commercial viability of Park Avenue, as well as continuing to pour vast sums into the Vanderbilt coffers (7).

The structure as it is now known was completed in 1913, based on a joint design by two competing architectural firms, Reed & Stern and Warren & Wetmore. As John Belle and Maxinne Leighton note in *Grand Central: Gateway to a Million Lives*, the ceiling was conceived by Whitey Warren, of Warren and Wetmore, and by French artist, Paul Hellau; the actual design and creation of the celestial mural was executed by J. Monroe Hewlett and Charles Basing (57). "Some 2500 stars were painted onto a cerulean blue sky ceiling," Belle and Leighton write. "Sixty of these stars were illuminated in varying degrees of light levels. Along the north and south sides of this ceiling, five clerestory windows were set into the curved night sky. The effect was to bring the heavens inside the building" (57).

Peter Lake's adventures on the lam lead him, still as a burglar, to attempt to rob the grand mansion of Isaac Penn (modeled on the now famous Dakota apartment building (Helprin, telephone interview)). Lake gains access to the mansion, but discovers that Penn's beautiful, although consumptive daughter, Beverly, is at home. Peter Lake and Beverly Penn fall desperately in love, a love that does not end with Beverly's inevitable and nearly immediate death. Peter Lake, grieving deeply, finds himself once again trapped by the Short Tails. The marvelous white horse, which now can literally fly through the air, rescues him. Peter Lake escapes, but the horse carries him toward a destiny for which Peter Lake is not yet ready. Instead, Peter leaps (or, perhaps, more correctly, *falls*) off the horse and, as Helprin writes, Peter Lake "tumbled through the world of white. And then, entirely forgotten, he vanished deep into its infinite fury" (193).

II. The Critics

Critical reaction to *Winter's Tale*, at the time of its publication and for several years thereafter, was decidedly mixed, with a few notable exceptions. Josh Rubin was typical: "In *Winter's Tale*, however, with nearly 700 pages of questing for 'justice,' transcended love, and immortality, even the prettiest confections--flying white horses, ancient machines resurrected with Disneyesque flair, bridges made of light--can't obscure the flimsiness, the unearned quality of Helprin's borrowed style and substance" (45). Tovah Riech commented along similar lines: "What we are given in *Winter's Tale* in place of plot, characterization, or a credible time and place, are certain ideas and themes that are repeatedly and urgently pressed upon us. These themes include the quest for the perfectly just city, the compression of time, the perfect symmetry and balance of the universe, and the conquest of death" (37).

Robert Towers wondered in *The Atlantic*, “Does it succeed as a novel? My answer must be a slightly qualified negative. A number of Helprin’s inventions are spectacular, and some of his effects are richly suggestive. But frequently they seem more willed than inspired. Again and again, I had the sense that my responses were being coerced” (123). Seymour Krim also argued: “All the complexity of a 20th-century megalopolis is quaintly and sometimes cutely simplified so that Helprin can mythologize the simple virtues of our ancestors and make them goals of the future. None of the alienation, hostility, electronic bewilderment and minority aggressiveness of an actual New York is allowed to be heard” (13). Much attention was placed on what Krim calls “cute” prose—over-heated language that, as Krim continues, is “stubbornly romanticized versions of old New York etchings and photographs” (13).

Benjamin DeMott’s comments in the *New York Times Book Review*, however, were rather startling. DeMott confessed that “There’s far more that I would wish to say about the book--so much more that I find myself nervous to a degree that I don’t recall in my past as a reviewer, about failing the work, inadequately displaying its brilliance” (22). Demott continued to note that:

The canniness of the balancing of fantasy and realism, the capacity of these Dickensian presences to bring to mind, subtly, contemporaries from Rupert Murdoch to Howard Hughes to Thomas Pynchon, the excitement scholars will find in interpreting Mr. Helprin’s extension of the line of American imaginers who have grappled for longer than a century with the meaning of technology.

(22)

Thomas DiPietro is similarly effusive in *The Commonweal* with “Helprin’s magnanimous message of hope and affirmation—this is an old-fashioned novel of ideas—provides a welcome tonic for our weary time, an antidote to fashionable despair” (154).

But several years later, Helprin suffered a direct attack, not just against *Winter’s Tale*, but against his own artistic and personal integrity. Paul Alexander, writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, essentially accused Helprin of being a liar. Alexander was not kind:

Up to this point, Helprin had never gotten a really negative review. Then, in 1983, he published *Winter’s Tale*, about a New York that never existed and never will, a city where horses could fly and a man could live for hundreds of years. It received mixed reviews, to say the least. Some critics called it magic realism, others contrived and phony. (65)

Alexander continued to insinuate that those portions of *Winter’s Tale* that approached the preposterous were consistent with Helprin’s own ability for exaggeration and self-promotion, pointing out what he called inconsistencies with Helprin’s biographical notes and other personal responses. Helprin’s response to this was immediate, and furious. While ostensibly promoting his next novel, he instead “undertook a three-month, ten-thousand mile, fourteen-city tour of the United States in a Volkswagen Westphalia van--not solely to publicize his just-published novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*, from which he never read, but also to refute the *Times* piece, point by point, brandishing affidavits and documents” (Linville, 162). In a *Paris Review* interview with James Linville, Helprin directly addressed Alexander’s charges:

The *Times*’ central thesis was that I am a liar. Along the way, they strongly suggested that the items on my resume (so to speak: I don’t have a resume) are fabricated, and that I am cowardly about upholding my beliefs in public. They

did so by innuendo, by contrived and inaccurate juxtaposition, and with false statements. The most troublesome thing in the world is to prove that you are not a liar, because any piece of evidence you marshal in your defense is suspect. (168)

In a somewhat self-defeating fashion, Helprin continued to defend himself not only against Alexander and the *New York Times*, but also against the larger academic community:

As you might imagine--given that I am absolutely sure of the now heretical proposition that you can judge a book by the race or sex of its author. And you can imagine how well I and my work are received in academic circles, when I assert plainly and without apology that deconstructionism, like Nazism or Stalinism, is less a system of thought than a sign of mental illness. (178)

All of this underscores the difficulty in reading *Winter's Tale*. But Helprin so adeptly mixes the fantastical with the possible, the impossible with the nearly believable, underpinning his entire narrative with an impressionistic style and force of language that make the novel nearly hypnotic. To concentrate purely on the fantastical renders the humanity and hope in the novel inconsequential, and represents on its own a focus that demonstrates a remarkable lack of critical integrity. Reading fiction almost always involves the ability to suspend disbelief; as a contrived reality, every novel represents an impression of what was or what could be. Helprin rightfully makes no apology for being a novelist.

The end and beginning of it is that I dissent from the dominant orthodoxies that cradle the profession I practice, that, despite what some assert, I have never been shy about it, and that, therefore, I find myself not only out of the mainstream, but playing the role, at times, of moving target. As I have an activist nature, I fire back. I confess, even, that I have often opened fire before being fired upon, as I

would, for example, were I to come upon a platoon of the SS or terrorists about to attack a school. (179)

III. The Rest of the Story

Following the plunge of Peter Lake from the magic horse, time accelerates rapidly. Helprin narrows his focus (if such a phrase can be applied to *Winter's Tale*) and begins to explore the New York City that, as Paul Alexander and other critics have simplistically commented, “never existed and never will, a city where horses could fly and a man could live for hundreds of years” (Alexander, 65). The narrative moves from a description of a magical, Christmas-card village in northern New York that, as Helprin writes, “was so far upstate that no one could find it” (99) to Manhattan itself, perched perilously at the literal edge of the millenium. Peter Lake incredibly reappears, and it is his return that sets into motion the redemption of a small child, and consequently, of New York City, its citizens, and ultimately, in Helprin’s grand design, mankind itself.

And the design is truly grand indeed. Helprin introduces this portion of the novel with forceful imagery that foreshadows the architecture of both city and novel that he wants to maintain until the end:

Every city has its gates, which need not be of stone. Nor need soldiers be upon them or watchers before them. At first when cities were jewels in a dark and mysterious world, they tended to be round and they had protective walls. To enter, one had to pass through gates, the reward for which was shelter from the overwhelming forests and seas, the merciless and taxing expanse of greens, whites, and blues—wild and free—that stopped at the city walls. (197)

This concept of the city as benign and “protective” has given way, however, to something that Helprin tells us has become more sinister:

In time the ramparts became higher and the gates more massive, until they simply disappeared and were replaced by barriers, subtler than stone, that girded every city like a crown and held in its spirit. Some claim that the barriers do not exist, and disparage them. Although they themselves can penetrate the new walls with no effort, their spirits (which, also, they claim do not exist) cannot, and are left like orphans around the periphery. (197)

And finally there is a challenge, enigmatic but hopeful, that is both a summons and a possible warning:

To enter a city intact it is necessary to pass through one of the new gates. They are far more difficult to find than their solid predecessors, for they are tests, mechanisms, devices, and implementations of justice. There once was a map, now long gone, one of the ancient charts upon which colorful animals sleep or rage. Those who saw it said that in its illuminations were figures and symbols of the gates. The east gate was that of acceptance of responsibility, the south gate that of desire to explore, the west gate that of devotion to beauty, and the north gate that of selfless love. It was said that a city with entryways like these could not exist, because it would be too wonderful. Those who decide such things decided that whoever had seen the map had only imagined it, and the entire matter was forgotten, treated as if it were a dream, and ignored. This, of course, freed it to live forever. (197-98)

Helprin poses some crucial concepts, central to the core of the novel, in those passages. The city has evolved, he tells us, from shelter to prison; as part of our own evolution, we who now live in the city do not even realize, cannot believe in, this change. The guiding principle of each gate is deceptively simple, yet seemingly impossible to achieve at the threshold of the new millenium. In various ways, by various characters, keys to these new gates are rediscovered. In the act of opening the gates and re-entering the city through them, both people and place are changed in unanticipated ways. Such a city is not “too wonderful” to exist, Helprin eventually demonstrates, because people have the courage to imagine it. And to enter it. As Helprin writes at the very beginning of the novel, “A great city is nothing more than a portrait of itself, and yet when all is said and done, its arsenals of scenes and images are part of a deeply moving plain. As a book in which to read this plan, New York is unsurpassed. For the whole world has poured its heart into the city by the Palisades, and made it far better than it ever had any right to be” (xi). The concept of the city has also, of course, become myth now, as well.

It is at this point that Helprin introduces the other central character in the novel, Hardesty Marratta. As scion of a great California family, Hardesty is faced with a choice when his father dies that everyone every one around him considers simple: he is named in his father’s will to decide who will inherit the great family fortune—himself or his wastrel brother. Whoever does not get the money is left with the ancient family salver, a relatively worthless object in comparison. Without hesitation, Hardesty chooses the salver, stunning his brother and friends. Later, Hardesty climbs to the aerie-like study in the Marratta family mansion high above San Francisco to find his legacy. “Hardesty picked up the gleaming salver,” Helprin writes, “and translated its inscription out loud: “ ‘For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of a perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone’ ” (248). As Hardesty will soon learn, the beauty of

that “perfectly just city” is inextricably intertwined with his own destiny. One key to the city has now been recovered.

And more importantly, Peter Lake has finally returned to the city. Lost, amnesiac, he awakens in a hospital with absolutely no memory of Beverley or the horse or the city that he loves. The attractive young doctor who has tended to him leads Peter Lake to the threshold of the rest of his journey. The doctor urges him to return to the living:

They came to the roof door. “It’s funny,” Peter Lake stated. “I don’t think that this notion I have could be so, but I’m afraid to open the door.”

“Just push it,” she said.

He did. (374)

Just as Peter earlier emerged from the safe and sanctity of the “barrel of the sky” over Grand Central Station to the glory of the city, he once again returns to the harsh reality of a city that is at once familiar and totally foreign. Like Hardesty Marratta, he now holds a key to city; unlike Hardesty, Peter Lake has not yet begun to conceive of the gift that he possesses.

A third key character in the novel is the mysterious Jackson Mead, master bridge builder. Oblique images of Mead are given early in the novel: “‘Jackson Mead,’ Mootfowl said with reverence and admiration, ‘has come from beyond the Ohio with a hundred good men and tons of money and steel from God knows where, to start another bridge.’” (66). Mead’s resources are apparently unlimited. We also learn that

Not much was known about Jackson Mead except that he had placed many fine suspension bridges over the great rivers of the West, some of which had taken years to complete and had been built to span nearly bottomless canyons and

gorges. He was quoted in the newspapers as having said that a city could be truly great only if it were a city of high bridges. (67)

The enigma of Mead is also immediately made apparent:

“The map image of London,” he had lectured during a press conference in the offices of the bridge company, “and of Paris, too, compared to that of San Francisco or New York, is boring. To be magnificent, a city cannot resemble a round cradled organ, a heart-or-kidney-shaped thing suffocated by a vast green body. It must project, extend, fling itself in all inviting directions--over the water, in peninsulas, hills, soaring towers, and islands linked by bridges.” The press had wondered why he included San Francisco in his examples, since there were no bridges there, and he had said, with a smile, “My mistake.” (67)

The bridges of New York City are among its most famous engineering landmarks. The Brooklyn Bridge, for example, designed and constructed by John Roebling and his son, Washington Roebling, is one of the most recognizable in the world, second perhaps only to the Golden Gate in San Francisco; both bridges immediately symbolize their respective cities. In *Winter's Tale*, bridges become a critical symbol of man-made technology. As one of Peter Lake's mentors, the Reverend Mootfowl explains

A bridge . . . is a very special thing. Haven't you seen how delicate they are in relation to their size? They soar like birds; they extend and embody our finest efforts; and they utilize the curve of heaven. When a catenary of steel a mile long is hung in the clear over a river, believe me, God knows. Being a churchman, I would go as far as to say that the catenary, this marvelous graceful thing, this joy of physics, this perfect balance between rebellion and obedience, is God's own

signature on earth. I think it pleases Him to see them raised. I think that is why the city is so rich in events. The whole island, you see, is becoming a cathedral.

(67)

In Peter Lake's first life, the building of bridges was a commonplace part of the New York landscape, and Peter Lake and the gang were an important part of the construction, of the the building of the new "cathedrals."

Meanwhile, Mootfowl and his group were ever at work as the city's structures took their places one upon the other, faster than reef-building corals. Each tower had a minute of free view, after which it would spend the rest of eternity contemplating the shins of its competitors. Not so the great bridges. They flowed out over the rivers, and would have airy views and be alone, forever. (66)

And now, in Peter Lake's new life, at the turn of the new century, Mead and a bridge are most important. As Peter has returned from a forgotten past, so have Mead and Mootfowl. The bridge they want to build far exceeds anything that any engineer ever remotely conceived of constructing. It is a bridge to the empyrean, a stairway to heaven, and to Hardesty Marratta it becomes a possible link to salvation.

Because Jackson Mead thought he saw in Hardesty's face that Hardesty wanted, above all, to understand, he confided in him. "My purpose," he said, suddenly soft and benevolent, "is to tag this world with wider and wider rainbows, until the last is so perfect and eternal that it will catch the eye of the One who has abandoned us, and bring Him to right all the broken symmetries and make life once again a still and timeless dream. My purpose, Mr. Marratta, is to stop time, to bring back the dead. My purpose, in one word, is justice." (449)

To understand Mead's words and to finally break the meaning of the salver's code, Hardesty returns to San Francisco. There, as he wanders the city, seemingly aimless but ultimately with a destination, he finds a vital clue, stumbling on a statue of Joseph Strauss, the designer of the Golden Gate Bridge: :

Like a parachutist about to make a jump, Hardesty briefly closed his eyes. Then he opened them, and with a restrained and ironic smile he lifted his gaze to meet that of Jackson Mead, who had been there in fog and the mist all the time, staring toward San Francisco for more than sixty years. Hardesty was sure that in other places there were other statues with other names, but the same far-reaching stare. (485-86)

The cities of New York and San Francisco are thus intrinsically linked, and by extension, so is the entire nation. Mead's bridge is thus an attempt to reach a higher power, to somehow break the code of heaven and allow mankind to glimpse a higher power. There is a climatic dialogue between Hardesty and Mead that is one of the fulcrums of events in the novel.

Hardesty tells Mead that

Everything will have to be right before you build this bridge, Mr. Mead, for this eternal rainbow is going to anger the city, since what you have in mind is so much greater than anything that has come before, and you know very well that people don't like to feel small, to be left behind as the hinge to the future is put in place by someone like you. (488)

Mead's response is rather startling: "I hate them!" Jackson Mead screamed (488). And he continues: "They don't understand that we have a mandate. I can't just refuse to build these

things; it's my responsibility. All the engines, bridges, and cities that we put in place are nothing in themselves" (488).

Meanwhile, Peter Lake has been discovered once again, by the relentless Short Tails, who have magically pursued him across the span of the millennium. Almost instinctively, Peter Lake returns to Grand Central Station. "He went straight to Grand Central," Helprin tells us (561), for reasons that Peter Lake does not entirely understand. But the majesty of the building and its ceiling and even the citizens of the great city have vastly changed:

Commuters and passers-through crossed the prairie-like floor much as they had always done, in a silence that invited the eye to rise and view the vaulted sky above. It was as if the building itself had been skillfully constructed to mirror life on earth and its ultimate consequences, and to reflect the way in which men went about their business mostly without looking up, unaware that they were gliding about on the bottom of a vast sea. From the shadows above the gallery above Vanderbilt Avenue, Peter Lake looked above him and saw the sky and constellations majestically portrayed against the huge barreled vault that floated overhead. It was one of the few places in the world where the darkness and the light floated like clouds and clashed under a ceiling. (561)

Peter Lake returns to revitalize the station. "They hadn't tended the lights of the stars for decades," Helprin writes, "and the unlit sky was stormy and somber. Perhaps no one remembered how it was done, or even that the stars were there to be lighted" (561). In the first of a series of actions that begin to save the city, Peter Lake, in his perch high above the unknowing city, restores the light:

Once inside, in back of the sky, he threw a familiar switch, and all the stars lit up. Not a single bulb was burnt out or missing. It was just that no one had ever been there to throw the switch. In the forest of steel pillars above the warm vault, Peter Lake heard the distractive sound of low faraway engines, something that he had once taken to be the rhythmic blizzard of the approaching future. (562)

The actual ceiling at Grand Central Terminal was revived as part of the overall restoration project of the entire structure that began in 1995 and was completed in 1998. Belle and Leighton describe the enormous mechanized scaffolding that was erected across the span of the ceiling: “It was constructed to slide on runners laid on top of the cornice from which the sky ceiling sprang. During the course of the sky ceiling restoration, the truss would move twenty-five feet at a time, from one end of the sky ceiling to the other, allowing [the] team of conservators to clean every detail of the heavens” (136).

At this point in the novel, however, Hardesty’s young daughter has now died, consumed by a strange fever, and her parents have buried her with great sorrow on the Island of the Dead. New York is meanwhile plunged into chaos; the city is burning, amidst a winter of titanic proportions. Hardesty searches the city maniacally for some sort of salvation. Instead, he finds Peter Lake. He wanders aimlessly into Grand Central Station. While there, wild-eyed, he suddenly looks up at the great ceiling.

No one ever looked up. The ceiling had been dark and cloudy for so long that it had been forgotten. Though for most people the barrel vault was too high to bother with, Hardesty slowly tilted his head until, as he leaned back, he was able to see it in its entirety. (575)

But something is different now. Peter Lake has returned, and Helprin writes that “The stars were on. They shone in incandescent yellow from deep in the green” (575). Hardesty thinks that the lights “had burnt out one by one and would never light again, and that they had been placed too high to be reached or changed. No one tried, and eventually the stars were forgotten and denied. But now they were lit. And not one was missing” (575). But Hardesty is the only one, in his desperation and grief, who begins to understand the changes that are about to take place.

“Look,” Hardesty commanded a young woman in the uniform of a dental assistant, “the stars are lit.”

“What stars?” she asked, without looking up at them, and ran toward the tunnels to catch her habitual train.

“Those stars,” Hardesty said to himself, staring at the green sky. (575)

Hardesty also sees Peter Lake, who sticks his head out of a small trapdoor in the distant ceiling. In a frenzy of magic and energy, Hardesty scales the inner wall of the station, suspended high above the station floor until he reaches the trapdoor.

Mead has meanwhile launched his bridge. It is 31 December 1999, and the millennium is upon the city, which is in flames.

It had taken ages for him to realize that he had to make a bridge of light without a discernible end. Before that, he had built wonders of lovely proportion and airy grace, silvery catenaries that sang in the breeze high above windblown straits all over the world, connecting one heather-covered cliff to another, or marrying the two sides of a choked and improverished city. It had been right and good to fashion those vast curves which were in themselves an ideal synthesis of rising

and falling, aspiration and despair, rebellion and submission, pride and humility. In imitation of universal waves, they were the strongest things ever constructed, and probably the most religious of structures except perhaps for the church steeples, that pointed up into the far distance. (660)

For one brief, glorious moment, it appears that Mead's bridge will take:

From the Battery rose a beautiful angled beam of light in every color. Each section was as tall as a man, a yard wide, and how long no one could tell. The warmer colors--the reds, greens, violets, and grays--were the core, and the more ethereal and metallic colors the sheath. Solid beams mitered the air, rose through the plumes, and disappeared beyond sight. The blue, white, silver, and gold beams that comprised the sheath were transparent, blinding, and jewel-like, and a halation that appeared substantial enough to walk upon followed and echoed the main structure in a diffuse, spangling, silvery road. (661)

But it does not take. The beams of light that comprise its construction dissolve and disintegrate. Peter Lake is finally cornered by the Short Tails and killed. But Hardesty Marratta's daughter returns from the dead, having been recovered by Peter Lake, and the city is reborn.

Rising above it, slowly and in silence, they saw that all its parts were of one piece, a painting of risen gold and animate clouds the long plumes of which climbed gently upward, billowing to heaven. The fine bays and rivers that surrounded the city had been moved to come alight, and for a hundred miles the bays and the rivers and the sea itself were a pale shimmering gold. (669-70)

IV. Helprin and the New York Novel.

A cottage industry of sorts has formed in the past decade or so regarding “Old New York” and what Mark Twain called facetiously “The Gilded Age.” That age turned into what may be the first celebration of American superiority, as an initial realization of the country’s vast resources was recognized. The nation was still in a rather pale but original imitation of European influences in both art and politics and social etiquette, yet its remarkable potential was already readily apparent. We continued to imitate, but we also began to invent. And contemporary writers were quick to begin to fictionalize the new America. Novels like Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* were written in the 1880s, and nascent concepts of the “American Girl” were first developed, but James preceded *Daisy Miller* with *Washington Square*, which intricately used Manhattan location and architecture as a metaphor for social discourse. At the turn of the century, fin de siècle American was a powerful economic force indeed, and the continual growth of America as a cultural and economic dynamo was reflected by novelists like Edith Wharton in *The Buccaneers* and *The Age of Innocence*, with the city forming an important backdrop, especially in the latter. New York City as a setting of fiction has been used consistently with the work of Dos Passos, Scott Fitzgerald, Nelson Algren, and Beat novelists like Jack Kerouac.

Winter’s Tale stands in a strange kind of juxtaposition with the work that has preceded or followed it. It appropriates certain aspects of *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, and *The Age of Innocence*, but yet has different aims and different objectives. *The Great Gatsby*, for example, uses New York as a glittering but distant example of success, an embodiment of the American dream that is never quite realized. In fact, for all the talk of New York, there is only one major scene in the novel that takes place in Manhattan itself, and that is near the end, when the central characters engage in a tense set piece in the Plaza Hotel. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton surrounds the entire cast of characters with “the gilded age” but it is more an attitude and

response to New York manners that is important. The city is incidental to the way people have chosen to live in it.

In more recent fiction like Caleb Carr's detective novels, *The Alienist* and *The Angel of Darkness*, New York at the turn of the century is used as backdrop. But there is no sense of relevance in terms of what the city means to the narrative; referencing familiar landmarks like Delmonico's restaurant and the Croton Reservoir could have easily been done using any city. It is the era, the temporal point framing a particular time in the country, that is most important in novels like *The Alienist*. New York City is only part of a travelogue to highlight the distant past. Jack Finney's *Time and Again* and *From Time to Time* succeed a little better in using the city as both a cultural and social background, *and* as a point of departure—in a clever and effective plot device, the central character uses the Dakota apartment house in Manhattan as a gateway to the past. Thus both the past and the present (or in some cases, the future) are always kept in mind by the time-traveler; the city of Manhattan is a much less obtrusive (but no less important) touchstone than in Carr's novels. Finney's novels also involve considerable fantastic elements regarding the manipulation of time, much as *Winter's Tale* does.

E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* offers a dystopian view of the "gilded age," and focuses not on the hopeful possibilities of new wealth and emerging technology, but instead on its corrosive elements brought to the city by those concepts, as manipulated by the corrupt Boss Tweed administration. *The Waterworks* is as challenging as *Winter's Tale*, and presents its themes of redemption in malevolent, despairing ways. The novel's bleak vision stands in direct contrast to that of *Winter's Tale*, and Manhattan is an ominous and oppressive setting that ultimately becomes a kind of wasteland.

Hart Crane's long narrative poem "The Bridge" perhaps best approximates a similar tone in terms of landmark and symbology. Crane used the Brooklyn Bridge as a metaphor for what was possible within man, in terms of a city landscape. In Crane's poem, the bridge talks more to the past than it does to the future, although the technical capabilities employed to span the East River are considerable. There is a certain, distinct regret in "The Bridge" that is still nevertheless positive; as Mark Schorer once wrote, "American literature is the most positive literature of dissent in the world" (1143). Helprin also uses the old and the new in comparative ways to make us feel both loss and hope; the loss of the past, which describes despair, and the possibility of the future, which emphasizes potential.

Winter's Tale succeeds by taking not taking Manhattan for granted. With the key exception of Grand Central Station, almost no landmark in New York is named. Even the famous Oyster Bar restaurant deep within the terminal, where Peter Lake has several notable encounters, remains anonymous. The names of famous places are not important; it is New York City writ large that matters most to Helprin. Grand Central Station becomes a haven for Peter Lake and a heaven for Hardesty Marrata. Hardesty's climb up the wall of the terminal is as spiritually liberating for him as it is for Peter Lake. It unlocks the faith contained within each man.

V. Conclusion.

Thus, in *Winter's Tale*, man-made structures exist as symbols of salvation, as testaments to human possibilities and hope. Helprin's elegiac ending does not answer all the questions that have been raised in the novel. Even in failure, Jackson Mead's attempt to "throw" the Battery Bridge highlights those human possibilities, and reflects the optimistic ambition of true creativity:

Because Jackson Mead's bridge was not able to penetrate the empyrean, he, Cecil Mature, and Mootfowl disappeared with no trace, and were soon forgotten. But Jackson Mead was convinced, as always, that the next time, a new means at his disposal would allow him to return to the high place from which he had been cast. And he knew that if he could not return, he was now perfectly willing to bide his time. When he would come back once again, no one would know him, and he would have the great privilege of starting over. (672)

Despite the destruction and chaos that has occurred during the attempt, the indefatigable New Yorkers emerge to reclaim their city. In a brief section that hauntingly foreshadows the aftermath of 11 September 2001, Helprin writes:

That very morning, they began to rebuild the city. Barges appeared in long chains, taking rubble out to sea, and the sound of the pile drivers, the muffled explosions under iron nets, the optimistic banshee cries of saws . . . was music (672).

The closing coda offers no conclusions, but insinuates the price that hope and love have exacted:

Now there are no more lakes in the clouds. The city is deep within its new dream. What of Peter Lake, you may ask? Was the past fully reopened to him? Was he able to stop time? Did he rejoin the woman that he loved? Or was the price of the totally just city his irrevocable fall?

At least until there are new lakes in the clouds that open upon living cities as yet unknown, and perhaps forever, that is a question which you must answer within your own heart. (673)

By returning to “the umbilicus” of Manhattan and reenergizing Grand Central Station, Peter Lake was able to save not only Hardesty Marratta’s daughter, but the entire city as well. He has apparently sacrificed himself, but Helprin leaves that in an ambiguous state. Peter Lake has cheated death before, and like Jackson Mead returning in anonymity to recast the Battery Bridge, there is the distinct hint that Peter Lake may return at last to reclaim his love.

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