

VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2018

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REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

Charles R.  
Kesler:  
*Trump's  
First Year*

John Marini  
♦  
Michael M.  
Uhlmann  
♦  
Bradley C.S.  
Watson:  
*Bureaucracy  
in America*

Brian Allen:  
*The New  
African American  
Museum*

Allen C.  
Guelzo:  
*The  
Gilded Age*

Karl Rove:  
*William  
McKinley*

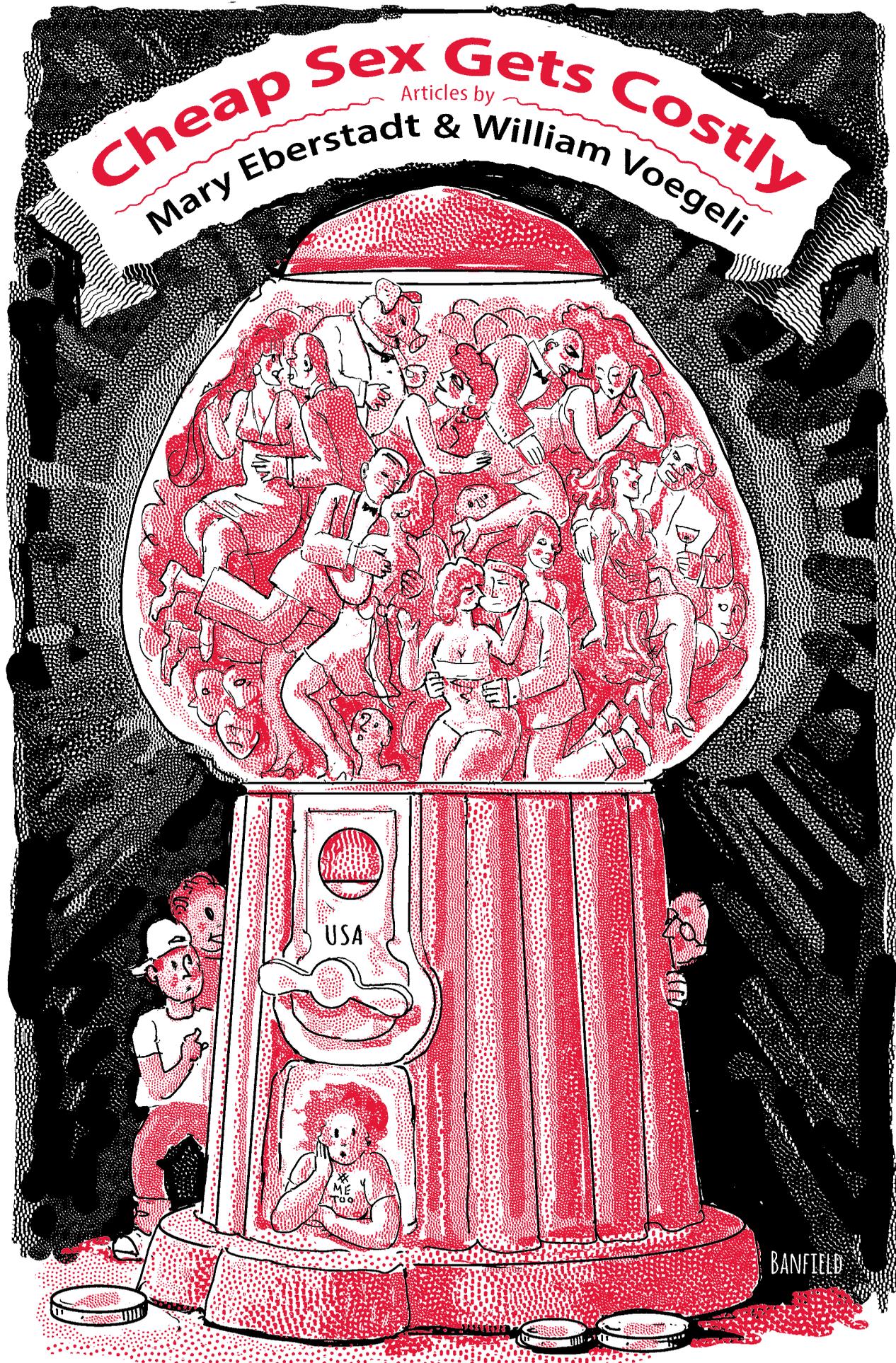
Hadley  
Arkes  
♦  
James R.  
Stoner, Jr.:  
*The End of  
Free Speech*

David P.  
Goldman:  
*Condi Rice  
Goes to  
the Seashore*

Matthew  
Continetti:  
*Senate  
Pages*

Andrew  
Roberts:  
*VDH on  
WWIs*

Joseph  
Epstein:  
*P.G.  
Wodehouse*



A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

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Book Review by Sara MacDonald

## DIVINE HARMONIES

*Paris in the Present Tense*, by Mark Helprin.  
The Overlook Press, 400 pages, \$28.95



MARK HELPRIN'S NOVELS ARE LONG, luxurious reads, with vivid descriptions of settings and characters that draw readers in. The places he describes seem familiar; the characters, like people we've always known. *Winter's Tale* (1983), set in New York City near the turn of the 20th century, introduces us to orphan-turned-thief Peter Lake and the woman he loves, the wealthy but dying Beverly Penn. Fantastic elements in the story, including a flying horse and a mysterious cloud wall, reveal the transcendence of Peter and Beverly's love. *A Soldier of the Great War* (1991) recounts an epic walk across the Italian countryside by Alessandro Giuliani and his unlikely young companion, Nicolò. Over the course of their pilgrimage, Alessandro reflects on his life as a young boy growing up in Rome through to his trials in and after World War I. Confessing his failures and vices, as well as tremendous love for the world

and his now dead wife and son, Alessandro prepares Nicolò for life just as he is preparing himself for death. The latest novel, *Paris in the Present Tense*, is Helprin at his best.

SET IN PRESENT-DAY PARIS, WHERE once-vanquished enemies and ideologies have returned, the novel explores the intermingling of beauty, love, and truth. Its hero, Jules Lacour, racked by guilt and thirsting for justice, seems from an earlier age. But there is nothing outdated about Helprin's prescription for our future health, which will require a recollection of the world's beauty, and be grounded in our desire to love and be loved in turn. In the midst of injustice and betrayals, the author holds out the possibility of a perfected love and justice.

Helprin is unapologetic about his belief in universal truths. As Jules puts it at one point,

Just because you can't catch it doesn't mean it doesn't exist or that you can't see it. And it isn't in the eye of the beholder but rather that people see differently and some are entirely blind.... For me beauty is a hint, a flash, a glimpse of the divine and a promise that the world is good.

Throughout the novel Helprin's beautiful language models Jules's account of beauty. Descriptions of cityscapes, ungainly insurance salesmen, and insistent ice cream peddlers are crafted with a loving eye that allows goodness to shine in the most unlikely of places, compelling readers to take note of things and people they might normally dismiss. Of *Paris in the fall*, Helprin writes,

The air was crisp as often as not. Storms that blew in from Normandy and the west fought the blue with huge thunder-

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heads rolling upward in gray and black. In the minutes before they arrived, the air they charged and their distant yellow lightning made Paris the most exciting city in the world.

That excitement is felt again when the same imagery echoes in the description of a young woman when Jules first sees her: “most distinctive were her eyes, which to Jules seemed illuminated by the kind of storm light that slips in under a tight layer of cloud...her expression was almost that of a sailor pressing into the wind.”

**A**T AGE 74, JULES IS AT THE END OF HIS life, haunted by regret for things that he did and didn’t do—most especially, for being unable to save his parents, who were murdered by Nazis in World War II, or his wife, Jacqueline, who died after an operation. And he is terrified that the growing tide of anti-Semitism in France will cause his daughter and her family to suffer, a fear magnified by his grandson’s leukemia. Jules discovers that his feeling of having betrayed his loved ones has rendered him unable to live and love in the present. Seeking to confound time, he spends the last months of his life striving to avenge past injustices and to secure his family’s happiness after he’s dead.

Inadvertently coming across three thugs—whom he later discovers are Muslims—on the verge of killing a young Jewish man, Jules kills two of the attackers. Helprin moves from almost hypnotizing descriptions of nature’s beauty to fast-paced action scenes: “He couldn’t keep up with them, but instead of boxing...he waited for an opening and, with a scream, seized one of them by the neck, turned his whole body, and as if diving into a pool pushed off hard into the abyss, out from the stairs, riding the one he had seized down the twenty-one steps as if on a toboggan.” As in life, time can seem to move all too slowly—and then, in an instant, everything is in motion and each choice could be the last. With no simple explanation for what he has done—the man he saved has run away—Jules, too, flees the scene. He spends the rest of the novel evading the police, who draw ever closer to arresting him.

Jules’s guilt about the past and despair for the future is balanced by his appreciation of the symphonies of sound that surround him every day. He is a cellist, and the beauty of the world, particularly music, makes concrete the universal principles he believes in:

Jules didn’t analyze what he saw, he heard it and he felt it. This is not to say that he merely listened to the noise of

traffic, the wind, aircraft straining at a distance, barge horns, sirens, chimes, and the surf-like rustle of leaves now stiffening before their October deaths. Somehow he heard Paris itself.

His melancholy initially prevents him from understanding what these harmonies suggest. But he comes to realize that, just as a cacophony of noise can become music, so people of diverse desires and disparate ends might form a just community. Helprin illustrates this through the growing friendship between Duvalier and Arnaud, the Jewish and Muslim detectives responsible for tracking Jules down. Although mistaken about Jules’s motive—they think they are seeking a Jew, who, in an unprovoked hate crime, killed two Muslims—they are devoted to discovering the truth and seeking justice. Their differences are irrelevant in light of their common cause.

**T**HROUGH SUCH UNIFYING DEVOTION TO good and just ends, Helprin indicates, individuals mimic the divine. *Winter’s Tale* makes this argument explicit by depicting an eternal reality alongside the temporal world. *Paris in the Present Tense* indicates it in the structure of the novel itself. As in any individual’s life, the novel contains disparate plot lines, brought together and shown to be working in harmony—and fulfilling Jules’s hopes in ways he could not have anticipated.

For example, he is given the unlikely opportunity to compose a marketing campaign jingle for Acorn, a multinational insurance conglomerate. Promised €1 million, he flies to Los Angeles and New York to present his finished piece. But, through no fault of his own, the deal falls through—after Jules has spent €40,000 on expenses that could have gone to his daughter and sick grandchild. He went to America thinking it the solution to his problems, only to discover that, like all places, it is only as good as the individual citizens forming its community. Jules leaves seeking revenge, but a betrayal of another kind—that of his body—provides him with the unexpected means of achieving justice. He collapses with a brain aneurysm and is taken to a hospital. Realizing he wasn’t carrying identification—so there’s no record of his diagnosis—he leaves the hospital and buys one of Acorn’s most lucrative life insurance policies. He thus secures his daughter’s and grandson’s futures (as well as Armand Marteau’s, a much abused, but lovable insurance salesman). Jules carefully crafts his plan, but its fruition requires that elements of a much broader—even infinite—plan fall into place.

**N**OT EVERYTHING IN LIFE WORKS OUT as we wish. The Muslim who escaped after attacking the Jew martyrs himself in Syria. The man Jules saved never steps forward to clear Jules’s name. And as Jules resists the romantic temptations of several women with whom he continually falls in love, he discovers his wife had an affair with his best friend, François. At the same time, however, he discovers the true meaning of love, realizing that the mistakes she made don’t diminish his love for her:

He was tired of life, but full of love. Though he had long believed that only God was capable of infinite love, the love he had for so many people and so many things seemed nonetheless to have no limit... [H]e discovered that one can love infinitely not as an attribute of one’s capacities but rather as an attribute of love itself.

Love’s infinite nature empowers Jules to forgive even the worst betrayals—those of Jacqueline and François, but also those he himself has committed.

*Paris in the Present Tense* presents the possibility of temporal justice grounded in our capacity to forgive offenses and move forward in a spirit of friendship and love. It does not argue naïvely that this is possible on the strength of our love alone. Instead, our failings in charity must be augmented by a divine will that can forgive the present with an infinite view of past and future. That we might hope and believe this is true is evidenced, Helprin suggests, in the beauty of the world that surrounds us.

The novel begins with Jules flying from New York to Paris. The narrator reflects on our faith that airplanes will hold together in the face of whatever they encounter, and that we will land safe and sound in a different place. Jules’s death at the novel’s end returns us to this beginning. We are left with the hope that Jules has safely journeyed to rejoin his parents and the woman he loves. Helprin suggests that, just as airplanes reach their destinations through countless individuals’ hard work and good will, so too political communities withstand domestic and international turmoil through their citizens’ hard work and good will. But not everything can be anticipated. Sometimes, only faith and hope in divine justice will carry us to a safer shore.

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