



Review of Swirski, Peter. 2015. *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics*. US: Palgrave Macmillan. 214 pages. ISBN: 978-1-349-70461-3

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American Political Fictions is one of a couple of Americanist studies by Peter Swirski in recent years. In this book, he studies five cases of American political fiction, all published or released during the last few decades, including Heller's *Picture This* (1998), LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* (1995), Beaton's *A Planet for the President* (2004), the rap by various artists and *The West Wing* by co-authors, obviously as a result of a careful selection. But why American political fictions? By answering this question first, we will understand how warranted Swirski's study turns out to be.

America is notable for its political writing in particular. When the first American fictions appeared during the Revolution period (Elliott, 1988: 169), they already expressed the political anxiety of the day apart from being sentimental and didactic (1988: 179). Political fiction as a genre in America, as exemplified by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, should have taken essential shape many years before the Civil War when a nationwide debate over slavery was escalating. From then on America seemed to have more political fictions produced than any other country, largely owing to its polemic tradition and the unresolved conflict between the American dream and reality.

Political fiction is always popular and is one of the most important American literary genres. Despite or rather because of this, political fiction never exempts itself from the habitual accusations against overall genre or popular fiction that it is low, vulgar, peripheral or even harmful (Swirski, 2005: 41-42). Without correcting this myopia no scholarly efforts in this area are warranted or recognized.

Peter Swirski's interest is in genre fiction, especially in political fiction on which he has already published several other books of criticism, e.g., *Ars Americana* (2010), and *American Utopia* (2011). Swirski definitely knew what he was doing and was in full

consciousness of the unpleasant attitude people held towards genre fiction, so he would not get himself started without his apologizing for it. He did apologize for it. As early as 2005, Swirski published an introductory study *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005) by virtue of which he cleared once and for all the way for his coming series of studies on political or other genre fiction. In that book, he argues it is for no good reason but out of ingrained bigotry that we still distinguish literary canon or literature of “highbrow” from genre fiction or “lowbrow”.

His argument is based on the following points: If genre fiction is mean, sexual or violent as it is deemed to be, the literary canon is no less so; genre fiction also embodies aesthetic virtues and social dimension that are presumed to characterize literary canon; the genre may become a canon or vice versa, rather because of social contingency than of its inherent quality. He thus concludes, commensurate with the “mass or popular culture” described by Adorno and Horkheimer (Barker, 2009: 49), that in our era “highbrow” and “lowbrow” have compromised themselves, creating a situation in which “nobrow”, i.e., genre or popular fictions or whatever, dominates (Swirski, 2005b). Given this premise, when Swirski studies political fiction, he is safely studying the literature proper.

Now come to the five political fictions he studies in this present book. Swirski must be very selective about these five as listed above, considering that American political fictions are so large in number and uneven in quality. Then why these five rather than a lot of others? Obviously, these publications fall in the period from the 1980s until this millennium, namely, the contemporary America that the book is mainly about. Most importantly, the works represent what Swirski himself defines as “artertainment”—apparently a word coinage of “art” and “entertainment”.

In *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005) he proposes artertainment for the first time, which he reiterates in his *American Crime Fiction* (2016), as the benchmark of fiction of “nobrow”, by which any particular genre or popular fiction can be judged or tested. No doubt, artertainment guaranteed that Swirski would select the qualified political fictions for study. Similarly, artertainment sets the criteria with reference to which the five political works are studied as well. It lays down three criteria: 1) the power to entertain, 2) the artistic or aesthetic virtues, and 3) the social dimension (Swirski, 2016: 1-26).

In *American Political Fictions*, although Swirski is very brief in proving the five works’ power to entertain (for their status as bestsellers or popular art indicates it well), he makes enormous efforts to apply Criterion 2) and 3), that is, to demonstrate the works’ artistic virtues and their social dimension. As he illustrates, for instance, *Picture This* possesses artistic virtues such as unconventional or formless structure, narrative digression in addition to its resort to dramatic counterpoint, tragicomic fusion, ironic conceit, etc. (Swirski, 2015: 23-24), and the rap uses poetic license like rhyme and meters to heighten artistic effect. In regard to what is artistic or aesthetic, Swirski is much of a Formalist or Modernist believing that the artistic depends on something rather strange, unconventional, variational or

innovative. Therefore, in his mind, Heller's "hisrorature" is artistic and so is Beaton's topical satire that attains universality and the rap that makes the best of music and poetry (Beaton, 2004; Heller, 1998).

His strongest argument is about Criterion 3). By examining the fictitious and factual world in parallel, Swirski enables us to see that the political fictions not only have a social dimension but even more. If average literature expresses the social dimension through imitation or representation of the actual world, "imitate" and "represent", he gives us to understand, are simply not enough for that purpose for the political fictions in question. Certainly they often imitate or represent the actual world, but they are equally liable to misrepresent it or even distort it as in a fantasy, so no one may recognize it easily. But "stories don't have to be real to be true" (Swirski, 2015: 134), says he, so neither do the political fictions, which, represent it or distort it, are inevitably true to the actual world.

Insofar as "imitate" is concerned, ironically, it is often politics that imitates art (2015: 4), or in other words, fiction that makes life (2015: 2), rather than the other way round, so much so that, take *The West Wing* for example, one would not possibly sever the real from the reel. By being true or rather by making fiction and fact true to each other, Swirski points out, the political fictions express profound social dimension and chiefly for this they qualify as arertainment.

The social dimension is political in nature- they are political fictions after all. If the political fictions express certain social or political meaning, this meaning is significantly extended and developed by Swirski as he elaborates on such political issues as American imperialism with *Picture This*, education and environment with *Left Behind*, presidency with *A Planet for the President*, racialism with the rap, and democracy with *The West Wing*. Without doubt, Swirski is as critical as the fictions of American politics and even more radical.

As he reveals, the political status quo of America is hopelessly wrong. For example, American imperialism is addicted to foreign wars because the wars become a moneymaking business on which the American empire necessarily depends. This is why America makes trouble everywhere and Bush II insists on launching an infamous war on Iraq. Bush II is definitely a terrible president, but what about Barack Obama, his successor? Simply a Bushama as Swirski inspires us to see. He differs from Bush II merely in rhetoric, but their substance remains the same, the defiance of human rights, the inaction in environmental protection, the insistence on wars, bio-weapons, weapon sales and so on.

By the same token, American democracy is untenable for the very fact that it is indirect or false. Although direct democracy, which has been satisfactorily practiced in some countries or regions, may have become a feasible alternative, America is dead set on an out-of-date democracy that results in nothing but political apathy. In short, as the subtitle of the book shows, Swirski is waging an open war against American political "errorism".

I agree with Swirski's suggestion, which he has made on several occasions, that political expression in America is too common, but the rare sample is "political political", that is, radical or partisan expression (Swirski, 2005a). What a dull world that yields too many political evasions and political presumptions! Hopefully, Swirski again voices his partisan expression that is critical and radical. Needless to say, it tasks one by far more to make partisan expression because it demands a speaker not only critical, insightful, articulate but also passionate, faithful and undaunted. But partisan expression is too valuable, for one thing, it is rare, for another, it represents positive forces that may change the world for the better, especially when this world of ours is far from perfect.

On account of his partisan expression, Swirski and his *American Political Fictions* may be readily labeled "un-American". It is un-American if by un-American is meant that one out-speaks oneself and tells what is true as true. In fact, it is the American rather than un-American that has gone very ill today. And for that matter, *American Political Fictions* thus becomes more than mere literary study. Yet, it is a literary study in the first place. As such, it not only appreciates the literariness and art virtues of the above American political fictions as samples, but also justifies the overall genre as a whole.

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