Peter Swirski
American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought, and Political History.
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American Utopia is the most recent in a series of books by Peter Swirski which engage in both politics and literature, a growing collection that includes *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature* (2009) and *Ars Americana, Ars Politica: Partisan Expression in Contemporary American Literature and Culture* (2010).

In *American Utopia* Swirski for the first time in his oeuvre foregrounds a neo-Darwinian approach to utopian literature and argues that what prevents man from achieving utopia is man himself. Hardwired into our adaptive systems is the struggle to survive, and this fits ill with utopias that seek to place the common good above the individual need. Swirski pursues this thesis by analyzing five novels, or five "thought experiments," that ultimately demonstrate how the great American democratic experiment of equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness may be ill-conceived from the start.

Swirski starts with B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), a blueprint for an enlightened community based on behavioristic principles which proved remarkably difficult to put into practice. In the real-life Walden Two experiment in Twin Oaks, Virginia, begun in 1967, communal childcare, shared lodgings, and the banning of individual possessions were all abandoned. Whereas Skinner felt that blood ties would be a minor issue, in practice families' reproductive investment in their offspring proved crucial: people insisted on raising their own children. In Swirski's view, Skinner's failure is based on an inadequate conception of human nature. Human drives like jealousy or parental love are not cultural constructs that could be simply adjusted, instead, they are the product of human evolution stretching way back in time.

Swirski's next chapter interprets Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) as a critique of American democracy. The novel is seen as a canny political allegory in which the mental ward is advertised as a democratic community run by the patients, when in fact social engineering and extreme behaviorist control rule. Throughout his book Swirski draws parallels with his texts and contemporary political events, and in this chapter nice connections are made between Nurse Ratched's ward meetings and The Patriot Act, which contains provisions against its own amendment. American democracy, it is implied, is indeed vulnerable to authoritarian makeover.

The neo-Darwinian approach returns in Swirski's reading of Bernard Malamud's post-apocalyptic beast fable *God's Grace* (1982). A sole human survivor attempts to instill among the surviving apes the principles of love, altruism, and aspiration for higher things, but the novel ends with the last human being led up the mountain by his ape 'son' to be slain. From the long evolutionary perspective, intentionality, or shared points of view, has encouraged the formation

of society, and our large brains have meant that we have, time and again, survived "ecological IQ-tests," but this same intelligence leads to our destruction. As Swirski points out in mock-Biblical style, a style entirely appropriate to a novel which has so many Biblical echoes: "shared intentionality, which begot culture, which begot science, which begot the H-bomb, may be the ultimate Trojan horse" (98). Malamud's apes prove all too human: survival is all and altruism at heart is only a developed form of egoism, a point that Swirski extends through an examination of proverbs from around the world and the shared wisdoms of many cultures. Swirski's and Malamud's conclusions here are bleak: if man's duty is global stewardship then "Humanity itself gives little indication that it is fit for the job" (129).

Walter Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1986) is the next thought experiment Swirski unpacks. Is there a way to tinker with our biological coding and extract the aggressive gene? Even if successful is there a price to pay? Anthony Burgess's response to these questions in *A Clockwork Orange* was that aggression is part of what defines us, for better or worse, as human. Aversion therapy may render the subject docile, but the link between aggression and creativity is so close that it would mean no more Beethovens, and certainly no more appreciation of art. Percy's novel is similar: psychotropic chemicals might well reduce violent crime, but it would reduce us to passive beasts. Swirski, though, does not leave it at that, for in closing the chapter he plays both Advocate and Devil's Advocate with the implications of what Stanislaw Lem has called "betrization" (an in utero method of reducing aggression). Ultimately, he leaves the question open; he suggests, moreover, that "It is an open question ... whether Kesey or Percy would approve of de-aggression" (170), to me a somewhat strange conclusion that runs counter to the implied critique of mind and body manipulation by these two writers.

The final counterfactual or "what if?" novel is Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). What if the Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh had become the US president? Like all utopian and dystopian novels an imaginary scenario plays against a backcloth of present times. Roth's novel, in effect a *roman à clef*, invites links with what Swirski calls Bush's "fascist Republican presidency," when in the post 9/11 political climate all sorts of civil liberties were being curtailed. More applicable to Reagan than to Bush, Roth's novel also raises the political danger of the triumph of emotion over reason, the victory of the aura of the presidential office coupled with personal charisma over rationality and substance. This chapter is also a checklist of how to persuade the public: keep your message simple; emphasize good guys versus bad guys; go tribal—us and them; go easy on numbers; work within a fairly narrow set of emotions, verbal emoticons that have universal appeal, and so on. All these points, Swirski suggests, work because they are at one with evolutionary impulses. And all work even more effectively in a climate or war or threat when issues of survival are paramount.

What makes *American Utopia* a special book is the quantity and quality of ideas raised and the zest of the writing. Not all readers will go along with Swirski's evolutionary perspective, but the argument that our inability to achieve utopias is grounded both in our inherited strengths and in our human weaknesses is finely argued and intellectually appealing. What helped us survive as a species is also the root cause of our potential downfall.

The book closes with a comment on history and its link with fiction: history is about utopia making, it is the stories we tell each other about the past. Social engineering and mental

engineering are thus alike, they both involve the eradication of unwanted truths about ourselves and our past. When the Texas Education Board wished, among other things, to drop Jefferson from the list of Enlightenment thinkers and to rename the slave trade the "Atlantic triangular trade" it was remaking the (American) world in its own restricted yet utopian image.

In the final ironic sentence that echoes the closing of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Swirski returns to the great American dream of democracy for all which is sadly at odds with political realities: "If not this time around, then the next we will succeed in twisting history's rubber arm to make it conform to the utopian vision of a city on the hill, with liberty and justice for all" (207), or as Fitzgerald puts it: "It eluded us then, but that's no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

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