I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature (review)

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Peter Swirski, ed. *I Sing the Body Politic: History as Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2009. 216 pp. $80.00 cloth; $24.95 paper.

As the book's subtitle indicates, this collection of essays examines various recent works of U.S. literature (and film) that grapple with that country's history in order to interrogate its current political predicaments. Surveying novels by Phillip Roth and Joseph Heller, memoirs of the Vietnam, Gulf, and Iraq wars, and films by Spike Lee and Michael Moore, the collection's authors argue that the visions of the American past found in these works are to be understood as activist briefs meant to reshape the American future.

This argument is best fulfilled by Michael Zeitlin's thoughtful contribution on "the ways that the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War are bound up in complex webs of American cultural memory and historical repetition" (86). Zeitlin shows how fictions about the Vietnam War came to serve as interpretive lenses through which soldiers in the later wars understood their experiences. Zeitlin plays on both senses of "fiction" here, discussing feature films about the Vietnam War as well as the ideological fictions about that conflict that continue to shape contemporary U.S. political discourse. The Vietnam veteran occupies an especially vexed location in these fictions: the veterans who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) upon their return illustrated the costs of the U.S.'s military aggression on its own soldiers, many of whom became radical critics of the war and of U.S. imperialism as a whole. Yet, as Zeitlin notes, the association in the popular mind of Vietnam vets with PTSD often served to delegitimize their political activism—marking it as the ravings of the mentally ill—while the damage done to these men by U.S. military policy was effaced by the (spurious) urban legend that claimed that soldiers were spat upon by anti-war activists. In this fiction, it was the anti-war movement, not the U.S. government, that mistreated the vets—a mistreatment that could thus only be rectified by waging new wars that could be won via overwhelming firepower and by a domestic politics that labeled any dissent from these wars as a failure to "support our troops." Zeitlin explores the ways in which memoirs from veterans of the Gulf and Iraq wars engaged with the complex legacy of the Vietnam vet, redeeming the latter's military service with their own, feeling guilt over the heroes' welcome they received (and that the Vietnam vets did not), and fearing that the trauma of warfare will shatter their lives just as it did those of a previous genera-

tion of soldiers. In these recent veteran memoirs, as Zeitlin artfully puts it, "the figure of the Vietnam vet encodes a painful recognition struggling unsuccessfully to negate itself" (94).

Unfortunately, the other essays in this collection do not engage their chosen cultural artefacts and historical questions with this level of aesthetic and political insight. Take, for example, editor Peter Swirski's discussion of Joseph Heller's *Picture This*. Describing Heller's ungainly novel as one that "clothes Periclean Athens and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic in rich historical robes and compares their rise and fall with the state of the American union," Swirski is quick to point out that Heller is "too canny a historian and satirist to close his eyes to the differences among these three superpowers" (49). Yet Swirski's essay quickly closes its own eyes to these differences—at one point lashing out against "hypocrisy that has changed not one iota in twenty-five centuries" (61)—while largely using Heller's novel merely as an opportunity to launch into a series of critiques of recent U.S. government actions. It is not so much that these invectives against U.S. policy are mistaken; it is rather that they are not news to anyone who has picked up a copy of *The Nation* over the past thirty years. Meanwhile, the essay has little to say of critical interest about Heller's adventurous aesthetic strategy, other than to praise it for its mixture of nonfiction and fiction, which has of course been a feature of the historical novel for some time now.

David Rampton's account of Philip Roth's recent "American Trilogy"—*American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000)—is somewhat more successful, yet it too begs some crucial questions. Admitting that Roth's works "represent the apotheosis of evasive self-reflexiveness" (13), Rampton nonetheless argues that something like a coherent depiction of a particularly "American stupidity" can be found in the trilogy's survey of twentieth-century U.S. political history. Unfortunately, despite his attentive reading of Roth's novels, Rampton never quite defines the essence of this "stupidity"; instead, he inventories things that Roth seems to despise—a collection of targets that ranges from McCarthyite persecutors to academic feminists—and labels them stupid. Rampton closes by suggesting that Roth offers as a counterweight to these stupidities "the note of quizzical uplift, the lyrical praise for therapeutic isolation, and the acceptance of the incomplete and imperfect" (44) but does not offer a clear argument as to how these features of Roth's trilogy "help us make the transition into the twenty-first century" (14), as the essay's introduction promises.

The collection's other two essays fail to do justice to the rhetorical and historical complexity of the two filmmakers (Spike Lee and Michael Moore) they respectively examine. Gordon E. Slethaug's account of the "dialogic" interplay of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X's political positions in Lee's films suffers from an inability to grasp adequately either black political history or Lee's cinematic strategies. Slethaug makes the mistake of treating King and Malcolm X as primarily writers and speakers rather than leaders of social movements, an error compounded by his odd characterization of black American history as a series of race riots and ghetto uprisings, with little substantive treatment of the various forms of African-American political self-organization that have powered the struggle for racial equality. Furthermore, Slethaug repeatedly mischaracterizes King's political strategy as one of "conciliation" (117) and "gentle prodding" (136), when in fact King's program of nonviolent resistance required radical acts of bodily confrontation, as even a cursory consideration of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches makes clear. Saddled with a reductive understanding of King and Malcolm X's politics, Slethaug's essay ends up offering a weak and unconvincing account of Lee's subtle negotiation of their legacy for contemporary race relations. Nicholas Ruddick, meanwhile, submits a brief in support of Michael Moore's political agenda, but he does so in a particularly curious manner: five pages are dedicated to a close reading of his brief 2003 Oscar acceptance speech, while the complex rhetorical structures of *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) are barely explored, let alone critically analyzed. In addition, Ruddick finds fault with the 2007 documentary *Manufacturing Dissent: Uncovering Michael Moore* but fails to address its most substantive claims, which concern Moore's sometimes misleading representations of historical events—an odd choice for an essay that purports to "reveal Moore's strengths as a truth-teller" (154). Indeed, Ruddick's uncritical relationship to Moore's filmmaking is indicated in the passages in which he praises Moore's frequent deployment of footage of people in emotional distress. There is a longstanding debate in both academic and popular discourse concerning the ethics of using this kind of footage (and of provoking emotional responses in one's subjects in the first place); it would have been helpful to Ruddick's case for him at least to acknowledge this debate. Finally, Ruddick and Slethaug both make rudimentary errors in describing the cinematic material they examine. Ruddick claims that Moore "employs fictional techniques, such as the use of a first-person narrator to enhance audience identification" (153), as if the history of non-fiction film is not filled with such narrators, and describes Moore's documentaries as "nar-

ratives" (152), when they are in fact more properly understood as essay films. Slethaug, for his part, gets numerous facts wrong about Lee's films. To choose just a few: he says that "with the exception of Mookie and the DJ, none of the blacks works [sic]" (128) in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), when of course Mookie's sister Jade is also gainfully employed; moreover, Smiley pins the picture of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X on Sal's "Wall of Fame" after the pizzeria has been set on fire, not before, as Slethaug claims (127). These are not crucial details, of course, but this careless treatment of the basic facts of the films themselves, and of the fundamental categories of film analysis, points to the lack of rigour in these essays.

The shortcomings of this collection are particularly disappointing in light of its admirable, animating purpose, which is to illuminate how many works of U.S. literature and film, far from participating in the oft-observed American ignorance of their own history (let alone that of others), have in fact generated profound engagements with this history, excavating the American past so that it sheds new light on the nation's current political and social impasses. If nothing else, this collection should spur other critics to explore in greater depth and more care the underappreciated historical consciousness of U.S. cultural productions.

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Jim Ellis. *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 303 pp. $21.95.

Jim Ellis has written an extraordinarily valuable genealogy of Derek Jarman's complex oeuvre that will no doubt stand as the critical standard by which other appraisals of the mercurial filmmaker, writer, painter, and gardener will be assessed. Written in a remarkably fluid and accessible style, Ellis guides his readers through the entire catalogue of films and through all of Jarman's important writings with equal lucidity and verve. For anyone familiar with the work in question, this is no small task. Jarman's work is thoroughly in dialogue with key trends in contemporary art practice, with the entire history of mainstream and experimental cinema, with British social history in general and the history of Renaissance thought and cultural production in particular, with the history of gardening, with a complex array of queer figures from past and present, and with the social