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Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, £19.95). Pp. xiv + 248. ISBN 978 0 691 13695 0.

From modest beginnings, the relationship between politics and fiction, and art more generally, is now a subject of increasing salience within the academy. Those in search of a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings generated by politics refer to fiction, often as a matter of course, despite the scepticism of hard-core political scientists. Indeed, some now question the extent to which politics and fiction can be distinguished in any clear manner, given that they are, as the political theorist Michael Saward recently noted, both “representative practices.” This process is nowhere more evident than in the United States, where it sometimes seems that analysis of *The West Wing* rivals that of the real White House.

*A Pinnacle of Feeling* is a study of American literature’s fascination with the US presidency during the twentieth century. This was, of course, the century when the imperial presidency gained an enormous degree of power, becoming at times – thanks to wars for the most part – the predominant element in the US constitution. Sean McCann usefully reminds us of the extent to which the presidency has fascinated poets and novelists since at least Walt Whitman, and how they have reflected on the cultural and political significance of the executive branch. His chronologically driven exposition of the works of, amongst others, Gertrude Stein, Richard Wright, Norman Mailer and finally Philip Roth illuminates how far their hopes and fears centred upon the office of the President and some of those elected to it. McCann is also assiduous in putting these different visions of the presidency in their historical context, most particularly establishing how far they echoed opinions expressed in conventional works of political analysis.

It is unfortunate that the author leaves a number of issues underdeveloped. It is not clear, for example, why some authors are highlighted and not others – the virtual omission of Gore Vidal is one such unexplained surprise. Moreover, most of the fictions selected are of the elevated sort – *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Death of a President* and *Winter Kills* and others written by the middlebrow author Richard Condon are nowhere to be seen. Again, some explanation would have been helpful, especially as the perspectives generated by such authors will have been of a very particular sort. Most significantly, McCann suggests that the writers selected for his work “help to illuminate some of the assumptions of twentieth-century American culture” (xi). It seems that the author considers that the works chosen reflected rather than constructed political reality. That would put him somewhat at odds with constructivists like Murray Edelman and it would have been interesting had McCann engaged with the arguments contained in *From Art to Politics*.

This, then, is an interesting book. Its lack of a robust analytical framework, however, means that while it usefully describes how certain authors looked upon the presidency it does not fully explain how and why they came to look upon it in the ways that they did – and what possible consequences their perspectives had.

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