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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 University Press, 2009, \$24.95). Pp. 157. ISBN 978 0 7735 3633 3.

Motivated by a desire to challenge the cynicism of George W. Bush's administration and condemn its assault on "the republic's political ideals," Swirski and his fellow contributors set out to search the literary past for lessons about the future and find a way to use history to shape critical prophecy. The result is a series of accusatory essays that are highly charged and highly readable, even though the collection's overall design is uneven.

Gordon Slethaug's "Spike Lee, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X: The Politics of Domination and Difference" is a great piece on *Do The Right Thing* and *Malcolm X*. The only problem is that it sits awkwardly beside essays much more forcefully targeted at the failures of Bush junior's presidency. In contrast, Peter Swirski's own contribution, a reading of Heller's *Picture This* as a visionary commentary on the second Gulf War, suffers not because it underplays the relationships between the primary material and the contemporary scene, but because it overplays them. In pitching Heller as a "latter-day Nostradamus," Swirski finds himself casting around for prophetic clues in a book that seems a little too conveniently suited to the task. Heller did not need second sight to know that a book written, in his terms, about "money and war" was just as likely to have as much to say about the future as it did about the past.

More convincing is David Rampton's account of Philip Roth's recent fiction. Writing about *I Married a Communist*, *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, "Stupidity's Progress: Philip Roth and Twentieth-Century American History" considers Roth's visions of misinformation, prejudice and politics and constructs a convincing commentary on the perverted logic of America's present. Tracing his thesis in a discussion that includes analysis of the erotic dimensions of Roth's fiction, the relationship between the present and the past and Zuckerman's play on authorial personality, Rampton's essay succeeds in raising sophisticated questions about America's national consciousness. Equally convincing is Michael Zeitlin's "The American Wars: History as Prophecy in Vietnam, the Gulf and Iraq." Perhaps because public debate about the invasion of Iraq included such frequent and self-conscious reference to Vietnam and the first Gulf War and perhaps also because the historical parallels remain so clearly apparent, the "powerful premonitions" Zeitlin sees in *The Eyes of Orion*, *Jarhead* and *Apocalypse Now* have real substance to them.

Nicholas Ruddick's analysis of Michael Moore seems even better suited to the collection's wider ambitions. In "Living in Fictitious Times: Michael Moore's Awful Truth about America," he traces the arc of Moore's career and argues that all of Moore's films share a "grotesque vision of the moral squalor of American politics," a vision made flesh by Bush's presidency. For Ruddick, as for the rest of the contributors, it is outrage and the desire to speak out against this squalor that fuels his writing. In these aims, his essay, like the others, succeeds. Sadly, though, the

collection as a whole does not have the coherence needed to consolidate these penetrating thrusts into a more coordinated assault.

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