

**A Review of Peter Swirski's *American Utopia: Literature, Society, and the Human Use of Human Beings*. New York: Routledge, 2020.**

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Peter Swirski, distinguished professor in American studies and author of 20 books, published *American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought, and Political History* in 2011. At the end of the decade, he made another try at Utopian studies and the result is *American Utopia: Literature, Society, and the Human Use of Human Beings* (2020). You may regard them as sisters, but there are evident differences as between most sisters: the titles or subtitles already indicate their respective focuses. Among other basic differences, the present book chooses new writers and fictions for task; it takes a distinct evolution point of view in his discussion; and Swirski enriches it by including a number of latest researches in the field of sociology.

Of the five apparently parallel parts, Part I is indeed an introduction extended to the same length and importance as any other part. Here, Swirski offers peculiar ideas about Utopia, such as three Utopias (Utopia, Eutopia and Youtopia), and two pathways to Utopia (social engineering and bioengineering); he surveys Western Utopian writings and American Utopian experiments; and he evaluates literature and Utopian fictions for their cognitive function. Meantime Swirski asks important questions: How do traditional Utopian writings fall short? Why do Utopian societies bankrupt one after another? He believes that the answers lie in the neglect of human nature and the lack of bioengineering. So he will give human nature a due voice and make bioengineering dominate his Utopian discussions.

Other important questions he asks in Part I are: Why do Utopian writings still haunt people? And, back home, for what good reason does he call attention to the Utopian fictions he studies in the following parts. In way of answering, he argues that Utopian writings and fictions are scientifically cognitive: that is, they inform us closely of human beings and society as science does. So he is keen on showing the cognitive side of the Utopian fictions in question. In Part II he highlights Thomas M. Disch's *334* (1976) which presents so-called Dischtopia, a welfare state where people enjoy everything for free, yet subject to computer manipulation. In terms of Dischtopia, Swirski reviews American society for its welfare status, universal basic income, happiness and direct democracy; only to his dismay, America lags behind European countries in every respect.

In Part III, he turns to Bernard Malamud and his *God's Grace* (1982), a story about a post-human society of apes. Swirski thinks that this is a perfect glimpse of evolved human nature. He thus dwells on evolution such as co-evolution of genes and culture, multilevel selection, and the pro-social nature of man. Part IV deals with *Timequake* (1998) and other Utopian fictions by Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut's Utopia features time travels, that is, seeking Utopia in the future. In this connection, Swirski draws on Game Theory, Prisoner Dilemma, and Tit-for-Tat to show how the cooperative or pro-social men is evolution selected. Finally in Part V, Swirski discusses Margaret Atwood's Biotopia in *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Biotopia is where high biotechnology is put to the last use in keeping human violence in check. More to the point, Biotopia throws light on such issues as biotech, deaggression, and auto-evolution.

Perhaps Utopian studies is as old as Utopia itself; and it is not unusual that one aligns Utopian with American studies. But a study of American Utopian fictions the way Swirski conducts it must recommend itself. First, he takes a distinctive evolution perspective. Swirski's complex about evolution is dated back to his *American Utopia and Social Engineering* (2011) or even "When Biological Evolution and Social Revolution Clash" (2009), in which he puts forward evolution and has since drawn on it from time to time in his social-literary studies. But not until in the present *American Utopia* does he make it prevail. Along with evolution he highlights bioengineering rather than social engineering as the main pathway to Utopia, fictional or factual.

Second, he explores the cognitive side of Utopian fictions. Swirski has long argued for the cognitive side of literature: that is, literature is thought experiment and enables us to know in the same way as science does. Of course, he does not downplay other sides of literature, whether it entertains, it moralizes, or expresses. Refer to his *Of literature and Knowledge* (2007) and *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (2005) for some details. With respect to the cognitive side Swirski has hitherto studied American political fictions (see his *American Political Fictions* (2015)), crime or detective fictions (see his *American Crime Fiction* (2016)) and other popular writings. Now in his present book, he considers American Utopian fictions and explores their cognitive side as well: he takes care to find what the Utopian fictions would tell of the society in which we live, its past, present and future.

And third, he makes dialectic discussions of Utopian dichotomies, such as aggression vs. deaggression, pro-social vs. Pro-self, altruism vs. egoism, me-first vs. we-first, competitive vs. cooperative, or capitalism vs. socialism. Apparently, he opposes bigotries and welcomes compromise or eclecticism of both ends. It is still not the first time that he has held such discussions. As he says, he has remained interested in such matter as deaggression for the last quarter of a century. No doubt his understanding of such issues improves over time and every time he is able to add bricks to his constructions. What we see them here are in their latest forms.

Alas, one is apt to find fault with him too. For one thing, his language is too difficult for subjects already esoteric. His sentences are short enough; the difficulty lies in the fact that he uses more uncommon words or expressions and concocted a good many of his owns. He is considered humorous, but his good sense of humor has to overcome the language to get across in the first place. For another, his use of a subtitle is too abstract or poetic that there is always trouble trying to guess what he will be talking about in a section it heads. You have to read his book through and thoroughly to get him. These notwithstanding, we have a smart book

worth attention.

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