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Remembering Peter Euben

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'Hello, this is Peter Euben from Duke University.' I can still recall the Bronx accent, the calm delivery, the unhesitating friendliness. I was sitting in my cubicle at Cadwalader, Wickersham, and Taft on Maiden Lane a few blocks from Wall Street. Peter sat, I imagine, in the Perkins Library Building office on Duke's campus, where he often held long office hours amid piles of books and papers towering towards the third floor eaves. A narrow leaded window overlooked the Chapel green and its aeruginous statue of James B. Duke.

J. Peter Euben was then Research Professor of Political Science and Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow in Ethics at Duke University. His scholarship spanned ancient, modern, and contemporary political theory as well as literature and politics, the politics of morality, and political education. His crucial early work on *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (1986), an edited volume that sparked interest in the relevance of ancient Greek drama for contemporary democratic thought and practice, figured a career of putting classical political theory in conversation with pressing political questions of the present. This appeared especially in subsequent works such as *The Tragedy of Political Theory* (1990), *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture and Political Theory* (1997), and *Platonic Noise* (2003) as well as numerous other essays, articles, and edited volumes. In the late 1970s he was also one of the founding editors of *Polis*, the first international journal dedicated to ancient political thought.

In that first conversation, which took place before I ever met Peter, I experienced his interest in others as well as his strategic modesty. Despite my having so clearly advertised myself as a Straussian with Continental interests – those were the days! – Peter inquired about my thesis, listened to my interpretation of Plato's theory of education, asked the appropriate questions. When the dialogue lulled, Peter offered his intervention: 'I don't normally do this,' he said, 'but I think you'd be interested in my most recent book, *Platonic Noise*. It's something we might talk about.' I thanked him and bade farewell until we'd

see each other again when I visited Durham in a few weeks. And like a diligent student I did check out the book. I'll never forget it.

I had no library privileges, but I managed to persuade the guard at Columbia's Butler Library that I was a prospective applicant. He let me pass after signing the register and I followed signs to the open stacks that filled the columnar citadel at the library's heart. Peter's book, a quick catalog search revealed, rested among the PAs of ancient literature and interpretation. It had chapters on Arendt and Sophocles, the Stoics and the Honeymooners, and Plato's *Phaedo*. These came interspersed with ruminations on Jorge Luis Borges and Philip Roth, interlineated with reflections on cosmopolitanism and the politics of mourning. The digital Table of Contents hastened my exploration of the thing itself among the miles of books.

I found the dustjacketless hardcover where it belonged and repaired to a scuffed wooden desk near the book's location. It wasn't thick and each chapter had an unexpected epigraph – not some gnomic phrase from Aristotle in the original Greek but recent writers and even phrases from contemporary popular culture. I laughed aloud when I read the epigraph to Chapter 7, which quoted Jack Nicholson in the film *Prizzi's Honor*: 'If he's so fucking smart how come he's so fucking dead?' Now I can hear Peter repeat the line to himself and chuckle with pleasure.

Reading Peter's chapter on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Plato's *Phaedo*, I knew in my gut that I had to study with him. A discussant of my work years later commented that she knew I was 'a Peter student' because of the energy evident in my writing. Peter created this energy in the chapter and everywhere in his work through the tensional relationships he crafted: Aristophanes and the Simpsons, Foucault and Greek theater, Plato and DeLillo. The juxtaposition was his key move, and he used this to dramatic and galvanizing effect like a poet uses line breaks. In the titular chapter to *Platonic Noise*, this juxtaposition also took the form of the theoretical and the practical. After an introductory few paragraphs relating the chapter to the foregoing ones, Peter suddenly took a different tack. He wrote:

To study the interrelationship of politics, political theory, and mortality is daunting in the extreme. This is due not only to the stature of those who have engaged, if not anguished over, the subject, or to the fact that one can trace the beginnings of 'Western' literature and philosophy to Achilles and Socrates. It is due to the simple fact that I am a man in the last years of his life. Whatever the academic conventions that govern my story, the stakes in it are not only academic. Perhaps they never are.