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**J. Peter Euben: Platonic Noise**

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# I

## *Introduction*

PHILIP ROTH'S *The Human Stain*<sup>1</sup> is a novel about a light-skinned “black” man named Coleman Silk who opts to pass as a “white” Jew. Coleman eventually becomes a professor of classics and reforming dean at a small New England liberal arts college. But he is undone by a charge of racism when he wonders out loud whether the two missing students in his class are “spooks” and they turn out to be African American women. Since his chosen path to success has meant renouncing his family, symbolically if not literally killing his mother, and rejecting his heritage, one might think he got what he deserved, even if the charge of racism was absurd. In that case, the novel would be a morality play in which a callous, self-serving, and selfish man received an appropriate punishment. One would be wrong.

To dismiss Coleman as merely self-interested is a comforting simplification for the same reason that regarding Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor as a self-aggrandizing, hypocritical power seeker rather than someone driven by love of humanity and created by our desperate need for authority and meaning is one. In both cases it lets us off the moral hook. It is true that Coleman reaps the benefits of the privileges whiteness brings. It is also true that he is traumatized by the racism he experiences before deciding to reject his past for a self-defined future. And it is true that passing seems to provide an adrenaline rush he cannot do without. Indeed, because Coleman tells no one (including his Jewish wife) his secret, his life is a constant performance on a stage as large as his existence. He seems to thrive on taking risks and challenging chance (such as having children), then reveling in his seeming triumph (all of them miraculously turn out white). But these risks are taken in the name of the American dream of freedom. It is this more than the privilege of whiteness, the experience of racism, or the pleasure of performance that drives him. Why should he be unable to live the American dream simply because he happens to be “black”? Why should he be precluded from “accepting the democratic invitation to throw our origins overboard if to do so contrib-

utes to the pursuit of happiness” (334)? He is the child of chance, not a victim of fate. He leaves the baggage of the past behind him where it belongs.

There is another figure in literature who believed that he was the child of chance, that he had escaped his fate and past and was self-made, Sophocles’ Oedipus. So it is not surprising that the epigraph for the novel comes from *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

OEDIPUS: What is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?

CREON: By banishing a man or expiation of blood by blood.

It is the genius of Roth’s novel that it first juxtaposes the myth of American self-fashioning with Greek tragedy and then juxtaposes them with the Monica Lewinsky affair and the impeachment of President Clinton. Thus Coleman becomes a character in a Greek tragedy he teaches. The narrator imagines himself and Coleman watching the latter’s life as if it were a play on the southern hillside of the Athenian Acropolis in the theater sacred to Dionysus “where before the eyes of the thousand spectators, the dramatic unities were once rigorously observed and the great cathartic cycle was enacted annually” (314).

*The Human Stain* is a protest and polemic against purity: the epistemology of it, the culture of it, and the political consequences of it. We assume that our categories capture the world in a way that enables us to be masters of our fate. But given Oedipus, the title of Roth’s first chapter, “Everyone Knows,” drips with irony and foreboding. As it turns out, none of us know very much about themselves, others, or the human condition itself. We do not know why what happens happens the way it does, what it is that underlies the anarchic train of events, or the uncertainties, mishaps, disunity, and shocking irregularities that define human affairs. Nobody *knows*, and any claim to such knowledge constitutes a banalizing of experience. “Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don’t know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing” (208–9).

Later, after Coleman has been accused of racism and resigns in fury at the charge, after his wife has died as a result, after he has taken up with a younger, deeply scarred woman, after they have been run off the road by her Vietnam vet husband, the narrator returns to the theme. “For all that the world is full of people who go around believing they’ve got you or your neighbor figured out, there really is no bottom to what is not known. The truth about us is endless. As are the lies” (315). Out of ignorance we turn people into abstractions, projecting our moralism onto them in a way that makes us feel safe and knowing. The narrator calls this fantasy of purity terrorism, an ecstasy of sanctimonious self-righteousness and virtue-mongering at once infantilizing and inhuman. To hell with pro-

priety and appropriateness, with making people comfortable with the demands by the high-minded for core values, civic responsibility, WASP dignity, women's rights, black pride, and Jewish ethical self-importance, and with the desire to bring things to closure. "The human desire for a beginning, a middle, and an end . . . is realized nowhere so thoroughly as in the plays Coleman taught. . . . But outside classical tragedy of the fifth century B.C.E. the expectation of complete, let alone of a just and perfect, consummation is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold" (314–15).<sup>2</sup> The novel's final image in its concluding chapter, "The Purifying Ritual," drives the point home. It is a scene out of Currier and Ives. "Only rarely," the novel concludes, "at the end of our century, does life offer up a vision as pure and as peaceful as this one: a solitary man on a bucket, fishing through eighteen inches of ice in a lake that's continually turning over its water atop an arcadian mountain in America" (361). Except that this solitary man, Les Farley, is a killer. He was taught to be a killer in Vietnam and brought his lesson home by killing Coleman Silk and his lover, Les's ex-wife, whom he had beaten regularly.

One thing all the characters in the book think they know is that Fate is a primitive notion that makes no sense in a land of self-made men and women. We can reinvent ourselves, choose a lifestyle, be all we can be, even if that means discarding our past as excess baggage. Coleman Silk believes this. Though he must ritually murder his mother, the rewards for him are worth it. He refuses to be a victim of racial tyranny whereby a man's color is his fate. Why allow one's prospects to be unjustly limited by so arbitrary a designation as race, allow one's future, his future, to be in someone else's hands? "All he's ever wanted from earliest childhood was to be free; not black, *not even white* . . ." (my emphasis).<sup>3</sup> He thinks of himself as "the greatest of the great pioneers for this 'I' against the despotism of the 'we' " (120, 108).

Like Oedipus, Coleman thought he had it made, that he had beaten the system, though he was conscious of his double life in a way Oedipus was not. As we saw, he challenged chance and won. But he had beaten the odds only to be "blindsided by the uncontrollability of something else entirely" (335), the charge of racism. He had decided to forge a distinct historical destiny only to be ensnared by a history he had not counted on. And it could not be otherwise insofar as one's fate is constituted by one's past deeds and words, which forge an identity and character over time and through action. It is the mother whom he has callously discarded in his reinvention who makes the point. "There is no escape," she tells her son who is trying to make one. "Your attempts to escape will only lead you back to where you began" (140). Like Oedipus's, Coleman's fate is accidentally formed and inescapable. His mother again: "You're white as snow and think like a slave" (139).<sup>4</sup>

Every one of us is stained: cruel, error-prone, perverse, enjoying the crudest pleasures. The stain is our sexuality and excrement, the trail we leave behind and the imprint we make, our unique smile and look, the thumbprint that distinguishes us from others. It is also our dirty hands, our deeds and words that mark our presence in time and space.<sup>5</sup> All animals, including men and women, are driven by preconscious instincts and elemental passions. But humans are the only ones who can make themselves other than who they are. The human world is always out of joint because we are becoming someone other than we were a moment ago, though the trajectories of such changes are both distinctive and allusive. Finally, and most fundamentally, the human stain is our “horrible, elemental imperfections” (242).

Instead of lamenting our sins and imperfections, Roth celebrates them in both the structure and the “argument” of the novel. “Closure! They [a professor is talking about students] fix on the conventionalized narrative with its beginning, middle and end—every experience, no matter how ambiguous . . . or mysterious, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing anchorman cliché” (147).<sup>6</sup> Substantively, Roth refuses to chastise, invite confessions, or endorse self-abnegation, all of which accrue significance only in a murderous Manichaean discourse of purity. Roth’s gods are Greek. They are the gods of life, impure and lustful, corrupt rather than innocent, created in the image of man. And men are flawed. That is their condition and a precondition of their nobility. Coleman, like Clinton, moved through the world with mixed motives, imprecise aims, half-blind to the forces that shaped him.

Any revulsion, contempt, or attempt to cleanse the stain is “a joke,” like trying to wash the grain out of a piece of redwood. Or it is an act of self-loathing. In the end, “human stain” is a redundancy, and Bill Clinton is accused of being human. His vilification came less from his deeds than from our need for a scapegoat.

It was strange to think, while seated there with all his [Coleman’s] colleagues, that people so well educated and professionally civil should have fallen so willingly for the venerable dream of a situation in which one man can embody evil. Yet there is this need, and it is undying and it is profound. (306–7)

There is a sincerity that is worse than falseness and an innocence that is “worse than corruption” (147). The longing for it—for an Edenic utopia before or without sin, the erotic desire for childlike purity and asexual sexuality, for noble actors with clean hands—embodies a hatred for the world and for the activity of politics, which, Aristotle suggests, defines our distinctively human status.

Here is Richard Posner’s condemnation of Clinton. It is an example of what infuriates Roth.

[Clinton] committed repeated and varied felonious obstructions of justice over a period of almost a year, which he garnished with gaudy public and private lies, vicious slanders, tactical blunders, gross errors of judgment, hypocritical displays of contrition, affronts to conventional morality and parental authority, and desecration of a revered national symbol. Literally the office of the President. And all this occurred against a background of persistent and troubling questions concerning the ethical tone of the Clinton Administration and Clinton's personal and political ethics.<sup>7</sup>

*The Human Stain* is, appropriately enough, a "flawed" novel. There are stilted scenes, stock characters that embody Roth's own vision of political correctness, and a clichéd reading of the 1960s. But the novel does capture a sense of Greek tragedy. "In the tragic perspective," Jean-Pierre Vernant writes,

acting, being an agent, has a double character. On the one hand, it consists in taking counsel with oneself, weighing the for and against and doing the best we can to foresee the order of means and ends. On the other hand, it is to make a bet on the unknown and the incomprehensible and to take a risk on a terrain that remains impenetrable to you. It involves entering the play of supernatural forces . . . where one does not know whether they are preparing for success or disaster.<sup>8</sup>

Like the tragedians, Roth seems to deny that the relations of human beings to society and to each other, if properly understood and properly enacted, can realize a harmonious identity without profound loss.

More important, Roth brings an ancient text into conversation about contemporary politics and culture in a way I try to do in the following chapters. But conversation is too "nice" a word, for Roth engages the Greeks with the passion and struggle Nietzsche might have admired.

## II

In "Cities of Reason,"<sup>9</sup> Oswyn Murray tells the story of how national traditions influenced the interpretation of animal behavior. Animals studied by Americans rush about frantically with incredible energy and at last achieve their desired goal by chance. Animals observed by the Germans sit still and think and finally arrive at a solution out of their inner consciousness. Murray's conclusion is not the obvious one that the character of the observer affects the interpretation of results, but that the character of the experiment itself was "predetermined" by the mental attitudes of the experimenter. His point is that a similar national response to the phenomenon defines the study of the polis. "To the Germans the polis can

only be described in a handbook of constitutional law; the French polis is a form of holy Communion; the American polis combines the practices of a Mafia convention with the principles of justice and freedom.<sup>10</sup>

In some respects, the Greek historian or political theorist has a thornier problem than the behavioral psychologist, since she or he has to “establish the limits of the factual.” For example, are political myths evidence of rationality or irrationality? How are such myths related to rhetoric, on the one hand, and to logical argument on the other? Or is the distinction between the two overstated? When and with what consequences is an invidious contrast established between members of cultures who are deemed prisoners of their myths, and more rational societies that possess their culture rather than being possessed by it? How have such distinctions constructed views of agency and contrasts between those capable of autonomous thought and action, and those who, lacking reflective consciousness,<sup>11</sup> are fated to live as they do? The answers to such questions concerning the field of evidence determine to a large extent the result of any inquiry into the polis’s rationality.

No matter what substantive answers one gives to such questions, the form those answers take is likely to beg the question. That is because our very forms of inquiry presume rationality. At least that is so insofar as “we as observers are in the business of making models, of understanding through systemization.” In the interests of system and systemization we accept or reject evidence because it conforms to other evidence. But above all, “[W]e do not believe in the untidiness of reality.”<sup>12</sup> Even worse, we use our models to *create* evidence; we extrapolate from what we take to be a fact by rational arguments to further “facts.” Thus there is a complex relationship between model and argument from analogy; the concept of a warrior or democratic society allows transference of individual phenomena from one historical society to another across time and space.

Murray draws two conclusions from this situation. The first is that there are a number of senses in which the more complete, the more coherent a picture of any aspect of the polis is, the more false it is likely to be, or at least the more certain it is that the construct is that of a single observer. Here, the coherence of any society is a coherence that belongs to the observer rather than the society. The second is that if conflicting approaches result in conflicting interpretations, then we must “resign” ourselves to interpretive pluralism. But if, by some chance, conflicting approaches result in congruent conclusions, we are “on the way to establishing that the phenomena exist independently of the observers.”<sup>13</sup>

Murray’s warnings—present in the jokes about British apes with their stiff upper lips, ruthlessly enterprising American apes, hierarchical and communitarian Japanese apes, and promiscuous French apes<sup>14</sup>—become a screed in the case of Jorge Luis Borges, who once complained of “those

parasitic books which situate Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Canabiere or Don Quixote on Wall Street.” Like all men of taste, the narrator of “Pierre Menard” goes on, “Menard abhorred these useless carnivals, fit only—as he would say—to produce plebian pleasures of anachronism or (what is worse) to enthrall us with the elementary idea that all epochs are the same *or* are different” (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup>

If Roth provides a “model” for the chapters that follow, Murray provides a warning about and Borges a chastisement of them. For the former, my claim for the generative possibilities of juxtaposing ancient and modern is likely to produce Athenian Americans, and any light I might possibly throw on texts, issues, and theories will leave the surrounding contexts in darkness. In part, this seems to me an inescapable fact of understanding. In this I agree with Rorty and Gadamer: there are virtually no limits to our ability to redescribe any society or text and thereby recontextualize it. I am not sure I would call metaphysicians “control freaks,” as Rorty does, but I do think it is a mistake to believe that we can “now in the present construct a filing system which will have an appropriate pigeon hole for anything that might possibly turn up in the future.”<sup>16</sup> Given this “fact,” a number of strategies are possible, all of which are employed in the following chapters. The first is simply to do the serious intellectual work as well as one can. Another is to accept the warning and incorporate it in the structure of argument by creating a dynamic that makes textual strategies and purposes as visible as possible. A third is to do what I do in chapter 4—create an exaggerated, even playful, comparison that introduces an element of irony and self-parody into that dynamic. Finally, and paradoxically, one must make the personal, political, and epistemological stakes in any particular juxtaposition explicit.

As for Borges, the easiest thing to say is that he wants to eliminate political theory, or, rather, to reinstate the chasm between it and literature. But his real object is a case against the instrumentalization of learning, the desire to make art and knowledge useful, relevant, easily accessible, presentistic, and practical. And he has a case. Let me make it for him.

Presentism is a proclivity to analyze contemporary culture and politics using only contemporary texts, theories, and methods. The problem is that these texts, theories, and methods often mirror the society they are studying. While we can learn much from looking into a mirror, if we look in it too much and for too long, our activity becomes a kind of narcissism. Thus we need distant mirrors that are premodern texts, unpopular theories, peculiar locutions, and political or cultural non sequiturs to better map the outlines of the contemporary.

Presentism is also a belief or assumption that what is new is best, most self-reflexive, least subject to false consciousness. Too many believe that we here and now are the culmination of history; that what came before



was aiming to be what we are, and that our sophistication dwarfs that of our more gullible, less modern or postmodern predecessors. Depressingly, this view is often held by those who regard themselves as repudiating narratives of progress.

The demand that courses, issues, or books be relevant to me or us presumes that education is and should be defined by what I am or we are now, rather than by what we might become. It ignores how much of education is serendipitous, and how often we learn most from texts and ideas that were initially alien and alienating. When students insist that *The Republic* is boring—something I also thought the first time I read it—I ask them whose problem that is. I ask this not to belittle their intelligence but to insist on their responsibilities as readers.

Let me be clear that I am not opposed to relevance. What I find dangerous (even in my own work) is having relevance determine the agenda and purpose of thinking in ways that allow the present to play tyrant to the future. Though it sounds paradoxical, I am for relevance of result and in the long run, not of intention or in the beginning. Surely Borges believes this too, since his position presupposes it.

The demand that our work be practical usually means that it should be useful. The problem is that those who judge what is useful are those who hold cultural, political, economic, and academic power. The call for practicality can be theoretically radical, but it is more often a counsel of docility and adaptation to professional norms.

More than this, if it is true that the conditions of our lives are never transparent to us, then the demand for practicality, like the demand for relevance, is a recommendation of ignorance. Oedipus (in *Oedipus Tyrannos*) is a very practical man. As such, he translated everything he encountered into a problem that he could solve. But he was, as Jonathan Lear suggests, so impatient for an answer that he never fully grasped the problem.<sup>17</sup> And it was, as we know, one hell of a problem.

My responses to Murray and Borges, such as they are, are practical and theoretical. The practical one is this: Do the juxtapositions “work” in the sense of opening up paths that are worth following? Or do they lead to dead ends? My theoretical defense relies on Nietzsche’s essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” though, given my disagreements with Nietzsche and his enormous popularity, it is a somewhat peculiar choice.

Yet Nietzsche’s essay (which is the subject of chapter 2) helps us negotiate between idealizing “the Greeks,” suffocating them with academic paraphernalia, and making them *too* useful. To mimic, worship, or otherwise idealize the Greeks is to become their acolytes rather than their students. Ultimately, such idealization is a form of disengagement, of making them decorative rather than allowing them to invigorate our political, cultural,

or intellectual lives. It is true that Nietzsche talks about the need for us to unlearn the present and give ourselves a second nature rooted in some other time. But the “us” refers to his contemporaries who live in the present, not somewhere else. (I will make the same argument about Hannah Arendt’s Hellenism in chapter 3.) And to the extent that we regard the past as so much purer and grander than our present, we are tempted to turn away in disgust from our own corrupt time, leaving all as it is.

Nietzsche insists that the “usefulness” of classical texts lies in sustaining their capacity to surprise and provoke. More generally, he insists that knowledge must exist for life, which means resisting both preemptory critiques and inundating ourselves with mountains of commentary that leave them and us supine. It also means that the search for knowledge must be driven by passion and need, by a hunger to understand, a sense of absence, and a profound engagement with the fact of mortality.

This requires, if it does not entail, sustaining a tension between proximity and distance in regard to one’s own time and an earlier Greek time. Yet in many respects the Greeks are a “primitive culture” that has more in common with the “backward” cultures of our own day than with advanced industrial societies, as a study of Greek religious rituals and social practices attests. It is Nietzsche’s insight that it is just this “primitivism” that makes the Greeks untimely, that enables them to work on our time and provide hope for a future time. For such “primitivism,” in fact, connects with powerful drives for life, with instincts that are not so much lost as reinvested or redeployed in ways that are self-annihilating.

Each of the following chapters begins with a Greek text, author, or epoch, or has one as its primary referent. Each takes that referent—be it a Sophoclean play or passage from one, a Platonic dialogue (such as *The Republic* or *Phaedo*), Aristotle, or the Stoics—and juxtaposes it with a contemporary text or thinker to explore a substantive issue. But only the following chapter on Nietzsche’s essay on history elaborates the “methodological” challenges to this practice raised by Murray and Borges. I chose Nietzsche because my political and theoretical commitments are so different from his, and because I admire his heroic efforts to make the Greeks untimely in a timely manner. In this way, he is both an inspiration and a rebuke to what I am doing. He appears as a critical voice reminding me (or the reader when I default) of how hard it is to use the Greeks without abusing them. I suppose one could think of him as a skeptical interlocutor, something like an unsilenced Thrasymachus who helps set the terms of the subsequent dialogue despite Socrates’ efforts to shame him.

Chapter 3 reads Greek tragedy (or rather, a tragedy) through the eyes of Hannah Arendt and explores Arendt’s Hellenism through the lens of tragedy. The tragedy I chose is *Oedipus at Colonus* because the “Wisdom of Silenus” she quotes from the play in the final paragraph of *On Revolu-*

*tion* prefaces her most dramatic claim for the redemptive power of politics, itself perhaps her most provocative challenge to contemporary ways of thinking about political life. I also want to save Arendt from (her) Hellenism and save the Greeks from Arendt. Since she is and has been the most cited theorist in my work (though I have only recently begun directly to confront her work), this salvage operation is a kind of self-reckoning.

Chapter 4, which has a somewhat wider circle of interest and concern, provides something like comic relief amid the themes of loss and mortality that find expression in this book. It asks a somewhat absurd question about whether television comedies can play a role in contemporary America analogous to the role Aristophanic comedy played in democratic Athens. The answer is clearly “no,” but the exploration of the question raises a series of substantive questions about popular and elite culture, humor and politics, unmediated communication and mass media, and ancient and modern democracy.

Chapter 5 is a story about what might be called the social ontology of political theory. Less pompously put, it is an exploration of why people theorize, and an argument that they are driven to by an acute sense of loss which has personal, political, and epistemological dimensions. It is loss that animates political theory as an enterprise and forms its problematic, but also threatens political and theoretical agency by tempting thinkers into nostalgia or certainty. This sense of loss existing at the heart of triumph is articulated by the “choral ode to man” in *Antigone*. Though the ode receives direct attention only in chapters 5 and 7, the sensibility it expresses informs the entire book.

Like chapter 4, chapter 6 begins with a question: is there an illuminating analogy to be drawn between the experience of political dislocation and theoretical struggle to understand it that accompanied the eclipse of the polis and our experience of globalization, as process and ideology, and our attempts to understand *it*? I begin with a brief sketch of the polis, drawing on Aristotle, then shift to an equally brief sketch of the Hellenistic period and the Stoics; then to the revival of interest in them (especially in the work of Martha Nussbaum), which provides a transition from the ancient world to a discussion of globalized and cosmopolitan citizenship in the contemporary one.

The final chapter offers some reflections on the interrelationship of mortality, politics, and political theory. In many respects, it brings together the preoccupations of previous chapters with historical remembrance and forgetting, the redemptive possibilities of politics, and the sense of loss as it appears in chapters 5 and 6. With its absurdly implausible juxtaposition of Plato’s *Phaedo* and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, it imitates and substantively inverts the content of chapter 4.

Except for chapter 6, every essay makes a case for the “usefulness” of literature in the study of political theory. This is neither a new nor an original claim, and I offer no systematic defense of it. What I do offer is a practice, and the success of my case rests on the various enactments of that practice.

Every chapter without exception presumes or argues for the significance of making Athenian political thought and democracy a presence in contemporary political and theoretical debates. I continue to believe in the moral value of participatory democracy; I continue to believe that none of its ancient or contemporary critics, no matter how intellectually powerful or politically astute they are, have offered us a form of government and culture more choiceworthy than the rule of the people, or a set of moral values more attractive than the freedom, political equality, and dignity of the citizenry as a whole and of each citizen taken separately.<sup>18</sup> I would insist that democracy requires the participation by the people in maintaining a political culture that constitutes them as agents and political equals, and that anything less constitutes what the ancients would have regarded as oligarchy. Thus I am not impressed by the argument that America is too democratic, though I agree that democratic rhetoric is hegemonic, often at the expense of democratic practices.

None of this is meant to ignore the transformation of scale that makes democratic citizenship (or perhaps citizenship itself) problematic. Indeed, virtually every one of the following essays explores that conundrum in one way or another. But, as I suggest in chapter 6, those transformations are playing themselves out in ways that provide spaces and occasions for a more demanding practice of democratic citizenship.

Finally, I assume here what I have argued at length elsewhere: that the origins of Western political thought<sup>19</sup> are constituted by a fruitful dialogue/contest/battle/struggle between Greek democracy (including drama) and philosophers who were critical of it even as they drew upon it, and that the literary memory of Athenian democracy is a crucial addition to our stock of cultural resources. The way these texts treat freedom, power and justice, individual and community, ethics and politics, deliberation and enactment, class conflict and public interest, eros and education, family and sexuality, provides an inspiration and object lesson for our reflections on politics and political theory.

### III

Perhaps I should say a word about the book’s title. At the most general level it poses a paradox that anticipates the juxtaposition of times and texts present in each of the following chapters. More specifically, the con-

cept of noise was first articulated during the Industrial Revolution by an avant-garde that seized the cacophony of street, factory, and mine for artistic inspiration and political protest. Where previous eras had associated the deliberate production of percussive noise, dissonant sounds, and nonsense syllables with children's activities, madmen, and religious fanatics, these now became and were portrayed as the material conditions of everyday urban life.<sup>20</sup> Plato of course is associated with harmony, the rhythm of reason, unity, form, and the life of the mind.

The book's title is a play on DeLillo's *White Noise*, the subject (along with the *Phaedo*) of chapter 7. The phrase "white noise" has several meanings, all of which amplify the earlier one of noise. "White noise" is the steady hum that blocks out irregular sounds thought to prevent sleep, comfort, and the concentration necessary for workers to achieve the highest level of productivity. Later it includes artificially produced electronic sounds intended to reduce the sense of isolation workers feel in sound-proof office buildings.

A second meaning derives from communication theory. Here, white noise is a random mix of frequencies that renders signals unintelligible.<sup>21</sup> It is too many people speaking at once without anyone's being able to hear, when speech becomes undifferentiated from other "sounds," or there is "information overload." The fear of such cacophonies lies behind the dream of undistorted communication present in Plato, Rousseau, Habermas, and Arendt.

In DeLillo's novel, "white noise" is all of this and more, and it is everywhere. It is there in the mangle of skidding carts, loudspeakers, coffee machines, and the cries of children that form a toneless system in supermarkets. It is there in what one critic calls "an entropic blanket of information from a media saturated society."<sup>22</sup> It is there in the hum of traffic and insects, the abandoned meanings that continue to haunt our speech, and the swarming life outside established significations that appears in non sequiturs resistant to projects of reason, enlightenment, modernization, and progress. White noise is the dark place young Wilder goes that elicits his crying jags, and the world of Silenus's wisdom and Weber's doubleness of action. White noise is the past demanding its due against the present and future, and the resentment of the aged as memory fades, agency withers, and we become shadows of our former selves. White noise is the world of Blacksmith (it is the town name, but there aren't any in it), of barns that had some purpose other than being tourist attractions, of deserted strip malls, obsolescent objects, and superfluous people. White noise is the murmur of dead souls babbling at the edge of our dreams, Rothian and Sophoclean ghosts of a past supposedly banished by our self-fashioning, the loss that cannot be acknowledged, spoken of, or even felt. White noise is the buzz that drowns out the cost of capitalism and the

instrumentalizing of intelligence. It is supermarket labels that erase the origins of white man's food and the lives of people in the twenty countries that produce it. As what renders the present permeable and contingent, white noise is a threat full of possibilities.

Plato (again, as conventionally read) sees the possibility in the elimination of the threat. He wants to contain such anarchy, providing definition, form, and boundaries while escaping from the agora to the still place where philosophical reflection is possible. Yet Plato is himself becoming something like white noise, a voice below and outside the theoretical terrain, marginalized by an intellectual avant-garde but also perhaps a non sequitur that further hones and blunts the cutting edge of theory.