Remembering Paige Baty, I

1. There are many reasons one should not presume to tell the story of a life but in the case of Paige Baty one reason is that she could have done it with more panache and intrigue than anyone else possibly could. It might not be an accurate story, but it would be fascinating. She often constructed scripts of her life that were larger than life: these were her standards and inducements, the way she envisioned futures, the true fictions that kept her enormous energy focused.

2. I met Paige her first term in graduate school. She came to my office to introduce herself since she would be teaching for me the following term. She held out her hand and said, "Professor Euben, I am S. Paige Baty, your new T.A." Her tone, at once mocking and respectful, direct and confident, but also teasing and wary, prefaced an intellectual and emotional complexity that would characterize her work and our friendship.

3. When we first met I asked her to tell me something about her background that was not on her graduate application. For a minute she seemed uncertain, and then followed a three hour conversation of extraordinary range, reach and speed. Her ideas, at once bold and brilliant, went spinning off in myriad directions. The individual points were astonishing, the juxtapositions of them even more so. Joycean in its syntax, structure, work play and seriousness, her performance was literally breathtaking.

4. She was a brilliant teaching assistant: enthusiastic, intense, provocative and knowledgeable. Her self-display and flamboyance were always in the service of texts and ideas. It was not just her deeply original reading of a wide variety of works that inspired students, but the way she communicated to them that intellectual pursuits provide the pleasures and depths worthy of passion and of a life. Her first term teaching for me she staged Machiavelli's Mandragola. She organized the students, added lines where she thought they might miss the
point, coached them (and me, whom she offered to cast as
Lucrezia or Siro), and brought the whole thing off with what I
was coming to recognize as her distinctive flair. I know the
literature on Mandragola well, but Paige said more arresting
things in her fifteen-minute analysis of the play than anything I
had read.

5.

Paige's work in graduate seminars was unsurpassed. She wove
complex, often colorful, tapestries of ideas, challenging others
and herself to see through points, to allow the texts to move
them outside the academic conventions that were supposedly
invented to illuminate them but in fact left them bland and
distant. What is not always obvious is how much Paige's work in
American cultural studies is grounded in deep if sometimes
idiosyncratic readings of the canonical texts. She was as good on
Gorgias or Prince as she was on conspiracy theory.

6.

Her love of conversation and her capacity to engage in it for
hours and hours is legendary. For the first four years of her
graduate education (which is when I saw her most), we would
meet for a drink at five and talk about her work, politics, gossip,
movies (which she loved), television (which she loved even
more), books and ideas. Hundreds of ideas. Hours later, I would
be comatose: she would be just beginning. I was repeatedly
impressed, not just by her distinctive intelligence but by her
fierce independence, impatience with clichés and utter
indifference to locally reigning ideologies.

7.

Paige could be a difficult and demanding friend. But not during
these years. Then, she was concerned, attentive and loyal, full of
warmth and charm, and of course very funny, sometimes
intentionally.

II.

8.

Paige's work was remarkable. She wrote three books: American
Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic (California, 1995) and
two forthcoming volumes, Email Trouble: Love, Junk Mail and
Other Forms of Addiction and Representative Women:
Unsettling Portraits of Still Lives. Email Trouble is currently in
copy-editing at the University of Texas Press and will be an
inaugural book (along with Luce Irigaray's The Absence of Air
in Heidegger) in a new series called "Constructs" devoted to
untraditional forms of scholarship. Representative Women is
currently under review at Routledge. These two forthcoming
books are very different from each other and from American
Monroe. Email Trouble reads like a novel that, from the
perspective of the feminist involved in virtual travel, borrows
upon Kerouac's *On the Road*: it also evokes the despairing and
apocalyptic visions of Nathanael West. Highly reflexive and
neurotic, Paige, the narrator, stuck in a small New England town
with a home address ("williams.edu") that offers no warmth,
embarks on an email relationship that ends badly and ultimately
resolves itself in a purging flood in New Orleans. The book is, in
all sorts of ways, a "trip." It is also a mediation on the desire for
community, love, and communion in an electronic culture, on
the "matrix" (both biological and electronic), on female troubles
of various sorts, from severe endometriosis to severe romantic
delusion. Its writing style is vertiginous, narcissistic, allusive,
full of word play. The book is maddening and therapeutic.
Readers will either love it or hate it.

9.

*Representative Women* is a much more controlled and academic
work involving a good deal of primary historical research and
yet it, too, is highly unusual in its focus, its method, and its
purpose. Its title is a direct response to Ralph Waldo Emerson's
*Representative Men*. In the initial chapter, "The Emersonian 'T'
or Constructions of the Monumental," Paige takes up Emerson's
belief that biographies of "representative" male figures could
yield a sense of the American character and political ethos, but
she confronts his significant males figures with three nineteenth
century American female counterparts--and questions what this
shift in gender means both to Emerson's sense of the American
body politic at the time he was writing and to the very categories
and characteristics that framed his own enterprise. The three
women are MArgaret Fuller, the intellectual and journalist, Ellen
Craft, and escaped slave, and Clover Adams, the wife of Henry,
who wrote endless letters and committed suicide.

10.

Each chapter is conceived as a kind of dialogue between the past
and the present, between the contemporary woman and her
nineteenth century counterparts. The book exists primarily as a
series of first-person accounts, explanations, and question, and
makes extensive use of letters, diaries, essays and the like. It
has, as Paige describes it, the quality of a sampler: its initial
authors sit in cross-stitched relation to each other and the whole
is embroidered by its current author and commentator. Certainly
you could learn more about each of these women from more
conventional works of historiography; yet one could not learn
from them about the possible contours of their emotional lives or
the substance of their desires. There is something thrilling about
Margaret Fuller's erotic fulfillment after a life intellectual
spinsterhood in the chapter "Margaret Fuller: Living Gender in
the Third Person Position." The chapter "Ellen Craft: Passing for
Human," is as exciting as any Hollywood movie of high
adventure; Ellen is a light-skinned slave who escapes the South
not only by passing as white, but also by passing as male and as rich: she poses as a young, ill Southern gentleman attended by her male house-slave (actually her dark-skinned journeyman husband). Finally, one reads the last chapter, Hooper Adams: History Is the Catalogue of the Forgotten," as an emotional companion to "The Yellow Wallpaper:" Clover, the writer of an impossible number of letters and a suicide who silences herself, is written out of her husband's representative life, out of history. Representative Women is a radical act of historiography. It dares to imagine what it is to be these women and to live these lives--which, after all, if representative, should be somehow "available" to those of us who live now, even if only in bits and pieces and scraps. Reading it is a moving experience. What she has written is thoroughly Paige: changeable, passionate, poetic, playful, deeply informed by meticulous research and huge philosophical questions.

11.

And now it is all we have left.

_J. Peter Euben_ teaches at UC, Santa Cruz. His most recent book is _Corrupting Youth_ (Princeton, 1997). He is the book review editor for the journal _Political Theory_.

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