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1949–2021: Tribute to Michael Tratner

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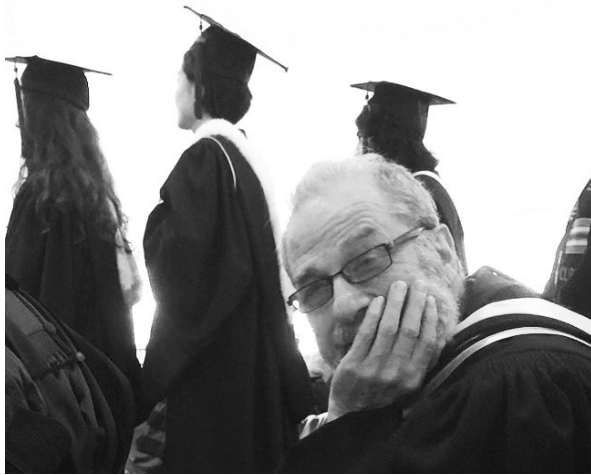


Photo courtesy of Paul Saint-Amour

I had the amazing fortune to be Michael Tratner's graduate student from 1991 to 1997. Mike altered the course of my life, first by plucking my application to the PhD program at Stanford's English Department out of the discard pile, and then by inspiring and encouraging me intellectually, responding generously to my work, serving on my dissertation committee, and seeing me launched. One of Mike's great subjects in those days was *debt*. I feel lucky to be so deeply in his.

Those of us in Mike's "Politics of Modernism" grad seminar were a nervous bunch. But he always found a way to set us at ease, usually by telling a story about his kids. I remember his gleefully reporting to us one afternoon that he now had first-hand proof that the Oedipus complex existed: over the weekend, his little son Jeffrey had asked Leda, Mike's wife, "Mommy, is Daddy easy to kill?" Our laughter was riotous and grateful. We liked being in on the joke, knowing what the Oedipus complex was and thinking that a question asked so plainly by a small child couldn't represent much of a complex. We were bowled over that Mike would share something so intimate and relieved to be reminded, in the child-free zone of a university campus, that there were such things as children, especially nakedly parricidal toddlers. Mostly, I think, we loved the way Mike told a story about his own vulnerability so triumphantly, with such unmixed delight and amazement in his son.

My own transgression, as one of Mike's intellectual children, was not wanting to *kill* him but wanting to *be* him (and yes, there is a difference). I was so excited by his ideas and ways of reading that I wanted nothing more than to be the author of the next Michael Tratner book. Where another kind of mentor might have been prickly and proprietary, he was only ever kind to me. He spoke of my work as allied with his rather than derivative of it, and he focused on the moments where something divergent seemed to be stirring in it. He was patient enough to let me pass through imitation and arrive somewhere new, if often nearby. I have to think that dozens of Mike's students over the years have undergone similar infatuations with his ideas and been met with the same forbearance and enthusiasm on his part.

What have readers of Mike's work found so magnetic? To begin with, his claims are inspiringly bold. In the mid-nineties, when his first book was published, the portrait of modernism as a rejection of mass culture seemed more or less settled. *Modernism and Mass Politics* (1995) tore up that portrait, arguing that Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and other modernists undertook to write both about and from what Eliot called "the mob part of the mind." *Deficits and Desires* (2002) ventured a running homology between financial and libidinal economies, reading modernism as a celebration—sometimes euphoric but more often anxious—of deficit spending in both economies. Mike anchored these big claims in fearless and always memorable analyses of particular passages. His way of reading literature was entirely his own: a giddy, headlong allegorizing that could come so insanely close to the edge of plausibility that it won you over. Totally infectious, like his laughter.

Michael left Stanford in 1997 after his tenure decision there went unaccountably against him. That result was, naturally, the source of some lasting bitterness for him. But he couldn't have landed more brilliantly than at Bryn Mawr College, where he was properly appreciated and rapidly promoted, bearing the title of Mary E. Garrett Alumnae Professor of English from 2004 on. His colleagues there speak and write admiringly of his skill as chair of English and, eventually, of the faculty at large. In these leadership positions, and in his activism within and beyond the College, his egalitarianism shone alongside his devotion to social justice. A legendary teacher, he was deeply proud of his students—just look at him quietly beaming among the mortar-boarded Mawrters.

During his decades at Bryn Mawr, Mike's writing circled back in wider arcs to the themes of his first two books. *Crowd Scenes* (2008) reflected his growing interest in film, carrying the key terms and questions of *Modernism and Mass Politics* into U.S., Soviet, and Nazi cinema. *Love and Money* (2021) unrolled the core homology of *Deficits and Desires* like a tarpaulin, stretch-

ing it over five centuries of economic and literary history. Here's Mike, in an email to me, on what would be his final book:

I am working on a Casaubon-like project claiming to demonstrate a relationship between economic theories and love stories from 1500 to the present (expanding on my last book, *Deficits and Desires*)—and I have been giving talks at conferences way outside the modernist era (Early Modern, eighteenth century, postmodern, American Colonial, etc.). At first I was worried I would embarrass myself, but I have discovered that if you start your talk by saying that you are stepping out of your realm of expertise and are hoping that others will help you, the response is much better than anything you get when you present yourself as one of the “experts” in a field—people go out of their way to tell you what was good about your talk and to suggest lists of books to read.

I love the combination of self-mockery and vaulting ambition in “Ca-saubon-like,” the exuberant gate-crashing of other specialists’ conferences, the frank avowal of the fear of embarrassment. But best of all is how, for Mike, worry is redeemed, even eclipsed, by discovery. What’s more, the discovery that matters to him is not about seventeenth-century monetary systems but about the conditions of other people’s generosity. I like to call up the mental image of Mike talking to a room of economists or early modern scholars, his candor leading them from skepticism to munificence.

Mike was with his family—his wife Leda and his children Jeffrey and Cara—when he died, peacefully, on the morning of August 27, 2021. Although his illness had progressed quickly, he had been able, in his last weeks, to say goodbye in person to many of his friends and colleagues and even to participate in a Zoom discussion of the newly published *Love and Money*. Hundreds of messages from former students poured in over email. Although I never had the pleasure of hearing him play, he was by all accounts a phenomenal blues harmonica player. I hope—I know—there was music, too, in those final weeks.

Farewell, old friend, beloved mentor. The love, admiration, and gratitude of your many fortunate students go with you.

—*University of Pennsylvania*