TEACHERS COLLEGE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Department of Philosophy and the Social Sciences

To: The Teachers College Community
From: Robbie McClintock
Subject: Martin S. Dworkin
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Martin S. Dworkin died March 20th at the age of 75. His death marks the close of an important current in the post-war history of Teachers College. Those who knew him well will remember him with regret as an extraordinary individual, a powerful teacher, an impossible friend, a person who miraculously incarnated both the Greek philosopher and the Hebraic prophet.

Martin came to Teachers College in 1946 to study philosophy and education. He was far too much the perfectionist to ever complete the doctorate, but he lived unstintingly as philosopher and as educator. In the post-war bustle of the College, he and Larry Cremin met as assistants in *200 Fa: Education in the American culture*, taught by multiple teams of leading professors and required of all at TC. As Martin and Larry saw it, the course was all-too-superficial, offered in four sections, with enrollment in each "limited to 450 students." Fresh from total war, they recoiled at the College's endemic willingness to reward well-intentioned mediocrity. By Martin's account, they then together formed the idea of transforming a lax Social and Philosophical Foundations into a far more rigorous Department of Philosophy and the Social Sciences. In this effort, it was Larry's achievement, with his rare combination of critical enthusiasm and intelligent caution, to carry the idea to success, yet in all probability it was Martin's accomplishment to have incubated it with his critical inspiration. For Martin, this idea was not a mere strategy, but a fundamental responsibility -- anchor the study of education, in the ostensible needs of neither society nor the profession, but in the rigorous disciplines of intellect.

It is hard, in times so crass, to feel the fervor with which Martin held his purpose, especially as the disciplines have now become, not commitments, but careers. He came of age in the midst of the contentions of New York intellectuals in the late 30's, skeptical of their passions and their pretense. He then served in the war, crossing Europe at the fighting front in a special mapping company, with his ravenous intellect absorbing everything, including liberation of a death camp. Aware of the worst, Martin found hope in critical thinking -- not in that limp piety of pedagogy, but in Pascal's thinking reed, that one frail check on the arrogance of those righteous beliefs in the name of which people wreak myriad destructions, from the subtle sapping of intellectual vigor to the barbarity

of the Final Solution. He cautioned that inward satisfaction with the goodness of one's intentions, or the rightness of one's sensibility, justified nothing and chanced horrible harms. He asserted that each person needs to take full, reasoned responsibility for the consequences of his actions. He recognized the enormity of that standard, and his burden -- and the burden he communicated -- was to hold that its full, universal attainment was, despite its enormity, the one real measure of human worth.

During the 1950's, Martin was at the New School, both as sometime student and part-time lecturer. He established himself as a freelance writer, photographer, and film critic, bringing to his work a fierce independence and ethic of reasoned criticism. From early in the decade, his wonderfully compact essay, "Disagreement: The Situation of Reason," enunciated the fundamental ideas behind his life and teaching. Late in it, his agonized critique of the film version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* showed at its best his conviction that the critic must always unmask how popular culture glosses over the harsh tragedies, even when seeming to face them. Martin's prose suffered from his conviction that a writer must say exactly what he means and only what he means, for his writing was too tight for most any taste, at once convoluted yet devoid of lubricating redundancy. These same convictions, however, made him a wondrous editor, a craft he pursued throughout his work with great altruism towards both seasoned professionals and novice beginners.

Through these years, Larry Cremin took increasingly firm hold of the emerging new department, and he made several unsuccessful attempts to appoint Martin to its faculty. Finally, Martin became a Lecturer and through the 1960's and 70's, he consistently taught two courses, which were difficult, demanding, disturbing. One did not take his courses; one did battle with them. His reading lists were endless, which is not unusual, but he additionally expected students to have previously established a thorough, unbounded engagement with the intellectual tradition as grounding for peer-to-peer discussion with him. He tried to live and to think without the comfort of a canon, to engage instead in the Heraclitean search for the principle that steers all things through all things and he assumed that students came to him, not by happenstance, but as result of their own independent engagement in that search. It was a frightening, bracing education to tackle questions to which everything imaginable had intense relevance. The year after I participated in Martin's courses, I took a two-term Graduate Faculties seminar with Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling, which was then notorious around Columbia as a demanding yet valuable ordeal. To me, it was a relaxed tour compared to wrestling with Dworkin for a year.

Martin unleashed everything he had ever read or thought in a sustained examination of a fundamental rational obligation. The obligation at the heart of the "introductory" *Aesthetics and Education* was the imperative never to confuse an aesthetic preference with a moral or rational

justification. That central to *Education, Ideology, and Mass Communications* was never to confound propaganda for a cause, no matter how true, good, or beautiful one holds it to be, with the work of education, which aims at developing the autonomous power of judgment. Martin would spew his reading and reflection forth in monologic conversation throughout class, and for those who would stick with it, throughout an hour-long exit from Main Hall, then a stop-and-go creep to the IRT, and finally throughout an unending discourse in his rent-controlled, top-floor walk-up, tucked in the Garment District, creaking with books and papers. Thus, like no one else, he would impart an intimation of the discipline incurred in becoming a Socratic educator.

His courses were an education, if one could stand them. Walter Kaufmann once observed that Plato was a great humanistic educator because a prolonged encounter with Plato changed a person, and in this sense Martin was a great humanistic educator. The problem outwardly was that too few subjected themselves to a prolonged encounter with him. Martin expected students to earn his approval, and it did not come easily; and he absolutely scorned the idea that he should curry approval from students: they needed to be pushed, challenged, and driven. It is the scandal of the tenure system that those who get it so rarely need it, and those who are not in line for it, are too often precisely the intellects who need it -- witness Veblen, and witness Dworkin as well. Over time, the College's proclivity to advise students away from challenging, disquieting thought minimized Martin's modest enrollments, putting his meager stipend at risk. In 1979, the College stopped offering his courses, and the logic of that process has spread, now culminating in disbanding the very department that Martin had been so instrumental in forming.

Yet those were the outward problems. There were even more difficult, inward problems at work. Martin had a bent for giving offense. He held that faith in the rightness of one's intentions was the source of error and evil, and his study of both Socrates and the Prophets left him steeled to the duty of breaking such beliefs. Thus he was a man whom many found it too easy to dislike and too hard to befriend. Martin understood that, and accepted it, sometimes taking adolescent joy when he really got so-and-so's goat. But there was another more deeply painful rejection that Martin suffered far too often from those few of us, myself included, who learned from him most deeply. One by one, we turned away from our friend and mentor. Surely these rejections signify our personal weaknesses, our inability to stay the course with a difficult and powerful presence. But there was more to it than these weaknesses alone. "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil." Martin distrusted Nietzsche, but this is one utterance by Zarathrustra the truth of which, in my experience, and, I think, in the experience of other friends who did not stay the course, Martin somehow could not grasp. Martin was always the teacher, forever the teacher, a powerful teacher, an incessant teacher. But like a parent, a teacher must learn to let go, so that the pupil can go forth

as a man, or the man, gasping, will turn from the teacher to engage the world alone. Despite our having done that, Martin, our teacher forever you remain -- a unique and luminous teacher.

Good bye. Thank you, Martin. I am sorry. And on behalf of others, who also learned and also left, and who no longer live to speak their praise themselves -- Good bye. Thank you, Martin. We are all sorry and thankful and sad. You suffered, remained true, and added immeasurable worth to our lives and to our world.

> **. . . that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.**
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> **George Eliot, *Middlemarch***