

*Worse Than Death*

Latin American literature has often reminded us that there are fates far worse than death. In fact, it often portrays death as a natural part of the cycle of life and only sometimes uses it as a gulf to divide character interaction. A character dead for many years can often still be found communicating and influencing the living characters in a Latin American work of art. For example, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* takes its very title from the spirits of life and death that move about in the house on the corner. In contrast to this continued influence, this paper will examine the things that halt this interaction, including many of the political and economic atrocities that still persist in Central and South America today. The disappeared have been robbed of the influence their voice and their spirit might have on the living, thus suffering a fate worse than death.

In Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story*, the viewer is given a cinematic view of the effects of the *desaparecidos* through Alicia's gradual uncovering of the truth. Alicia and Roberto have remained fairly secure in the final days of the military junta thanks to Roberto's business contacts. Their adopted daughter, Gabby, becomes the key to unraveling the seemingly perfect life they have built together as Alicia's friends and co-workers begin to sow the seeds of doubt. The details of Gabby's adoption have remained hidden from Alicia because Roberto does not want to talk about it, but Alicia's curiosity is stirred by her best friend's account of the daughters of the disappeared. Roberto's business contacts and his reluctance to discuss the matter of Gabby's adoption start to sound warning bells, and the title of the movie begins to take an important role.

The "official story" is a story of denial, where the military has not abducted anyone from their homes or offices, has not tortured and killed their opposition in the final throes of dying

power, has not taken the babies born to these prisoners and given them away to people who ask no questions and assume no responsibility. Never in the movie does it let one see the influence of Gabby's real mother or father – in fact, it never actually reveals anything about them other than that they were disappeared. Never does one see the classical Latin American portrayal of death that allows for communication and understanding, for the living are left in the limbo of unknowing. Both the living and the dead are robbed of this role of death in their lives. The movie does not portray anything of Gabby's real parents because it is as if they never existed, and it is beyond the film's right to give us more information than would be actually available. Instead, the viewer is left with the feeling of loss for not knowing, for not meeting and understanding and interacting with even the memory and spirit of the deceased. This is Gabby's loss, and Alicia's loss, and society's loss.

The viewer finds that as Alicia discovers more of the truth about her daughter and the reality of her family's role in the disappearing of a person's entire effect on humanity, she tries to do what she can to make things right with her newfound knowledge. She meets with an elderly woman who may be the grandmother of Gabby and mother of the disappeared, but the film never settles this fact completely; instead it leaves the possibility as uncertain as it would be in a real-life encounter of this sort. There is no way of knowing beyond scientific tests outside of most victims' capability. It is this uncertainty that cements into permanency the theft that has occurred here, reminding the viewer that there is nothing that can give Gabby back her first mother either in flesh or in spirit. Late in the movie, Roberto states that “she has already lost one mother, would [Alicia] have her lose a second?” With this pronouncement, one understands that there is no way to reclaim the disappeared to any normal sense of life and death. They will always be the *desaparecidos*.

Pablo Neruda's Nobel Prize-winning poetry paints a beautiful picture of his countrymen and the torments that they have faced over the years. With *The United Fruit Co.*, one finds huge corporations raping the land and its people of every profitable natural resource and dumping whatever remains into the waters of the harbor. The poem marries the companies with the country's tormented political history, naming the flies attracted to the fruit and the death after dictators of the past and present. "Wise flies trained in tyranny" plague the land and harass the people. In the last stanza, one is presented with the ultimate desecration, where "Indians are falling / into the sugared chasms / of the harbors, wrapped / for burial in the mist of the dawn". The natives have been robbed of the natural rites of death, to be respected and celebrated and allowed influence over the living. Instead, they are attracted to the sweetened harbors and disappear into the watery void, a body, a thing, a fallen cipher, a cluster of dead fruit without a name.

Neruda's poem *The Dictators* presents another portrait of the great gulf between the bourgeoisie and the common people, presented here as a contrast between the graves and the palaces. One finds in these few lines of poetry that the oppressed have been relegated to the cane fields, the swamps, and ultimately the common graves. It is in this poem, however, that Neruda shows us death in its most influential form, as a "petal that brings nausea" and "dead voices / and the blue mouths freshly buried" mixing with the rapid laughs of the delicate dictator. One finds that the dead are no longer speechless and impotent as are the disappeared in *The Official Story* and *The United Fruit Company*. Instead, one sees the tears and frustration fall to the earth like seeds planted to grow "scale on scale, / blow on blow, ... / with a snout full of ooze and silence". The suffering of the people is growing in the darkness of the swamp into an uncontrollable beast, an embodiment of the power for change that the dead possess.

The final Neruda poem to look at in examination of a fate worse than death is *The Heights of Macchu Picchu, III*. This poem more so than any of the others read for class presents to the reader a stark and unavoidable portrayal of the life of the people of Macchu Picchu. Opening the poem with the soul being “threshed out like maize in the endless granary of defeated actions”, Neruda wastes no time in establishing life as an endless wait for “the short death of every day”. No longer is death the silent robbery of the disappeared or the hate-inspiring deaths amid the sugarcane and coconut palms, but an ever-present promise that “[pierces] into each man like a short lance” every minute of every day. Here again one finds that death is not the worst a man can hope for when “grinding bad luck” is a constant and inescapable facet of everyday life.

The essence of Neruda's poetry and its message on death can be seen reenacted in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, a dark fairy tale of innocence lost set during the Spanish civil war. The story unfolds and we find rebels fighting an often hopeless war against a government that thinks of them as less than human. There are several scenes where the two sides' ideals are slammed together like bulls butting horns, and death is an ever-present fact of life as in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu, III*. Death, however, is not the thing the rebels are fighting against; it is an ally in the fight against the injustice of being treated like cattle. In the final moments of one soldier's life, he hands his baby boy to the rebels and asks them to “tell my son the time his father died.” They respond by telling him that his son will not even know his name, and then they kill him as punishment for the atrocities he has committed. In this denial of his legacy, we see a haunting echo of the robbery so many of the disappeared have suffered. Wielded here in the hands of the oppressed, we find that this is justice - the soldier is sentenced to a death that will doom him to fade away with no chance to influence his son.

Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is a beautiful work of Latin American literature that centers around the very nature of death's role in everyday life. Through the actions of the main characters and the metamorphosis of the country's political situation, one finds that death is robbed of its ability to remain a central part of the lives of the living. Allende contrasts death empowered and death impotent through several main characters during the novel.

The reader is introduced to death quite early in the book in the form of Rosa the Beautiful. Rosa, a girl of extraordinary grace characterized by her green hair and undine qualities, is to be married to Esteban Trueba but dies due to accidental poisoning before the marriage can take place. The death of this specimen of perfection sets the stage for the rest of the novel, becoming a catalyst that will fuel the destruction that follows Esteban, Clara, their family, and rest of the country. Upon Rosa's death, Clara closes her mouth and does not speak another word until nine years later, when she announced that she would be married to Esteban. Throughout the early part of the novel, Esteban is haunted by the visage of the woman who "slipped through his fingers", and he tried to chase these visitations away by abusing the native women of his hacienda. The death of Rosa the Beautiful has earth-shattering impact on the loved ones she left behind.

Allende also shows death taking a natural place in everyday life when Clara herself decides to die – for that is exactly what she does. She comes to peaceful terms with the shroud, viewing death as "like being born: just a change." She had spent her entire life surrounded by various spirits, whether dead, living, or extraterrestrial, and she was fully convinced that if she could communicate with those from the Hereafter, she would surely be capable of continuing communication with her loved ones. That is exactly what she does, as one sees her influence on Esteban during the final chapters of the book. He begins to see her and Rosa more often as he

gets closer to death himself, and takes on a resigned peace about himself. In this we see the role of Clara's spirit continued after her death, as she can still be found wandering the halls of the house years later.

Férula's death begins to show the first signs of the fractured nature that death plays in the novel. Férula is cast out of the household when Esteban becomes jealous of her relationship with Clara. Alone in her exile, she disappears from the narrative's radar until she mysteriously appears unchanged after all the years. Clara announces that Férula has died, and proceeds to go search for her body. They find her in a run-down flat with nothing other than some gaudy play-clothes and wigs. She died alone, and after Clara returns the personal attention she received at the hands of Férula over the years, her spirit never again returns to the pages of the Allende's novel. Contrasted to Clara's death and subsequent role as a spirit in the house, Férula's passing seems only half present, as if the full range of her life is abbreviated by her isolation and her spirit's absence.

As a final example of death in Allende's novel, the violence of the military dictatorship creates a whirlpool of deaths that mirrors the disappeared in *The Official Story*. The reader finds the same unnatural circumstances surrounding these characters, and Jaime's is the story shared by so many in that time of oppression. As the military takes over, Jaime finds himself befriended to the liberal President and aligned against the coup. It takes Allende two pages to describe the initial military assault on the presidential estate and to have Jaime tortured and killed. The speed and lack of detail leave the reader with the sense that something was missed, but it is never regained as the permanency of Jaime's death is absolute. He is essentially a metaphor of the *desaparecidos*, for his remains were blasted with dynamite and it took two weeks before the Trueba household was informed of his death. Even then, a long time would

have to pass before Esteban would believe the account and understand the truth of Jaime's murder. Allende and the political violence all but erase the altruistic doctor from the narrative of his loved ones lives. Compared to his mother's and aunt's deaths, Allende paints through Jaime a very open portrayal of how death should not be.

In closing, death is portrayed in a beautiful and poetic way within Latin American art, foreign to our imagination rooted so far from the magically real. However, the dark shadow of the true role death has played in many Latin American countries at the hands of military dictatorship and economic oppression can be seen as a yellowing bruise under the surface of much of the prose, poetry, and film. In a very natural sense, Allende's Clara said it best when she portrayed it similarly to being born: a change. Oftentimes throughout history, however, people have been robbed of the true role death should play in their lives and the lives of their loved ones – people disappeared without any spirit left behind to tell their stories or guide their children. This injustice is a common thread through all of the works examined here, and it is through their craft that Latin American artists attempt to give back some voice, some power to change, to the victims of such crimes.

## Citations

Pan's Labyrinth. Dir. Guillermo del Toro. Perf. Ivana Baquero, Maribel Verdú. Film.

Picturehouse, 2007.



### **Katie Terezakis: Award in Philosophy**

A trend in both scholarship and popular imagination, lasting over two millennia, has associated Platonic philosophy with implausible philosopher-kings, with ideal entities far removed from the stuff of the world and with a program of artistic censorship fit to rival the highest achievements of modern fascism. In the twentieth-century, Leo Strauss and his students, including Allan Bloom, took up the Herculean task of rescuing Plato's texts from the longstanding misappropriation, producing considered new translations and interpretations. As Ian Downey argues, Bloom proves to be a remarkably sensitive reader of Plato; Bloom succeeds in showing how what can be taken as literal and narrowly proscriptive in Plato is often "nuanced, complex, playful, flirtatious and ironic." Yet Bloom's revision is not without an ideological agenda; moreover, as Downey argues, Bloom's is an agenda with pernicious hermeneutic and political implications of its own. Downey argues that Bloom imports inappropriately modern themes into his reading of Plato, overdetermining Plato's position on knowledge, politics and the arts. To make his case, Downey focuses on several key junctures in Plato's *Republic*, accompanied by claims from the interpretative essay and loaded notes that Bloom provides with his landmark 1968 translation of that work. Downey's close readings of these texts are shrewd, yet he usually couches his arguments in an irreverent, expansive tone that insists, in itself, upon certain ironies that remain inseparable from any Platonic truth. On Downey's reading, Bloom offers a brilliant recovery of Plato, and then retreats from it, in one fell swoop. Downey concludes that Bloom unnecessarily abandons his nuanced reading of the *Republic* for political apologetics. Against this reading, Downey intervenes, the *Republic* itself continues to speak.

Bloomsday:  
The Modernist Plato of Allan Bloom

When looking at Plato, I find that I am strangely struck dumb. I cannot say anything about him. The form of his writing is unspeakable; one can only speak about the image of his writing, in the interpretations of the moderns, who live under the regime of contemporary democratic power.

Post-modernism never happened; we are all still modern, whether we like it or not. The very term post-modernism is an obvious contradiction, whose only meaning is negative, demonstrating through its very form the very impossibility of one's ever thinking one's way out of one's own time. Those who would oppose modernity, from Leo Strauss's post-doctoral students to Osama bin Laden and his fellow students of Sayyid Qut'b, are all doomed to be thoroughgoing moderns and even modernists, subject to what Hegel called the "necessary alienation" – time. Granted, modernism is (and always was) a manifold, variegated affair, a thousand movements at once, all in opposing directions, each one a incoherent mess of contradictions on its own, as complex as a "fundamentalist" "traditionalist" Afghan warrior with his own satellite dish, American-made Hawk surface-to-air missile launcher, and Soviet ak-47, or as Jay-Z puts it, "like Che Guevara with bling on... complex."<sup>1</sup>

There is a tendency among thinkers like Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom to depreciate modern philosophers in favor of the ancients. But if it is true that modernity lacks the reverent calm and poise of antiquity, then these thinkers transgress their own most sacred and self-imposed rule, desecrating the ancients by turning them into moderns, translating silence into a maddening din. Indeed, in his treatment, Socrates becomes far more "Machiavellian" than Machiavelli ever was, and Machiavelli is the representative of all the moderns, the prototype of the Enlightenment thinker who seeks to disseminate all knowledge of how things are and what leaders truly do. Bloom tells us

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<sup>1</sup> From "Public Service Announcement", on "The Black Album", Def Jam, 2003

that this is what separates the Enlightenment thinking from ancient philosophy in footnote 36, to Book V of his translation of Plato's Republic<sup>2</sup> (p. 460), where he (bizarrely, perhaps for the sake of sheer esotericism) decides to place the fullest and clearest statement of his own thesis:

**There is no necessary connection between a man's being born a ruler and his having philosophic talent or passion; nor is there any connection between a man's having philosophical talent and his being born in a city that would ask him to rule (the philosopher has neither the desire to be a ruler nor would he do what is necessary to impose his rule on an unwilling people). This statement is indicative of the most fundamental difference between Plato's political teaching and that of the Enlightenment. For the moderns, knowledge necessarily leads to political power. Stated otherwise, the dissemination of knowledge gradually transforms civil society and insures the realization of decent regimes. Plato denies this contention; knowledge as knowledge does not effect political change, and knowledge disseminated is no longer knowledge.**

There is much confusion in this passage. First of all, Plato does not deny this contention, at least not here – he merely refrains from affirming it. The passage in the text to which this footnote refers is Socrates' first clear mention, in the Republic, of the concept of the philosopher king. The very last line of dialogue that Socrates speaks previous to this one is Socrates' announcement, "Well here I am," in response to Glaucon's question of what change would be necessary to make (not "a small or easy one, but possible") in order to transform society into the republic of virtue. A few lines later, Socrates says – coincidentally, no doubt – "Come now, follow me," to which Glaucon replies, "Lead." (pp. 153, 154 in Bloom's translation; 473c – 474c in the original).

Bloom appears to take it at face value that the philosopher doesn't have the desire to be a ruler (cf. Book VI, 520d: "That city in which those who are going to rule are least eager to rule is necessarily governed in the way that is best..." and 521b: "Have you any other life that despises political offices other than that of true philosophy?" ). But isn't it possible that precisely here, and not in the other places, Socrates is being ironic? Isn't he

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1968

revealing his will to power? Isn't he, not so subtly, nominating himself king? The familiar image of the philosopher is the meek and gentle barefoot man, swaddled in a toga, dreamily drawing geometric proofs in the sand until soldiers push him aside. But what makes a philosopher a philosopher is certainly not the clothes he wears, or the fact that he is pushed aside, but his devotion to wisdom, deep within his soul. Couldn't this image itself be a stratagem, and a bit of a playful one? Mightn't the true philosopher actually be the jackbooted drill-sergeant, ordering his men to seize the government buildings? We think of the academy as being a peripatetic band, leisurely strolling and stroking their beards, as they discuss the dimensions of the universe through green gardens. But Plato presents us with the image of an academy that more closely resembles an insurgent training camp, with young male inductees performing athletic military exercises, to a martial soundtrack. (See 374c - 376d, etc) If knowledge in Plato's day had not yet effected political change, perhaps this was because it was not yet truly knowledge as knowledge. (All of the big three monotheisms, each clearly influenced by Platonism, have indeed effected much political change.)

Beyond that, Bloom is taking liberties when he claims that the second statement concerning the moderns is merely the first "stated otherwise". To say that knowledge gradually transforms civil society is much less than to say that it leads to political power for any particular knowledgeable person. The science that led to the development of the birth control pill has clearly transformed civil society, but it is not clear that this transformation led to political power for those who achieved or disseminated this science. This kind of hand waving is intended to cause the reader to skip over what is being asserted.

More importantly, to say that knowledge leads to political power says absolutely nothing about decency, and by no means makes any claims about insuring decent regimes. To claim this would be to equate knowledge with decency, that is, to deny the existence of what Nietzsche calls "cruel truths". It is silly to argue that moderns believe anything like this, and indeed, the pattern from Machiavelli to Hobbes to Messlier to Sade, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault, and in some respects even more gentlemanly writers like Rousseau, Hume, Stirner, and Marx, has been to elucidate these cruel truths. Thus Bloom does not really successfully contrast Plato with the moderns; on the contrary,

his Plato (which is quite an interpretive extrapolation from the text) is actually among very agreeable company in the world of the moderns, and might even be regarded as the most modern of all moderns, the most up-to-date, the avant garde.

It is possible that Bloom correctly interprets Plato, but if so then he grossly misinterprets the moderns. Perhaps he does this ironically, to signal to those who know that he is in fact a modern, with the characteristic modern irreverence. It is the essence of modernity to reject, not only to reject the past, but even to reject one's contemporaries, and even oneself, in so much as one does not transform and become new. Thus modernity must reject modernity, though it only becomes all the more modern in doing so, and indeed modernity was always this way from its inception.

Bloom's contention hinges on the idea that the reign of the philosopher king is so unlikely as to be a practical impossibility, and that Plato knew this: "What then was the use of spending so much time and effort on a city that is impossible?" he asks on p.409. "Precisely to show its impossibility." But the caste system in India is not unlike "Callipolis" in many ways: a small, hereditary clan of people dedicated to the contemplation of ideal forms (the Brahmin) who are enjoined to live without property and to survive by alms, a larger, but still small group of military leaders to execute the will of the dominant class (the Kshatriya), money-makers (Vaisya), peasants and workers (Shudra) below this, a system of arranged marriages keeping the entire society functioning, and a notion of justice that consists of fulfilling one's duty in whatever station one happens to have been born (dharma). Need we add that traditional Vedic culture also included a belief in metempsychosis, including the possibility of reincarnation as a non-human animal, or that it included a very strict regulation on music and sculpture, particularly when concerned with the depiction of a god?

Indeed, as Socrates suggests, this society not only is possible, not only has existed, but is moreover extremely stable – in India, it lasted thousands of years without significant interruption, even under the rule of the Buddhists, Muslims, Turks, and British, and even today is difficult to eradicate, with a large population dedicated to the current democratic regime trying very hard to do so. And though India is enormous, and comprehends nearly a fifth of the world's population, it is by no means alone in this regard. Similar systems have operated in Bali, in Korea during the Goryeo period, under

the Wolof system in Senegal, and for centuries a somewhat similar system existed in pre-Ptolemaic Egypt, which Plato experienced firsthand. Callipolis further resembles in many other regards the regimes of Sparta and Crete from Socrates' own time. True, none of these regimes had "women and children held in common," however that *was* a feature of the Canela in Amazonia<sup>3</sup>, (until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century!) who besides held sexual festivals perhaps somewhat reminiscent of those that Socrates describes (actually, among the Canela, one might say that the women hold the men in common). Nor are the Canela necessarily unique. Indeed, if many historical anthropologists are to be believed, then ritualistic, orgiastic holidays have been a common practice in many cultures, including those of Classical Greece and Rome. These, in turn, may be derived from the near-universal practice in Paleolithic times involving special occasions during which nomadic tribes (who might otherwise be enemies) would meet to exchange young marriageable partners – the only times that new sexual contact would be allowed without the fear of incest. The Olympic games may derive from such exchanges, which were often considered sacred, and enshrouded in myth – not unlike the festivals of Socrates' beautiful city. And no well-informed person would claim that the communal sharing of material goods is impossible – in pre-agricultural society, it is the rule rather than the exception, and it is still practiced by most nuclear families, even within capitalist society. But all of this is really beside the point. Irrespective of the actual practicability of the Callipolitan regime, it is clear that Plato *believed* it was possible, since he tried to bring such a regime into reality under the rule of Dionysius II in Syracuse<sup>4</sup>. This one fact alone renders Bloom's argument incredible.

Moreover, the examples of India, Indonesia, and especially Egypt serve to demonstrate a far deeper problem with Bloom's thesis. According to Bloom, "Socrates, contrary to fact, places the best regime first," in its "necessary downward decay" into other regimes. Contrary to what fact? Bloom sees this as partly ironic, partly a pedagogical device, "in order that the quest for wisdom not appear to be in conflict with the political prejudice in favor of the ancestral." (p.416) All of this is based on Bloom's

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance "Mending Ways: the Canela Indians of Brazil" Smithsonian Research, 1999

<sup>4</sup> As attested by Plato's Seventh Letter and the Biblioteca historia of Diodorus Siculus



misconception that the republic of virtue is a utopian plan for the future, rather than a reminder of what has been forgotten. This error derives from Bloom's fundamental error, which concerns the order of metaphysical priority of the various regimes. In Bloom's contorted reading of this passage, "Socrates taught, in the discussion of the ideas, that the end, not the origin, of a thing is its nature. Here he appeals to Glaucon's faulty philosophical understanding by putting what is really the end at the origin." Instead of all these wheels within wheels, necessary for Bloom's interpretation, why not simply take Plato at face value?

Why does Bloom reverse Plato's history, putting the aristocratic republic last? He claims that his reverse order for the regimes is "common sense," but a notion of gradual degeneration is a common theme in many cultures, from the Indian notion of the Kaliyuga to the Mayan calendar, and is besides supported not only by millions if not billions of modern pessimists but also finds analogy in the sciences with the physical process of entropy. More to the point, it was a very important notion for the Greeks, and these passages in the Republic make unmistakable references to Hesiod's Works and Days, which discuss the ages of man, from the Golden to the Iron. Bloom's failure to consider traditional societies far older than democratic Athens, like those of India and Egypt (one is tempted even to include Persia) is evidence of an unforgivable provincialism – he tends to "rely too much on the narrow experience of our own time." (cf. pp. 414,415)

Scratch the surface, and Bloom's political agenda shines through, despite all of his claims to be apolitical or antipolitical. The reason Bloom reorders time is to try to transform Plato into a modern. He even explicitly mentions "Communism" and "Fascism" (p.409) as though Plato would have any concept of such things. In regards to Communism and Fascism, "Socrates thinks about the end which is ultimately aimed at by all reformers or revolutionaries but to which they do not pay sufficient attention. He shows what a regime would have to be in order to be just and why such a regime is impossible." (p.410) So Bloom's Plato is little more than Ayn Rand writing "Anthem" – perhaps the greatest philosophical genius of all time is thus rendered into a crude cartoonist.

This is really what is most fanciful in Bloom's interpretation. Bloom is both a remarkably sensitive translator and a remarkably imaginative interpreter, and his quiet audacity is very seductive. And I think he succeeds admirably in showing that much of what has been taken overly literally in Plato can be seen as nuanced, complex, playful, flirtatious, and even ironic. But what he sees behind the apparent meaning of the Republic is too pat, too anachronistic, and too convenient to be believed. Was Socrates, deep down, Milton Friedman?

Aristophanes, in the *Birds*, had (comically) charged that the imitators of Socrates, the *esokrotoun*, were *elakonomanoun*, that is, mad with love for Sparta, the militant, totalitarian foe of Athens during the Peloponnesian war, and thus dangerous to Athenian democracy. Bloom, seemingly simply for the sake of being contrary, writes that Socrates "is actually engaged in a defense of democracy against its enemies, the potential tyrants and lovers of Sparta[.]" (p. 421) Thus Plato is enlisted in the support of Karl Popper. This is really going too far. All of Bloom's supporting evidence for this statement comes not from the text but from his own head, including his notion that philosophy can only exist within a democracy. This type of arrogance could only come from the political faction that seeks to shove democracy down everyone's throats. One would be hard pressed to claim reasonably that Vedic India and China during the "Spring and Autumn" or "Warring States" periods were democratic, but one could easily say that the Bhagavad-Gita and the works of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and the Legalists were philosophy. Indeed, the Socratic form of philosophy is more easily adapted to a rigidly stratified society than a democracy, especially if Bloom is to be believed and "knowledge disseminated is no longer knowledge." Unless their will is crushed, the masses will always demand to be let in on the big secrets, and to seek public education, which necessarily has a dissipating effect on the practice of dialectic. Perhaps it is true that Plato would have (at least mentally) opposed the Khmer Rouge or the Peoples' Temple had he known them, but that in itself is no reason to suspect that he would vote Reagan.

Take, for instance, this passage from Bloom: "...[I]t might well be asked why it is necessary to harm enemies, or why there need be enemies at all. The answer is twofold. There are unjust men who would destroy the good things and good life of one's own family or nation if one did not render them impotent. And, even though there were not



men who were natively unjust, there is a scarcity of good things in the world.” (p.318) “The answer,” indeed. Whose answer? Bloom may have his own very good reasons to believe these speeches, and cause to protect his own, but they are certainly entirely foreign to Plato, and to the Republic. They are, in fact, utterly modern. The economic idea of scarcity is very recent, and Socrates in the Republic offers a very different answer to this question: that in the healthy city, what Glaucon calls fit for sows, indulgences are unnecessary, and only in the city of Glaucon’s fevered imagination, born of his appetites, does war become necessary. And it is only the dis-ease of Glaucon’s amnesia that causes him to forget that this is not an actual city, but an image of his soul. By presenting these statements as “the answer,” born of nature and necessity and not of confusion, Bloom illegitimately makes Plato an apologist for capitalist imperialism and the forces of modernity.

Bloom’s mistake is in assuming that there is only a choice between totalitarianism and democratic capitalism, a mistake born of his myopic cold war historicism. Isn’t it possible that Socrates and Plato were not so limited in their imaginations that they were unable to see their way beyond both of these absurdities, to come up with their own, independent political ideas, neither Guelf nor Ghibbeline, neither Coke nor Pepsi? And I don’t mean some kind of hodge-podge mixture of totalitarianism and democratic capitalism, but something truly outside of both. Bloom’s only answer is: retreat! “Socrates’ political science, paradoxically, is meant to show the superiority of the private life.” (p.415) He also explains that “The Republic serves to moderate the extreme passion for political justice by showing the limits of what can be demanded and expected of the city; and at the same time, it shows the direction in which the immoderate desires can be meaningfully channeled.” (p. 410) Yes – into the closet, as it were. If Bloom believes the purpose of the Republic is to render anyone capable of thinking docile, to turn all potential political activists towards mere poetry appreciation, then he commits the same error of which he accuses Cornford: causing Plato to become boring (p.xv), bleeding the text of what is valuable in it, which is also what makes it wild and dangerous.