The Gad: or, Prolegomena to a Double Bill

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Abstract:

In this work of creative non-fiction, a search for copies of *The Conformist* (1970) and *I Went Down* (1997) in the video stores of downtown Toronto becomes the occasion for a philosophical discussion of the relevance of Plato's *Republic* for understanding the relation of erotics and politics in the modern world when the author has a chance encounter with an old acquaintance who teaches political theory at the University of Toronto. The evening's events are recounted in a semi-autobiographical email to his distant wife the next day.

- The Editor

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Subject: The Gad; or, Prolegomena to a double bill

Date: July 15, 2006 4:32:10 PM EST

To: Oona <oo@UTopia.edu>

I won't hide anything from you: I went to the video store yesterday, looking for a way to beguile the lazy time before bed, and ended up spending the night with one of your friends.

The afternoon in the Archives went well. I found the parts of the correspondence with Dennis about *Nightwatch* that I'd missed, and was happy enough to see it all again, though travelling in to Thomas Fisher to make notes on letters I can't remember writing was a new experience of alienation for me.¹ To ground myself, I had dinner with Em at a patio in Kensington. She told me about a summer course she'd dropped after the first class and made the mistake of asking what I thought she might take next term. Once the Calendar was out and we

were turning the pages, I got to reminiscing, and that turned into the usual grumbling. She quickly became impatient. So what if the profs I studied with back in the day had studied with the gods who'd emigrated from Germany and were passing on what they'd learned to us? She needed more immediate practical advice. I suggested Gad's 'Democratic Citizenship' course, and off she went to her shift at the Red Room, leaving me to finish the wine and muse.

The most interesting things seemed to happen at York then, not at Toronto. There was the 1978 Conference on Structuralism and Hermeneutics that ruined my life by giving me entirely the wrong impression of what it is to be an academic. On one of the roundtables, Voegelin, Gadamer and Bloom discussed the *Republic* for hours, it seemed, before a packed Moot Court.² McLuhan showed up and didn't succeed in making much of a splash. I don't think Frye even attended. Have I told you that Grant had known of the conference and had refused to attend? Too crowded a room for him. When he rediscovered his confidence, he came solo to speak at York (... not Toronto). It was my first time hearing him, and he said something that amazed me: 'The most important thing about any society is how it interprets Plato.' Then, after a pause, 'Of course, people also have to eat ...' All this brought to mind the first time I met Gad and Dennis, at Emberley's conference shortly after Grant's death. When Dennis gave his account of 'Grant's impasse,' the fallacy beneath the attractive presentation of a permanent existential double-bind seemed far less important than what he said Grant was getting at: living in modernity is so deadening that human beings long for an experience or understanding of their original nature, a sense of what it is to have been made to be claimed by the real, but the technological world we've constructed seems so inescapable – expanded and entrenched past the point of any possible deconstruction – that reason can no longer think or speak of such things without reproducing the impasse in its thinking and speaking.³ Except when we understand and articulate the problem. Or go to a good conference. Or read Plato; or *Nightwatch*, for that matter. You prefer Levinas; some Austen in the evenings. Still, he was on to something. It takes less and less time for a critique of modernity to become a critique within modernity if there's the slightest flaw in its formulation that allows it to be assimilated. Poor Nietzsche, now just another Protestant theologian.

When there was no wine left, I set out to find the video store. I hadn't walked through Kensington in a while. It was much livelier than I remember it being, everyone parading up and down, up and down, in a fond pageant, with the sunset lighting up the Fire Station clock tower. I

joined in, muttering the Rimbaud tag to myself: ‘One must be absolutely modern.’⁴ And then, jostling along with the crowd – one of those improbable coincidences – I ran into Gad. We each recognized the other, but were so surprised that we both turned to look for a third person before we spoke – he probably thought you were nearby, and I confess I looked around for Shannon. The tricks a strong imagination plays! I realized that there hadn’t been many opportunities to be alone together over the years, and I wanted to make the most of this one. I might have tried too hard at first. You know – one of those overdetermined remarks that make me sound like a Straussian grad student. ‘Just the man I need!’ I said. ‘I’m trapped in Grant’s impasse and can’t find a way out.’ An awkward silence. ‘I’m also trying to get to Suspect Video. Know where it is?’ I would have hesitated too, but he offered to walk part of the way with me. And gradually, once we got on common ground, our conversation moved toward the place I’d wanted it to begin. Something in the paper about Bush’s latest gaff reminded us that we’d both been identified as members of the ‘reality-based community.’ You remember the aide who let the secret slip out? The judicious study of discernible reality means nothing anymore because – I’ve memorized it – ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality, we’ll act again, creating other new realities.’ And they say all White House staffers have read Strauss! So we two *communards* had our own Pride March that evening, chatting about increasingly real things, and increasingly real ways of thinking and acting effectively, along the road that, if all went well, would eventually get us to the ‘really real reality’ of the *Phaedrus*.⁵

I intended to ask about his course and warn him that I’d recommended it to Em. I thought I could lead into it from a discussion of this laughable justification for American imperialism, but I got distracted.

‘This bodying forth of new realities with guns instead of pens is no airy nothing.’

‘And not entirely unknown either.’

‘Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, eh?’

‘No problem telling them apart. Not in this case.’

‘Any ideas about the hard cases? After a point, if I’m sure, I’m not sure why. When we met, I’d been thinking about how much fun Grant used to have knocking down the argument that everything past the wits of a pragmatist to say is equally nonsense; but if reason isn’t the measure, it’s hard to sort through all those rare visions people want to share with us ...’

‘... including the dream of reason.’

‘Especially. Still, even if we could agree on who the dangerous madmen are, I don’t know if the rest are a community of lovers or if they’d stay a community for long.’

Okay, I’m making it up. I don’t actually remember what we said – I’d like to think it flowed this well, and that I was leading effortlessly, wouldn’t I? – but it was something along those lines. In almost no time, we generalized our griping about Bush into raging against the world. Initially somewhat subdued – two respectable fellows can only say and do so much in public – and not against the world per se – only against whatever it is that’s universal in the whole range of modern regimes, liberal-democratic to totalitarian. But it did manage to express something we had in common in a way that surprised us. I wanted to know more about the ground of his fervor, and it occurred to me that it might be best to get at it by way of differences. There’s always been something about his perspective I haven’t understood. The alternatives to modernity don’t persuade me. They certainly exclude me – my old complaint. And they don’t seem to add up either.

He’s told us, on different occasions, that he’s a Buddhist and a Hindu, and he’s written that Asian religions are the place to go in order to escape the dualism of positivity and negativity at the core of the Western philosophical tradition. In my rather limited exposure to Asian traditions, I haven’t come across much that a Hegelian dialectic hasn’t assimilated, or couldn’t. Then there’s his fascination with the Kabbalah, and particularly the writings of Isaac Luria. I don’t know from this stuff, and you haven’t been able to show me the trick of it. Does some part of his interest in the Jewish mystical tradition originate from his resistance to attempts to use Levinas’s ethics as a first philosophy for liberalism? Even so, carrying pictures of Sabbatai Zevi ain’t gonna make it with anyone anyhow. Levinas’s ethics is a prophetic, messianic word, otherwise than *logos*, you tell me. Still, I shrug. After reading Nietzsche, the relation between messianism and instrumental rationality *is* the Western tradition after the Greeks. Going back to an historically earlier dispensation – if it were possible – would only get us back to where we are; and it would be a lot uglier the second time around.

I didn’t raise any of this. It might have been more in the spirit of the occasion to call him on his professed desire to hold Bataille down and circumcise him by working around to the claim that Bataille wasn’t quite uncircumcised enough. When Bataille offered to be beheaded in *Acephale*, he wasn’t being otherwise than Christian; he was accepting a Christian cartoon of a

pagan as the real thing and indulging himself in redemptive fantasies. It also might have been fun to call Gad on Levinas's reading of the 'beyond being' passage in the *Republic*.⁶ When Levinas is into Heidegger-bashing, he allows Plato a glimpse of his own idea of the otherwise than being, but whenever he discusses Plato straight up, it's the common line that the only transcendence of the particularity of being in Plato is the rational universal, a metaphysical abstraction. Clever, but probably not the first instance of the doublethink: it should be in Augustine somewhere, if not earlier ... No, some other time, I thought. Instead, I went through Marcuse. I always liked Gad's *Repression*, particularly the way he clarified the distinction between basic and surplus repression in Marcuse and developed its political relevance. And his discussion of the M'buti Congo pygmies as the best example of a relatively non-surplus-repressive civilization is still my favourite of his otherwise-than-modernities. I couldn't live with them – and I'd like to see Gad try to become their *moyel* – but their society didn't seem alien: consolidate a few such tribes and you'd get an interesting *polis*.

'You wouldn't seriously try to hang everything on Plato, would you?' I asked. 'The line that he's the first metaphysician or the first ideologist of domination who's responsible for everything that's wrong with western civilization is just a lecturing schtick, right? I mean: wouldn't the causal argument be transparent nonsense if most of us weren't used to believing that all of creation emerged from a single book and the few who'd picked up some liberal arts training weren't taught from textbooks that are versions of *Hegel for Dummies*? Well, never mind the genealogy of it. I'll let you have it if you grant me the corollary: the most important thing to be done is to understand Plato properly. Even if there are Republicans who read their domestic and foreign policies between the lines of Bloom's translation of the *Republic*, or straight from the Interpretive Essay, we shouldn't just let them have Plato, should we? What I'm trying to say is ... You seem to be giving Plato a hard time lately and I'm not sure why. Is it Levinas? I always thought of you as a Marcusean, but it can't be from Marcuse. One of the books that led me to Plato was *Eros and Civilization*. Back in the sixties, when I was gigging around town and trying to read between sets, I found out from Marcuse that if I thought Freud was good on *eros*, I should read the *Symposium*. Plato was part of the solution, man, not part of the problem.'

Last night I improvised and paraphrased, but I've got *Eros and Civilization* here on the shelf and, for you, I'll look it up. It's my original copy. I remember one of the singers in the band

taking it from my hands one night and saying: ‘Be careful. We don’t wanna lose you.’ He could do a perfect James Brown impersonation. I guess he wasn’t very Dionysian in his reading. Just another example of how pleasantly ambiguous everything was back then. Couldn’t tell your experiments in relatively non-surplus-repressive life from your exploitation by way of repressive desublimation without a programme.

So: Marcuse has the Greek conception of ‘*logos* as being’ developing as the logic of domination, but it’s Aristotle who ends up turning into Hegel, not Plato. Freud’s alternative account of ‘*eros* as being’ is similar to Plato’s. Marcuse takes a swipe at Plato for ‘introduc[ing] the repressive definition of Eros into the household of Western culture. Still [and what a qualification!], the *Symposium* contains the clearest celebration of the sexual origin and substance of the spiritual relations.’ Then there’s his summary of Diotima’s account of ‘an unbroken ascent in erotic fulfillment’ from ‘truly polymorphous sexuality’ to ‘higher culture.’ He writes: ‘Spiritual “procreation” is just as much the work of Eros as is corporeal procreation, and the right and true order of the Polis is just as much an erotic one as is the right and true order of love. The culture-building power of Eros *is* non-repressive sublimation.’ And there follows Freud’s account of how the ‘biological drive becomes a cultural drive’ – not as insightful, for me, and derivative where it’s good. ... Here’s something else! He says Rousseau’s revolutionary impetus, the one that ends up in Marx, can be traced to Plato. Wish I’d remembered that too.⁷

‘Students,’ I went on, ‘have to be trained to give up their naïve response to Plato – that he’s enjoyable reading, a bit difficult, likely harmless or irrelevant. He’s made dead on the page from the first lecture. When I was assigned Popper as an undergrad, I thought he was preposterous. Makes as much sense to blame *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for Hitler and Stalin as it does the *Republic*. I’m glad we’re beyond this, I thought. Continental theorists couldn’t possibly be as misguided as the English-speaking types who even manage to misunderstand Shakespeare. And they’re not. Plato’s no crude totalitarian distributing his political blueprint in pamphlets. No, it’s his metaphysics that’s totalizing, they say, and it becomes historically active in the Enlightenment, from which liberal-democracy and totalitarianism both develop. That’s much more sophisticated! And then there are all those helpful defenses of Plato, making him relevant to modern circumstances by riffing on the cave allegory as a representation of the political realm per se. Same thing. All polities are intrinsically totalizing, closed horizons. To

avoid the worst, politically, persuade people to check-and-balance their little selfishnesses, and while they're preoccupied trying, escape into metaphysics for some R&R.

I'd rather watch a movie. Actually, I'm on my way to look for two that are smarter about Plato's critique of modernity than ... well, they're as good as Marcuse. Not documentary or art-house. But not Hollywood either. Foreign. A good movie can be a window to what's beyond Grant's impasse. A really good movie, I mean. Don't tell anyone I said that. In front of students, I make ranting McLuhanesque comparisons between Plato's cave and the phenomenology of watching a film or TV. It's surprising just how well Plato can account for an experience that's distinctively modern. I know that sounds trite. Call me old-fashioned. But why should I worry if stating the obvious makes me seem a rube befuddled by a cellphone? Staring at a computer screen isn't more sophisticated – as a theoretical problem, that is – and one needn't first become enthusiastically lost in its fantasy of interactivity to be able to understand it. The machinery's more complex, but its effects aren't. It would take heaping dollops of Continental theory to make the experience of online shopping seem less simple than it is. But sorting out the many layers of the confusion of reality and appearance in Hinckley's shooting of Reagan – now, that's complexity! Plato's account of the cave helps me understand the broader effects of the psychic and intellectual passivity associated with all the screen-watching we do: it corrupts the formation of character and judgment; it affects our ability to participate reasonably in a conversation, unless screen-images are themselves the topic; and consequently, it erodes all other grounds on which we might develop friendships. We're endlessly passive spectators of a cascade of new realities.

'The movies I'm looking for get Plato. Bertolucci's *Conformist*, the one he made just before *Last Tango*, and an Irish gangster flick called *I Went Down*. Both hard to find.⁸ I want to watch them again tonight because – believe it or not – they both use the *Republic* in their screenplays, in an academically scandalous fashion, and they get its political philosophy right. One's a tragedy, the other's a comedy, and both have a sense of the literary qualities of the *Republic*. The cave is the centerpiece of Bertolucci's movie. Not just as an aesthetic device. He uses it to analyze the character of modernity, particularly the Italian fascist regime. McPherson and Breathnach, the writer and director of *I Went Down*, use pretty much everything else in the *Republic* – and a few other dialogues – in an Aristophanic manner; and, despite the comic front, their movie is primarily about understanding justice in the modern world. Together, they've got

it all covered. Not only innovative readings of Plato, but a Platonic critique of modernity in both its totalitarian and liberal-democratic forms, and even hints of a reflective critique of film-making as the modern sophistic.'

All very entertaining, isn't it? Me, going on like this. If I want it to seem anything like the dialogue it was, I ought to give Gad a few lines now and then.

We reached Suspect and began to look around. I despise video stores. They're the Anti-library. They're all dank ditches in one of the lowest circles of hell. Everyone roams around speechlessly – lost, dead souls driven by the memory of a peculiar lust; and every anticipated satisfaction snatched from the churning stream of illusions turns into a familiar, boring nightmare the moment it's rented. Even Video Paradiso, the pinnacle of Claremont culture, you ask? Sure. The foreign movies there are to die for – and so perfectly organized – but end up in a conversation with the all-too-helpful staff and you never escape. The Suspects were the usual sort: they denied ever having heard of either movie. We found *The Conformist* misfiled in Action. No luck with the other one. But then, a strange encounter in Comedy. An old, gaunt fellow – pale too, like he never saw the sun – noticed me getting panicky and asked what the problem was. Very knowledgeable. When he heard we needed *I Went Down*, he pondered some and did *not* suggest a porn shop. 'Won't be easy,' he said. 'You'll have to go to Queen Video. Maybe go to all the Queens. Miles to go before you sleep.'

Gad was heading back to Kensington, but he agreed to take a detour by the park with me. The pool makes the air fresher, though the dogs can be a nuisance. I had it in mind to tell him how I'd often have to go looking for my mother there. Along the way, we had to pass the bar in which she used to go drinking. The doors were open, so I looked in. It's a nightclub now. An all-girl band was playing loudly. Gad plugged his ears and said something I couldn't hear. I made more of an effort when he repeated it, but I was too distracted by the motion of all those beautiful, confused kids. One in particular, a barely dressed blonde, stood out against the background when she stopped dancing. She reminded me of the opening scene of *Contempt*. I dragged Gad away and sublimated everything into a lecture on Bertolucci's use of Plato.

Now that I think of it, the opening scene of *The Conformist* mirrors the opening of *Contempt*. A couple in bed; he's dressed, she's not. The red, white and blue blocks of lighting. Bertolucci's sharp! Or used to be.

‘The screenplay of *The Conformist* isn’t based on the *Republic*. It’s based on a novel by Moravia. Bertolucci radically transforms the book, and for the better. He seems to have been motivated by Godard's *Contempt*, also based on a Moravia novel. Godard's movie is brilliant. It discusses the *Odyssey* and brings it into the present through a writer's struggles to turn it into a screenplay. In the process, the relation of Odysseus and Penelope becomes the standard against which the writer's troubled marriage is measured, and the poor guy knows it. Bertolucci tries to outdo Godard's use of ancient sources. He takes Moravia's novel about the life and death of a fascist informant, strips it of Moravia's moralism and pietism, keeping only the story's framework, and then reworks everything by adding the *Republic*.

‘Here’s how Bertolucci tells the story. Marcello Clerici is raised in an impoverished bourgeois family. The father's in an asylum because of something in the first World War. The mother's a decadent, sleeping with the chauffeur who supplies her with morphine. As a pubescent schoolboy, Marcello has an encounter with another chauffeur, Lino, that profoundly affects him. Lino's something between a pedophile and a pederast. He abducts Marcello, who manages to escape by shooting Lino with his own revolver. Marcello grows up wrestling not only with the guilt of having killed a man but also with doubts about his own sexuality. As a university student, Marcello is drawn to ancient philosophy by Prof Quadri, even planning to write a thesis on Plato's cave with him before sliding into ABD limbo. When Mussolini comes to power and Quadri escapes to France, Marcello offers his services to the fascists. Why? Because he wants to conform. He thinks that marrying a petty-bourgeois bed-and-kitchen type and serving the regime will atone for the sins of his youth. The Church is irrelevant as a dispenser of forgiveness; the party has taken over that social function. The fascists don't trust him because he doesn't come to them for any of the usual reasons – fear, money, fanaticism – but they accept his proposal to finger Quadri in Paris and then gradually compel him to agree to do the killing himself. The more he's coerced, however, the more reluctant Marcello becomes. And when he's in Paris, visiting the Professor, other things come up to trouble him. Quadri uses a discussion of Marcello's abandoned thesis as an occasion to account convincingly for the nature of fascism, and also to begin an analysis of Marcello's peculiar psychosis. What’s more, Marcello falls in love with the Professor's young wife, Anna.

‘The long-standing psychic conflict between Marcello’s anti-conformism and his conformist desire to purge it because of what it led him to do now comes to a head. Instead of

resolving it, Marcello tries to have it both ways: he tries to have the Professor killed and to run off with Anna. However, the Quadris are both murdered and Marcello does nothing, incapable of participating in the killings, or of acting to save them, or of dying with them. By the end of the war, Marcello has become an unhappy, insignificant state functionary. When the regime falls, he goes to the Coliseum to watch the spectacle. And there he discovers a much older Lino, still alive, still enticing young boys. The movie ends with Marcello bewildered by the revelation of his innocence, his carefully constructed normality completely shattered.

‘The providential ending of Moravia's original story, and everything associated with a Christian sense of a fallen nature and need for absolution, is gone. In its place, Bertolucci substitutes a psychoanalytic explanation. He presents Marcello's character as horribly deformed, a tragic monstrosity.⁹ And paralleling the psychoanalysis is Bertolucci's vaguely Marxist analysis of the nature of modern regimes.¹⁰ Forget his class analysis, though. He's better at depicting the decadence of modernity than reflecting about it, and best of all at presenting the rapport between sexuality and politics. In *The Conformist*, there's a nice Marcusean sense to his presentation of the problematic relation between psyche and polity. In his subsequent movies, the relation falls apart: there's a vulgar-Marxist epic, Freudian explorations of incest and innocence, even some Hollywood Buddhism.’

'Maybe he's a one-hit wonder, like the guy who did *Gods and Monsters*.'

'In *The Conformist* his integrity doesn't slip, though. I'd like to think it's because the screenplay stays true to Plato, and in particular to the typology of unjust souls and regimes in Books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*, in which the corruption of the psyche and the corruption of the polity are parallel and interdependent movements, with a slight edge given to psyche as the shaping force. Money and faction are always important – that's Plato's political economy and class analysis. But the emergence of the psyche's restrained or hidden desires, manifest in generational changes within family relations – that's the motor of history driving polities toward tyranny. Bertolucci's portrayal of fascism is similar. Its development as a reaction to post-war decadence is presented in the context of Marcello's familial and sexual relations. If the democrat's secret desire to satisfy all his passions can't distinguish between the best and the worst, then the rule of democrats would produce a society simultaneously exhilarating and decadent, and that's what the time of Marcello's youth was like. Bertolucci's fascists certainly have tyrannical souls: there are a few ideological dreamers, but most of them are brutal men who

long to act out their crudest fantasies, like the fellow who thinks "cowards, homosexuals and Jews" should be killed at birth.

'However, fascism isn't ancient tyranny in modern dress, or even tyranny supplemented with an oligarchic reaction to modern democracy and a few timocratic trappings. Conformism makes it different. And for Bertolucci, conformism has psychic roots: it emerges from our reactions to our passions. I don't want to underestimate the importance of Christianity in his political analysis. The Christian understanding of humanity's fallen nature, and of the institutions necessary to atone for sinfulness, create many of the conditions necessary for the development of conformism. Nevertheless, for Bertolucci, the Church is no longer the main thing. What's primarily important is the psycho-sexual reason Marcello assumes it's necessary to pay a price to society by using one sin to atone for another.

'Marcello's problem isn't repressed homosexuality. As an adult, he shows no interest in other men, and little in women until he meets Anna Quadri. The problem is that the development of his pubescent, normally confused sexuality was traumatized by his encounter with, and apparent killing of Lino. Although Bertolucci ends *The Conformist* with a haunting scene in which Marcello seems drawn to the young boy Lino had been seducing at the Coliseum, I think Marcello is finally confronting his innocence, not any deep homosexual tendencies. There might be some truth to the argument that conformism is intrinsically homoerotic because it's love of the same, but the closure to the other that's the foundation of totalitarianism is manifest in Marcello's psyche as a massively repressed *eros*. "Surplus repression" doesn't quite capture it. And it's Anna who first opens him up, exposing his impotence. When his constructed normality is in ruins at the Coliseum, he's finally a free man. In principle. The movie ends with a traumatic sexual liberation. The political consequences of the moment? I don't know.

'The most politically revelatory moment of *The Conformist*, for me, comes in the middle of the movie, not at the end. When Marcello first meets Anna, any erotic stirrings he might have are immediately sublimated into his discussion of the cave with Quadri. They don't go through the whole account in the *Republic*, only the initial ascent. They also reminisce a bit about the Professor's lectures. There's a deliberate and attractive symmetry in the movie: the dialogic recounting of the details of the ascent; the recollection of the lecture hall, the blinds of which the Professor shut at the beginning of lecture; and the study in which their discussion is taking place, its blinds partly shut to recreate the lecture hall. Marcello is a shadow on the study wall. He

recalls how the cave's prisoners "entirely resemble us." And how they take as real the shadows cast by objects carried above a wall behind them. As he gestures to illustrate the height of the wall, his shadow is shown in a fascist salute. Not much more needs to be said. There's neither a scholarly exegesis of the text as an allegory for Plato's epistemology or metaphysics nor an interpretation of it as an allegory for the political realm. The cave, ruled by sophistic-tyrannical souls, is the totalitarian regime, not the polity. That's Bertolucci's reading of it, and he's right. Marcello understands the significance of the Professor's explicit comparisons of the cave and the regime, but his initial reaction is hostile. He accuses him: "You left and I became a fascist." The Professor replies, "A confirmed fascist doesn't talk like that." As he says it, he opens the blinds and the sunlight washes away Marcello's shadow.

'So how does Bertolucci's take on fascism as conformity apply to us? He doesn't say. But it's not an empty silence. He makes the audience confront things directly with a stunning bit of cinematography. When the study is being made to resemble the cave, for a moment – just long enough to raise a question – there's nothing on the screen but the dark study wall.'

We'd set out for the Queen farthest from Suspect and were about half-way. There was an odd look on Gad's face, a mix of discontent and patience, more the former. It might have been from the multiple tediums of having to suffer someone else's belaboured analysis of an unseen movie, or from the steady build-up of irritation that comes from being forced into the role of Socratic interlocutor, the punctuating grunts of which I haven't been reporting, or from the annoyance of having missed several convenient opportunities to get away politely. I interpreted it as hunger. To keep his company a while longer, I offered dinner at the Caribbean place near the video store. After apologizing for subjecting him to a Reg Hartt intro, I offered a cartoon break: there'd be tears of laughter as I recounted the jokes in *I Went Down*. And then, just like Reg, I continued lecturing. But Gad had better success breaking in, sometimes even with the punch lines.

'There's an easy familiarity with Plato's dialogues, as an Irish Classics Professor might have summarized them, in *I Went Down*. There's also a fine comic sensibility in the movie, entirely natural. McPherson uses a free hand in rewriting the *Republic*, reading it as a work of literature in the epic tradition, which it is, but also as an intrinsically humorous one, which it also is, despite its rep.¹¹ How can an Irish gangster flick that's part mythological quest and part

Aristophanic commentary on the *Republic* not be funny? The bonus is that it's also an unusually insightful reading of Plato. If you can spot it.

'The two main characters are Bunny, the Socrates figure, and Git, who's all the sons of Ariston rolled into one, including Plato. Bunny and Git are definitely not the polished statues of the tradition; they're Socrates and Plato still in formation. And the plot of the *Republic* – as experienced, not as recounted – is the basis for the story of how they became who they are.'

'An *exposé*.'

'Right. Both are cons who've done time – gone down. Bunny once even stuffed his grandfather into a dustbin during an argument.'

'A reference to the *Clouds*, after Beckett ...'

'But they're also moral guys. It's just that the conflict between their rough-hewn characters and their even rougher circumstances always seems to get them into trouble. Woman-trouble, for instance. We don't see much of Bunny's wife, a Xanthippe to whom he's nevertheless stubbornly loyal. She eventually leaves him, their relationship ruined by his long imprisonment. Git does less time. He becomes a con out of loyalty, taking the fall for his father, no less ...'

'... the beginning of the *Euthyphro* ...'

'... and during his stretch, his girlfriend leaves him for his best friend, Anto. When he gets out of prison, he tries to remain loyal to both of them, and that's how he gets into the trouble that sets the whole story in motion.

'In the *Republic*, the discussion of justice starts from differences of opinion: is justice paying debts and telling the truth? or helping friends and harming enemies? or simply the advantage of the stronger? These differences come into conflict existentially for Git and he has to work them out in practice. At the pub, he sees Anto being taken into the back room, where several thugs threaten to hammer his fingers for non-payment of a debt: he owes a large sum to Tom French, the bar owner and local Don. Git refuses to allow this to happen. In the ensuing fight, one of the thugs, French's nephew, loses an eye. Now Git owes French too.'

'An eye for an eye?'

'Yeah, but French has something else in mind: "This is what I need you to do to make it right," he says. And a complicated plot unfolds in which Git works his way clear, not only to a better understanding of justice, but also to a better way of life.

‘French sends Git from Dublin to Cork on a job, keeping Anto hostage. The driver for the job is Bunny. Bunny isn’t one of French’s men, but French has some power over him: not a debt, but rather some information best kept secret. Bunny later confesses it to Git: "There was a ... a man, a man I shared a cell with, for two three months. And what went on. It wasn’t ... I’m not a queer, but Tom French ... says he’ll tell. ... My wife doesn’t know. And that’d tear it."’

‘... Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium* – the esoteric reading ...’

‘French’s job for them seems innocent enough: they’re to drive someone to Cork to see Frank Grogan, an old friend and comrade. It’s soon obvious that French wants Grogan dead, but we don’t immediately know why. Bunny prefers to know nothing about it, but Git’s sense of justice won’t allow him to do anything that might cause others, including Grogan, to be injured – except in self-defense.’

‘... the Socrates of the *Apology*, refusing to be implicated by the Tyrants’ order to apprehend whatzhisname ...’

‘Not that Git, and Bunny, and everyone watching the film doesn’t want some grievous harm to come to Grogan. At one point, with his gun pointed at Grogan’s face, Bunny yells, "you motormouth fucking eejit," and you have to sympathize. He’s such an irritating, garrulous liar that he’s kept in the car’s trunk most of the time.

‘Now, why does French have it in for Grogan? It seems Grogan’s been having an affair with French’s wife, but that’s just the surface. The deeper reason comes out at the end of the movie, and the revelation of the back-story is one of the more perceptive reworkings of the *Republic*. When they were young punks, Tom and Frank ran with Sonny Mulligan, the most successful gang-leader of the time. They were close. But when Sonny acquired two counterfeit plates, front and back, to print US twenties, there was a falling-out. The younger guys got greedy. Sonny ended up dead, shot by Grogan. Somehow, Grogan and French separately ended up in possession of one of the plates, each of which was obviously useless without the other. Sonny’s body was buried in a wood. Grogan and French buried the plates there too, each only knowing the location of his own. And that’s how things remained until Git and Bunny arrive to dig them up with Grogan and French years later.

‘Once you remember that, in the *Republic*, philosophy ascends toward the good as sight turns toward the sun, and that the antithesis of Socratic justice is the injustice of tyranny and

sophistry – Presto: Sonny is entirely a creature of the greatest counterfeit good these days: money, American dollars.'

'... a creature of a counterfeit of a counterfeit ...'

'Tom and Frank, who divide up Sonny's regime, are two sides of the same coin: Tom has brutal power and Frank can talk; tyranny and sophistry, neither of which can succeed for long without the other. For most of the movie, it seems that together they can get away with murder; and at the end, it seems that one of them will get away with everything. Instead, they get what they deserve. When Git digs up the second plate and hands it over to Frank, he discovers something else buried with it. Git and Bunny pull out a canvas bag, and out pops Sonny's corpse.'

'...Er's return from the dead ...'

'Sonny's cameo isn't to tell the story of what he saw. Instead, the corpse prompts Tom and Frank to tell the truth and – finally – nothing but the truth about the past. Things get intense, Tarrantino-style. Tom and Frank end up dead. They're last seen curled up in Sonny's grave, each with his head at the other's feet – the image of the punishment of unjust souls in Er's tale – and when Git finishes burying them, we're sure they won't be returning from Tartarus.

'The movie's almost entirely made up of witty references to the *Republic*. The longer you look, the more you see. For example, the places they go on the road trip, and in particular the bars and hotels, are the various cities in speech. Their troubles start in French's bar, the Concorde Lounges, just as Socrates' troubles begin at Cephalus' house when justice ...'

'... concord? ...'

'... becomes an issue. Their trip is seriously underway, and they're required to begin improvising, when they're at the Ideal Shopping Center. First stop: a rural village. We see no inhabitants, only cows. The car they steal here is a broken-down heap and has a bag of manure in the trunk.'

'And which city is that, I wonder?'

'No relishes until they get to a place that Bunny says is "civilisation" – it has a Cabaret. Their next major stop is the Black and Amber Inn, where they go to look for Grogan. Its name might refer to a lousy mixed beer, perhaps local team colors, but I think it also refers to the Black and Tans ...'

'... the troops of the British garrison ...'

'... In the *Republic*, with relishes come the soldiers necessary to acquire and guard them, and with the soldiers comes the need to bridle their aggression. It's here that Git and Bunny find the house in which Grogan is staying with a band of crooks. Bunny gives Git some quick training in the use of firearms and they succeed in breaking in and abducting Grogan.

'Eventually, they check in to the Ambassador Hotel where there's cable, a pool, a nightclub. After tying Grogan to a bed, Git and Bunny go out to have some fun, and they even get lucky. But while they're gone, Grogan escapes. He hides out at the swank Slieve Na Vogue Hotel, the height of luxury, where they recapture him. From this point on, things degenerate quickly. In other words, the building of the city in speech is over, and the mistake has been made that causes everything to unravel. And in place of Socrates' catalogue of inferior towns, there's a car chase, with shooting, that gets us to the woods in which Sonny and the plates are buried.'

'If the road trip follows the map of the *Republic*, there ought to be some education going on.'

'There is. Git and Bunny end up changed. No radical transformations. More a gradual drawing out of natural intelligence and moral sensibilities. Bunny, for example, is very much a caricature of the "historic" Socrates. He's barely literate: a few times he's shown moving his lips as he reads a paperback Western called *Deadly Justice*. Nevertheless, he's attracted to the power of the *elenchos* and to dialectic, even though he has difficulty using them. The *elenchos* appears in his charming habit of attempting to list his reasons against something. When Grogan's talk gets to him, he says: "Would you fucking shut up? ... the fucking thing is, I mean, we don't know if: ... One, you're bullshitting us. Two, if you're lying, or three, what the fuck is going on." His dialectic is a bit rough too, but not as belligerent. Early on, he dismisses Git's plan of action by saying, "Well, that's one theory." When Git insists, he continues: "I know what you're saying. But ... what are you basing your opinion on?" "I'm not blaming you for your opinions," he says. He just wants to keep "an open mind." And the best practice for Bunny? "I think I wanna see when I get there. Do you see what I'm saying?"

'And if Git is a young Plato ...?'

'He learns about the cave the hard way. The scene in which Bunny saves Git's life is a straight rewrite. It's a suitably bleak setting: a wreck of a railway garage on a deserted bog; a tarpaulin sheet spread on the floor and the only person there, a man known as the "friendly face," is a hired executioner. When Git delivers Frank there, Git's innocence and confusion

immediately make him suspicious and he's ordered onto the sheet as well. Frank ignores the gun at his head and calmly buys his way out, leaving Git to die without a second thought. It's then that Bunny, armed, shows himself. As it turns out, no one gets killed. But not because of an appeal to moral principle. Rather, it takes Bunny's prudent use of force to bring that about. The outlines of the cave are clear, I think: the prisoner's predicament; the equivalence of tyrannical power and sophistic lying in those who rule the cave ...'

'... the blindness of an ex-prisoner forced to return to his seat; his failure at the customary games ...'

'... and the philosopher's appearance as his saviour. With a nice practical use of the dialectic too: Bunny says, "There better be a very good explafuckination for this." For me, the important thing in the film's interpretation is that its cave, though real enough, even common, is an extreme; it's not an image of polity or society per se.

'And there's another use of the cave image that ties politics to sex. Bunny and Git have some small revenge on Grogan at the Ambassador Hotel: they tie him to the bed and leave him to watch television while they get away.'

'... the bound prisoner again ...'

'But they don't leave the hotel-room prison to study metaphysics. They're out drinking, dancing and looking for sex. Where does this come from? Textually, I mean. Plato's take on erotics is in the *Symposium*. It's not usually associated with these passages of the *Republic*. Scholars in all camps swear that the *Symposium* and *Republic* contradict one another. I think Breathnach and McPherson are on to something important when they bring them together. In the movie, it's *eros* for the lads, and it's Grogan who's bound and forced to study. The Open University comes on the TV, and he can't change the channel while the fundamental theorems of algebra are rehearsed and the development of complex numbers into planes is explained. Meanwhile, Bunny and Git have an intimate conversation at the bar, mostly first and second wave stuff but discussed, one might say, with psychic openness to the substance of Diotima's highest revelations. Bunny works on his "theory about the ladies," that "maybe ugly birds are better." He and Git discuss the problems they've had with women because of their imprisonments. And then the real thing. Git sees a woman to whom he's immediately attracted, obviously an equal. When the boys are in the john, Bunny notices Git's erection, with some fondness, maybe nostalgia too ...'

‘... like Socrates enjoying himself at the beginning of the *Charmides* ...’

‘... and with the enthusiasm of a philosopher-king arranging matches, Bunny does what's necessary to get them together for the night. However, he also makes a mistake in his calculations. While Bunny's having his own one-night stand, Grogan manages to escape. How that turns out, you already know.’

‘No need to tell the tale twice.’

We'd made it to Queen Video and were looking for the Foreign section.

‘There's an Epilogue to *I Went Down* too. It's not based on the *Republic*, but it is about its significance.’

‘Oh?’

‘Everything's been made right. Enemies defeated; friends protected and benefited; no one harmed unnecessarily in the process. Justice is preferable, QED. Then Bunny and Git decide to go to America. They've either been using the plates to print twenties, or they've sold them for a nice sum. But if they're the Socrates and Plato figures, how to interpret their decision to emigrate, using counterfeit money to establish themselves in a counterfeit society? Bunny even says the States is "brilliant."’

‘A PoMo comment on the origins of modernity in Platonism?’

‘A Straussian comment about the same thing as noble lie?’

‘The Irish like to think problems originate elsewhere. Could be a comfortable dig at the US as Hollywood/Babylon. Are they waiting for someone like Oona's Governor to become President? Isn't it obvious enough that the US is already Hollywood with real guns?’

‘But is it the pre- or post-Terminator era? And do the guns bring Hollywood or does Hollywood bring the guns?’

I Went Down was there. So was Bertolucci's *Dreamers*. While we were waiting to pay, I mentioned that I'd seen it and told him about my favourite line. During the May '68 riots, one of the characters says that Mao isn't a tyrant but rather the greatest sort of film-maker. Bertolucci obviously knows that the claim is reversible – film-makers are our society's dictators – and truer that way too.

Down the road to the Caribbean restaurant. Even though the place was deserted, it took forever to get our food. The cook was working alone that night and in no hurry to have us leave. It was a pleasure to rest for a while, breathing in the curry and listening to her Calypso Rose and

Brother Resistance tunes. Then she got a call on her cell and started to talk loudly and in great detail about problems in her love life, so we went outside to wait on the bench. I picked up where we'd left it, ragging on Hollywood as the video store in the Inferno, but Gad cut me short.

'Don't expect to get away that easily. A few jokes and mess of vegetarian take-out won't buy me off. You said that, together, these two movies had it all covered. I don't see it. Sure, there's something clever about their uses of Plato, but do they add up to a coherent political critique? Putting aside the issue of whether you can take film as the quintessence of technology, that is – with or without Grant's help in identifying technology and modernity. If *The Conformist* says the cave is fascism – or even authoritarianism or the tendency to totality – and suggests there's something political outside, what would it be? The Ireland of *I Went Down*? Or the part of Ireland that the movie suggests is outside the cave of gangsterism? And what would *that* be? If Bertolucci's right about conformism being the common feature of totalitarian and liberal regimes, then maybe *I Went Down* is right too: there's only the States. Modernity is the universal and homogeneous cave, in which only the States is brilliant because it has the monopoly of fire-power. If hit-men and neo-Nazis get away with murder in the darker corners, they're only digging small caves beneath the cave. I don't see any other way that even the best Plato could be made to account for the States' ability to create new realities at will.'

'But that *is* Grant's identification of technology and modernity, with or without US imperialism as the material or efficient cause. We'd be stuck in Grant's impasse with no reasonable escape. Except, for him, Simone Weil's *gnosis*. And, for you, the equivalent in Levinas? What's the political consequence? Supporting Israel? What happens to Marcusean resistance then? I've been told that Levinas isn't too good at describing relatively non-surplus-repressive sexuality and community and what's to be done to get them. That's what I like about these movies. In both of them, what's outside the cave is a realm of the relatively non-surplus-repressive that doesn't seem impracticable, foreign or exclusive. I can see myself stepping into it. There are others there too. And friendship is possible. I can't be friends with the Levinasian other, can I? The way I can be friends with you, I mean, and have things in common? If not, then the other, for me, is something like a combination of an infinite regress, a rhetorical trumping device, and an overstretched evangelical sensibility. Didn't Nietzsche write "I do not teach you the other, but the friend" in *Zarathustra*?'

'The neighbour, not the other ...'

‘And neighbour *doesn’t* mean the other in the revelatory tradition Nietzsche is rejecting? After the exegetical battles in which Christians and Jews argue themselves to a draw, I mean. And if it’s the *love* of neighbour part that’s a problem, then doesn’t loveless responsibility to the other reduce nicely to the liberal ethic?’

Just as I was beginning to think I was in over my head, our food was ready. Although the cook’s distraction cost us time, it paid off in other ways. I’d ordered what I thought was enough for several people, but I discovered she’d been so generous with the portions – to say nothing of the plastic cutlery – that there’d be plenty to share with anyone we found at home at Em’s. If we made it, that is. Cutting through traffic while balancing bags of hot take-out and keeping up a conversation was more of a challenge than I’d expected. When we were nearly blind-sided by an F150 that came from nowhere – Alberta plates – I asked Gad to wave a paper napkin as a white flag just to get us across the street. Once we were on the side-streets and the din of the road wars was well behind us, I had a question to ask him.

‘I might have been wrong about the significance of the final scene of *The Conformist*. While I was thinking about what relatively non-surplus-repressive sexuality might be, the scene came back to mind. There might be more Marcuse than Plato in Bertolucci’s imagery – or rather, Bertolucci seems to be using more of Plato’s imagery than I’d thought, but with a Marcusean intent. And if my suspicion is right, my whole argument might just unravel. I’d like to know what you think.

‘In both *The Conformist* and *I Went Down*, all politics is sexual politics; the character of a regime is best understood by considering the *eros* of its citizens or subjects. In both movies, *eros* is primarily a present absence. The most erotic longing Marcello and Git and Bunny have is the longing *for eros*. And it becomes political: when they experience intimations of it, they also want the freedom necessary for it to be fulfilled, the freedom to live their lives according to its requirements, to live according to the needs of their friends and beloveds. But Marcello’s psychopathology is unusual. Understanding its erotics requires sorting out the difference between the tyrannical soul and the totalitarian or conformist soul. The tyrannical soul doesn’t assume that its worst desires are the only ones; nor does it recoil from those desires and attempt to construct an artifice of normality to deny, avoid or control them. And these aspects of conformism originate in the doctrine of humanity’s sinful, fallen condition, a condition that’s not natural, in the sense of being given, but rather one that’s created by the institutionalization of the

doctrine itself. In the *Republic*, Plato doesn't develop a psychopathology of that sort of soul. Until now, I'd thought the best text from which to work one up was the *Symposium*. Imagine a comparison of the erotics of the *Symposium* – some combination of the eulogies of Aristophanes, Socrates and Alcibiades – and Christian understandings of sexuality. Or more dramatically, if Plato could have had a Christian crash the party – I won't speculate about David and Solomon or about Hosea – his eulogy would be a rewrite of the cave.'

'He could offer Eros some poisoned wine. The Pope's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, began with a reference to Nietzsche's aphorism about Eros degenerating into vice.¹² Protesting too much, I thought.'

'And about his assimilation of Aristophanes' eulogy and *Genesis* you say nothing?'

'It's at least as good as Strauss's reading.'¹³

'... *The Conformist*. While I was talking with you, I came to realize that the imagery of the cave is used to depict Marcello's sexuality in the final scene of the movie. I hadn't seen it before.

'You remember: Marcello discovers that Lino is still alive. He finds him seducing a willing street kid at the Coliseum. After he rants some in his confusion, and Lino makes his escape, Marcello collects himself. The scene is a set of stairs leading up to a gated pathway into the Coliseum. The young fellow has a bed and some furniture at the top of the stairs. There's also a small fire burning. Marcello sits down on the stairs to consider what's happened. In the meanwhile, the boy takes off his clothes, gets on the bed, blows out the candles and begins cranking a record-player. Some scratchy pre-war tune. The fire lights Marcello's face as he turns to look up the stairs, through the open gate, at the boy. It's a beautiful close-up, held for a long time. That's how the movie ends. The scene has always captivated me, and I finally know why. It's the cave. The prisoner turning his head toward the fire behind the wall, ... it's all there. But there's a boy – a pederastic beloved – at the top of the stairs.'

'The cave *and* the wrong eulogy from the *Symposium*. You're right: there goes your innocence.'

'It's worse. I didn't tell you that when Lino makes his escape, he runs *up* the stairs, along the pathway and out the door!'

The timing worked out perfectly. We got to Em's place just as we began discussing Marcello's quandary. Gad seemed resigned to watching the movies with me after dinner.

Her housemates were in the backyard cooling off by the sprinkler. We flustered them when we appeared suddenly through the laundry drying on the line. Even the landlord's bulldogs were caught off-guard – too busy chewing on something to bark; or maybe they knew us for friends. The girls were reticent at first – crusty profs can have that effect – but they warmed up and chatted amiably after we laid out the food and invited them to join us. When we'd satisfied our hunger and opened some wine, and the girls had gone their separate ways, the refreshing night breezes brought me to that wonderful sense of being beyond the world and its cares, beyond even its lesser glories.

I asked Gad, 'Is life blessed? or is it enough to love it?'

'Nietzsche sounds too much like Luther in that aphorism. Why make the distinction?'

'Are you teaching any Nietzsche this year? ... Oh, that reminds me! I meant to tell you earlier that I recommended your course to Emma. When she gets home, I'll introduce you. Won't that be a surprise? I mention your course just as she's leaving for work, and when she gets home, there you are watching her TV! Do you think that's too pushy? I mean, I wouldn't want to seem like Strepsiades.'

'No cheap shots.'

There's more, of course. It'll have to wait. The night was overwatched; the morning and the day as well. The afternoon sleeps so peacefully. I'm tired, nodding. But it was worthwhile trying to squeeze it all into one message.

Gina's just written me. That was fast.

When *The Conformist* ended, I got to wondering about the significance of the song the boy plays. All I found in the credits was *Chi è più felice di me?* First thing this morning, I wrote to ask Gina if she'd ever heard of it. As it happens, she's in Detroit visiting family. She asked her mother about it over breakfast. Her mother remembered only the title, not the tune. So Gina called and asked me to sing it for her. You can imagine. She thought she recognized a song she'd heard often in her youth, but was sure it wasn't *Chi è più felice di me?* Gina writes that her mother became so exasperated trying to remember the song's lyrics that she picked up the phone – they still use a land line – and called her sister in Italy. After a few minutes, her aunt began singing it, her mother picked it up, and Gina even joined in for the choruses.

Oh, they must have burned up the transatlantic cable. I can hear their voices. Will they wake me?

The notes to the text of the e-mail have been added by the editor.

¹ Dennis Lee, *Nightwatch: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1996* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), 167-204. The correspondence discussed is in the Archives at the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto, MS Coll. 358, Box 19, folders 2-5.

² Panel on Plato's *Republic*, *Hermeneutics and Structuralism: Merging Horizons*, Conference at York University, November 22-24, 1978. See *Voegelin in Toronto* DVD (Wagner Columbus Publishing, 2008).

³ Dennis Lee, 'Grant's Impasse,' in P.C. Emberley, editor, *By Loving Our Own: George Grant and the Legacy of 'Lament for a Nation'* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), 11-39. See also Dennis Lee, 'Grant's Impasse,' in his *Body Music* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998), 129-160.

⁴ 'Il faut être absolument moderne.' Arthur Rimbaud, *Une Saison en Enfer (A Season in Hell)*, 1873.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 247c.

⁶ Plato, *Republic* 509b.

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 101-102, 114, 192-193, 206.

⁸ Paramount released *The Conformist* on DVD in December 2006.

⁹ 'Bertolucci on *The Conformist*,' interview with M. Goldin, in F. Gerard, T.J. Kline and B. Sklarew, editors, *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 66-68.

¹⁰ 'A Conversation with Bernardo Bertolucci,' interview with J. Mellen, *Bertolucci: Interviews*, 71.

¹¹ Conor McPherson, 'Introduction,' in his *I Went Down: The Shooting Script* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1997), vi.

¹² Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, available at:

<www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html>

¹³ Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, S. Benardete, editor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 119-142.