

BOOKS AND ISSUES

What Literary Criticism Cannot Do

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Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography, by Roger Shattuck, St. Martin's Press.

Forbidden Knowledge comes with a warning label: "Parents and teachers should be aware that chapter 7 does not make appropriate reading for children and minors." Figuring that any child or minor would read this sentence as enticement rather than prohibition, I turned first to chapter 7 in search of the good bits. Although "The Divine Marquis" is the best chapter in *Forbidden Knowledge*—it tells a fascinating story about the rehabilitation of the works of the Marquis de Sade—no teenager would read more than two or three pages before throwing down the book. Even the most persistent teen would need to wade through forty pages of intellectual history before reaching the inner sanctum. Another warning is posted at the door: "*To the reader*: In this section, I shall quote and discuss passages that many people will consider offensive and obscene in the extreme." Shattuck does quote two lurid passages, but as he admits, Sade's "comic-strip universe" seems more often bizarre than offensive. Ten pages *before* the second warning, however, Shattuck prints the only passage in *Forbidden Knowledge* that I would not want my children to read: the transcribed recording of a ten-year-old screaming for her mother while she's molested, tortured, and killed. Since the wisdom of the Wife of Bath appears as one of the book's epigraphs ("Forbode us thyng, and that desiren we"), it is hard not to feel that Shattuck's warnings are meant to be provocative.

Roger Shattuck believes that the age we live in is particularly bad: "At the end of the second millennium C.E., I believe we have arrived at a crisis in our lengthy undertaking to reconcile liberation and limits." In the scientific laboratory and the academic English department alike,

we have grown used to the idea that limitations exist merely to be transgressed. We have lost a common frame of cultural reference. We have developed weapons of unthinkable force; audiovisual media threaten to shape our lives as insidiously as genetic research. “Are there things we should *not* know?” asks Shattuck in the first sentence of *Forbidden Knowledge*. The question is not really open to consideration. Shattuck believes that we know too much, expect too much, ask for too much, and receive too much.

Having taught and written about literature for almost half a century, Shattuck now finds himself mired in what Richard Rorty has called the academic culture of “knowingness”—a culture in which we are encouraged to feel indignation rather than awe in the face of works of literature. There are signs, however, that the culture is not monolithic. Recently, in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, a dense and brilliant work of psychoanalytic film theory, Kaja Silverman pointed out that films occupy an “unconventional position” in her argument: they figure “less as objects which I interpret from a position of greater theoretical knowledge, than as guides which, like Socrates’ Diotima, have instructed me in the arts of love and productive looking.” This sentence seems to me astonishing. On the one hand, it is encouraging to see a critic so stalwartly resisting the culture of “knowingness”; Silverman argues that we should embrace and even harness aesthetic power rather than debunking it. On the other hand, it is startling to see a critic suggest so straightforwardly that such a position is unconventional. Silverman wants to challenge the culture of knowingness from within. Shattuck lives, or wants to live, in a world elsewhere.

That world is called the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, which Shattuck helped to found and which elected him its president in 1995. Dismayed by the ways in which overtly theoretical and political interests have come to dominate the Modern Language Association, the founders of the ALSC designed an academic association that (as Shattuck has recently put it in an essay called “Standing Up for Literature”) is “resolved firmly against taking any political or ideological position. Literature would have no rivals.” Just how bad have things gotten? Shattuck’s evidence is mostly anecdotal: the MLA paper titled

“Of AIDS, Cyborgs, and Other Indiscretions”; the student who, when asked to report on Emily Dickinson’s “A bird came down the walk,” suggests that the poem “is ‘really’ about a lesbian sexual encounter”; the professor who writes an essay on Frank O’Hara that turns out “to be an occasion to celebrate homosexuality on the basis of its alleged aesthetic and moral superiority.”

Roger Shattuck, Richard Rorty, and Kaja Silverman would agree about almost nothing except for the fact that English departments have cultivated a climate in which literature is more often debunked than admired or even read. And inasmuch as Shattuck, Rorty, and Silverman agree on this point, I am cheered by Shattuck’s attempts to reassert the value of art; I am emboldened by his desire to read literature as literature, not as a chip in some ongoing ideological poker game. But as soon as Shattuck’s argument moves from the general to the particular, I have to jump ship. Given that gay studies has become increasingly fashionable in the last several years, it could be a coincidence that most of Shattuck’s examples of what seem to him academic nonsense concern homosexuality. But half-baked or provocative versions of responsible arguments have been offered by students and professors for as long as there have been students and professors to offer them: why pick on gay studies? It is difficult not to feel that something other than the fate of literary criticism is weighing on Shattuck’s mind.

As Shattuck admits, the mission of his book is divided. On the one hand, *Forbidden Knowledge* offers what Shattuck calls a “history of stories” rather than a “history of ideas”: it examines a wide range of literary narratives and case histories that dramatize the seduction of forbidden knowledge. On the other hand, *Forbidden Knowledge* is a polemical condemnation of hubris: one feels here the weight of Shattuck’s alienation from the culture of knowingness, but one also feels that he has capitulated to its demands. Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* is similarly divided between intemperate tirades against the “school of resentment” and lovingly detailed readings of great works of literature. But it is possible, reading *The Western Canon*, to forget about the tirades and be seduced by Bloom’s indomitable enthusiasm for the

works he advocates. Reading *Forbidden Knowledge*, it is impossible ever to forget that we are listening to an angry man.

“Their cumulative effect is to eliminate the very category of literature,” says Shattuck of the political and theoretical interests he deplores: his own interests threaten to do the same thing. Rarely does he read a work of literature by attending to its language. The exception is a detailed commentary on a Dickinson poem; the rule is suggested by the notion that Emerson occasionally “plants a subtle truth” in his “succulent and sometimes fatuous prose.” Novels and poems exist for Shattuck mostly as moral exempli. “After cohabitating for many years with the corpus of Western literature,” he admits, “I sometimes wonder if it all could be reduced to a few simple stories.” There’s not much room for pleasure in this eagle-eyed point of view. In “The Far Side of Curiosity,” the first and most synoptic chapter in the book, Shattuck surveys a variety of Biblical and classical narratives: Prometheus and Pandora, the Tower of Babel, Cupid and Psyche, Odysseus, Oedipus, Lot, and Orpheus. As Shattuck reads them, all these stories argue against the human lust for forbidden knowledge: “Ignorance may not be bliss, but the observation of prudent restrictions on knowledge might have prevented the fate of Orpheus, of Icarus, and of Lot’s wife.”

In contrast, John Ashbery suggests in his poem “Syringa” that Orpheus would have lost Eurydice one way or another, since all beautiful, mortal things are lost: “one cannot guard, treasure/That stalled moment.” Perhaps what’s missing in Shattuck’s consideration of these stories is the recognition that we need not only to *heed* them but to *tell* them, especially when we fail to heed. Reading Montaigne, Shattuck praises him for his hearty undercuttings of human ambition (“On the highest throne in the world we can sit only on our own arse”), but laments that “Montaigne could not follow the advice he formulated out of his own experience.” Reading Augustine and Hobbes’s condemnations of unbridled curiosity, Shattuck laments that they “wrote these severe words in the midst of a project to discover and report knowledge about the how and why of human actions.” At moments like these, Shattuck seems strangely intolerant of human failure—with the part of

us that, while aiming higher, is nonetheless consoled in defeat by Orpheus's music. There's something desiccated about the need to read the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as little more than a parable about breaking the law and paying the price.

Although he asserts that forbidden knowledge may be ambiguous ("what we know" sometimes "confounds us by turning into its opposite"), Shattuck is unwilling to grapple with contradiction. He says that the "bantering style" of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* makes it "difficult to decide whether Laclos is condoning or condemning the exploits of his two dedicated *libertins*." He laments that the "moral of Faust's life and of Goethe's drama cannot be easily grasped" because it "lies deep in paradox and ambiguity." Shattuck has a particularly hard time coming to terms with *Faust*, which he criticizes for its wide variety of tones, ranging from serious to slapstick, and for its cantankerously baggy form. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is more to his liking: the book "never jests and never forgets that the artificial production of life carries dire consequences." The Marquis de Sade, as Shattuck reads him, is equally devoid of intentional comedy or irony, making him as easily dismissed as Mary Shelley is embraced. "A man can be only what he is and can imagine only according to his reach," wrote Montaigne: Shattuck adds that the "two instances of 'can' might well be read as 'should.'" Such rewriting—a conversion of proposition into proscription—is implicit throughout most of Shattuck's argument.

Although I'm sure it can't be true, *Forbidden Knowledge* consequently gives the impression of having been written by a man who dislikes literature—or at least by the kind of critic who wants, as Kenneth Burke once put it, "the seasoned stocks and bonds of set beliefs." But literature can only be diminished if we demand of it something it cannot do. Burke suggested that since ambiguity rather than certainty is literature's strong suit, we should see what effect ambiguity might have, rather than trying to wedge the square peg of literature into the round hole of certainty: "society might well be benefitted by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies." In contrast, Shattuck wants to shore up ready hierarchies and lay the foundations for some

new ones. “Imagine a literary game in which one is required to assign to famous figures the place they deserve in Dante’s three-decker-after-life,” suggests Shattuck. “Where would Faust go?” This game reduces us to maintaining that there is “greater strength of character” to be found in the protagonist of *La Princesse de Clèves* or in Emily Dickinson (“both in her poems and in her life”) than in Don Juan or Faust. It makes us choose between false alternatives: Mary Shelley’s judgment “is keener and more courageous” than Goethe’s; unlike Milton, she does not “redeem the destruction Frankenstein has left behind him” by embracing the doctrine of the “Fortunate Fall.”

What makes Shattuck’s knowingness all the more troubling, however, is that it knows no bounds: it’s one thing to reduce the Orpheus myth to a cautionary tale; it’s another to sum up a long reading of *Paradise Lost* with the notion that “Adam and Eve have learned their lesson.” Milton’s epic is a crucial work for Shattuck (a chastened Adam provides the title of Shattuck’s book when he says that he “sought/Forbidd’n knowledge by forbidd’n means”). And Shattuck focuses deftly on those moments in the poem when the angelic narrators chastise Adam for wanting to know about “things too high” or commend his desire for “knowledge within bounds.”

Heav’n is for thee too high
To know what passes there; be lowly wise:
Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
Dream not of other Worlds

Milton, who invokes the heavenly muse, who speaks not only with the voices of angels but the voice of God, wants us to feel his own predicament here—a fallen poet who dares to dream in twelve long books about “other Worlds.” Reading *Paradise Lost* as a cautionary tale, Shattuck cannot afford to recognize that Milton self-consciously writes a fallen epic, one in which issues of hubris and humility are implicit in the very texture of the poetry.

Most oddly, Shattuck must read the doctrine of the Fortunate Fall as a consolation prize that Adam and Eve do not deserve—something that, like Mary Shelley, Milton might have had the courage to omit

from the story. In the final book of *Paradise Lost* (where Milton's verse is itself subdued, checking the poem's hubris), the angel Michael tells Adam about Jesus's life and death, leaving Adam—like Milton, like readers of the poem—poised uneasily between the Ascension and the Second Coming: “thou hast attain'd the sum/Of wisdom; hope no higher,” says Michael. “We can read *Paradise Lost* as a tale about the downward path to wisdom,” admits Shattuck, “a path that must lead through the experience of sin.” Do we have much of a chance to do otherwise? *Paradise Lost* stakes all of human history on the Fortunate Fall: because of his earlier hubris, not in spite of it, Adam attains “the sum/Of wisdom”—the knowledge of Christ and the possibility of redemption. And when he tells the angel that he is not sure if he should “repent” or “rejoice,” he must do both. Reading *Paradise Lost* as one more story in which overreaching humans “suffer dire consequences when they break a prohibition,” Shattuck would have Adam merely repent. He admits that the Fortunate Fall was “adopted as Christian doctrine during the Middle Ages,” but nonetheless maintains that because “Milton depicted the Garden of Eden as the scene not of a tragedy but of a Fortunate Fall,” *Paradise Lost* proposes “a relaxation of both classic and Christian moral traditions.” If Shattuck seems more unforgiving than Milton's God it is because he sees redemption as a gift to Adam alone—the protagonist in a morality play—while Milton sees it as a gift to everyone.

Forbidden Knowledge is divided into two parts (“Literary Narratives” and “Case Histories”), and one feels Shattuck's prose gain new momentum as he leaves literature behind in the second half of the book. Shattuck's power as a critic has always turned on his ability to tell stories about authors and their works; *The Banquet Years* is itself a great literary narrative. And throughout the second half of *Forbidden Knowledge*, Shattuck tells dramatic stories about recombinant DNA, the Manhattan Project, the Human Genome Project, and Himmler's *Lebensborn* program. This is the most satisfying part of the book. Shattuck is especially adept at demonstrating the ways in which scientists have disguised the potentially harmful effects of their discoveries by emphasizing an artificially pure notion of “pure” research. But his

prose is even more compelling when he narrates the story of Sade's rehabilitation. In 1810, the Bibliothèque Nationale created a special collection called *L'enfer*: here the works of the Marquis de Sade more or less remained until Guillaume Apollinaire published a selection in 1909. Shattuck traces the stages of Sade's rehabilitation through the work of Bataille, Camus, de Beauvoir, Foucault, Barthes, Pasolini, and Mishima, ending with the edition of Sade's work published by the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1990. It is a fascinating story, and Shattuck tells it expertly.

This story is followed, however, by accounts of serial murderers. Preparing for the material, Shattuck asks this question: "Is it possible that the India paper, limp leather binding, and scholarly apparatus of the Pléiade edition can transform Sade into an author to be read along with Dickens, Balzac, and Melville with pleasure and profit by our own children?" Over and over again, Shattuck brings us to the brink of complicated issues concerning censorship and free speech. Over and over again, he backs away from the precipice. "How many actual cases and what risks of cruelty and violence, particularly to children and women, should we accept in the name of the principle of free speech?" The question is easy to ask; the difficult task of formulating an answer, whatever it may be, "probably lies beyond our capacities."

Yet the answer, though never stated clearly enough to provoke a clear rebuttal, always seems implicit: some knowledge ought to be forbidden. Shattuck points out, as have many people, that "prenatal and carrier testing" pose difficult questions for individual parents and for society at large: "As increasing numbers of fetuses are diagnosed with serious disorders, abortion has become a widely practiced therapeutic procedure, an elective, ad hoc version of sterilization, which was formerly favored by eugenicists." While it seems clear that Shattuck does not favor abortion, he is unwilling to make an argument against it, relying instead on implication and innuendo. Does he mean to suggest that because abortion was once favored by reprehensible eugenicists, women who have abortions are practicing eugenics? Just some women or all women? All abortions or just those provoked by prenatal testing? Avoiding the implications raised by his own questions, Shattuck

appears to assume that any reasonable person will agree with him.

Shattuck does offer a few constructive suggestions (that scientific researchers should commit themselves to some kind of Hippocratic oath, that “dangerous and destructive ideas should be admitted with care into the child’s environment”), but the suggestions are so bland that it is difficult either to approve or disapprove of them. More peculiar is the fact that Shattuck by and large ignores the enormous effort that has recently been devoted to the task of formulating answers to his questions concerning censorship, free speech, and pornography: the Sade chapter offers no reference (to pick only the most predictable voices) to Catharine MacKinnon or Andrea Dworkin. Neither does Shattuck show much interest in recent discussions of hate speech or academic freedom. To what authority does Shattuck turn when he wants to suggest that pornography may corrupt us? Ted Bundy. “I’m not blaming pornography,” said Bundy shortly before his execution: “the issue is how this kind of literature contributed and helped mold and shape the kinds of violent behavior.” Shattuck admits that Bundy’s argument may be mightily self-serving. But he is nonetheless willing to pose another question: “Is it possible that the essentially common-sense, even clichéd, things [Bundy] said about pornography deserve our attention?” Maybe. “Does it make any difference that. . . Ted Bundy read Sade?” Almost anyone could ask these questions.

One distinguishing aspect of the culture of “knowingness” is that those who deplore it and those who perpetuate it often agree about one thing: literature is important—worth debunking because of what Paul de Man called its “temptation to immediacy,” worth defending as what Matthew Arnold called “the best that is known and thought.” Roger Shattuck holds both of these positions at once. His book suggests that since literature may harm us, literary criticism will save us. “Do writers fare best under repression and persecution or in a free society?” Shattuck does not answer this question either, but he quotes the Cuban dissident Heriberto Padilla: “The best poems have always been born beneath the jailer’s lamp.” I read poems every day, and I’d be hard pressed to imagine a life without them. But if I had to choose between great poems and social justice, I’d choose bad poems. Fortunately, I

don't believe the choice really exists, not at least in the heroic terms in which Shattuck presents it. "Art just isn't worth that much," wrote Elizabeth Bishop to Robert Lowell after reading the manuscript of *The Dolphin*: she was concerned about the effect of the poems on Lowell's ex-wife, not the fate of Western culture at the end of the second millennium C.E.

Reading *Forbidden Knowledge*, my first and last impression is that the book does not provide an examination of hubris and humility but presents foregone conclusions about these issues. It seems odd to me that Shattuck treats these two attitudes towards knowledge as mutually exclusive, never wondering if some kinds of humility might mask the deepest hubris, if some kinds of hubris are enabled by the deepest humility. Consider this notebook entry by Thomas Hardy, written in 1896 as he resolved to turn from novels to poetry.

Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel—which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries—will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.

Tired of being condemned for expressing controversial ideas in his fiction, Hardy lowered his sights, embracing poetry precisely because people took it less seriously than prose. Hardy wanted fewer readers and less attention. But this act of self-humbling was committed in the service of his ambitions: he could commit himself to every heresy in his poetry, and nobody would mind.

In contrast to Hardy, Roger Shattuck has gone after bigger fish by

moving to a bigger pond. To me, the most revealing moments in *Forbidden Knowledge* occur in the second half of the book when Shattuck refers back to his earlier examinations of literary narratives. Only a tendentious reading of *Paradise Lost* would allow us to compare Adam and Eve's sin with the eugenics practiced during the Third Reich: "The moral of the story of Himmler's *Lebensborn* program" points us "toward the Angel Raphael's injunction to Adam and Eve: 'Be lowly wise.'" I could sympathize with a literary critic who, taunted and tempted by the culture of "knowingness," asks questions he cannot answer. I am perplexed by a critic who makes literature less interesting in the process.

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