Current Books

Resisting Temptation

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE:

From Prometheus to Pornography.
By Roger Shattuck. St. Martin's. 384 pp. $26.95.

by Robert Royal

Western culture, especially as shaped by the universities, prides itself on having no dogmas. We like to think of ourselves as open, intrepid, and unflinching in our pursuit of the truth. Though the very notion of truth has been battered a bit in recent decades, its impartial pursuit remains a high and honored calling. To question the value of seeking knowledge for its own sake is to risk being branded a reactionary or a fanatic.

Roger Shattuck is willing to take the risk. Indeed, he points out that this contemporary stance toward knowledge is itself a kind of dogmatism. A professor of literature at Boston University, he established himself as one of our foremost critics 28 years ago with his magisterial study *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France*. Recently he served as president of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a distinguished group of intellectuals, including Saul Bellow and Robert Alter, that challenges the theory-driven approach to literary studies championed within the Modern Language Association. Shattuck's eminence adds weight to his assertion that "the time has come to think as intently about limits as about liberation."

Shattuck bases his claim on a wide-ranging survey of religion, philosophy, history, and literature. We are accustomed, he says, to the biblical warning against tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, so accustomed that we tend to dismiss it as a quaint religious notion. But so many similar warnings are sounded throughout Western literature, from the ancient Greeks to Albert Camus, that Shattuck would have us take them more seriously—not just in the humanities, where "transgression" is exalted over moral concerns, but also in the sciences, where pure research is elevated above consideration of possible real-life consequences.

In Greek mythology, Shattuck reminds us, the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and incurred their wrath, is coupled with that of Pandora, who opened the box that now bears her name and loosed a host of evils. In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses stops the ears of his sailors so that they will not hear the Sirens' song, and can only hear it himself without being destroyed because he has himself lashed to the mast. While Shattuck is careful to point out here and elsewhere that in all these stories we cannot say that knowledge itself is ever simply evil, we can see that, given human nature, certain forms of knowledge are dangerous and need to be approached, as Ulysses teaches us, with prudence and precaution.

Shattuck makes his argument largely through literary and cultural exegesis, for instance comparing the stark tale of Adam and Eve in the third chapter of Genesis with John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "a great work of Christian faith produced in the turbulence of 17th-century England." Although Milton was a champion of free speech and inquiry, Shattuck does not accuse him of "standing Genesis on its head." Rather, he writes, Milton "wished to reestablish the great European religious tradition in sturdily Protestant terms." That is, Milton respected the human craving for knowledge but also feared the accompanying sin of pride. "In vivid filigree behind the theological meaning of Eden," Shattuck writes, "Milton narrates a secular story about a legendary yet very human couple who move through four stages of

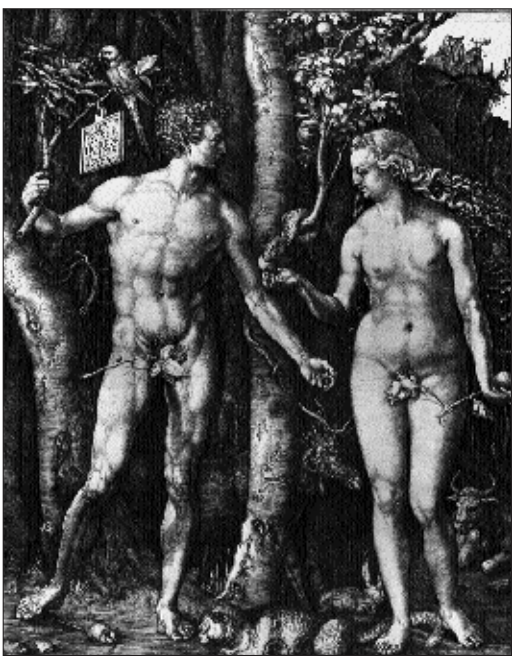
knowledge: innocence, fancy or dream, experience, and wisdom. We can read *Paradise Lost* as a tale about a downward path to wisdom, a path that must lead through the experience of sin."

For Shattuck, this "downward path" was followed with a vengeance by the romantics. In the 16th century, Christopher Marlowe conceived of Doctor Faustus as a figure tempted by Satan to exceed the proper bounds of human knowledge. But by the early 19th century, Goethe had produced a version of the story in which Faust is pardoned by God precisely because God admires his relentless "striving." While appreciating the brilliance of Goethe's *Faust*, Shattuck faults it for passing too lightly over the indisputable evils—seductions, abandonments, deaths—caused by Faust's restless quest for he knows not what. To dismiss these moral lapses out of romantic admiration for human aspiration, Shattuck says, is to be seduced by art from a fuller wisdom.

Interestingly, Shattuck finds in several women writers a recognition that "overcoming limits and restraints on experience" is not the only path to wisdom. He cites Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as a youthful but perceptive portrait of the Promethean tendencies of her romantic contemporaries, including her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the flamboyant Lord Byron. It would be too sweeping a statement to say that the romantic cultivation of one's own genius and creativity results in half-human monsters. But there was beginning to emerge in Western consciousness some notion that the romantics' unbridled attempt to take life apart and put it together again would lead to problems for both the creators and their creations.

Even before the romantics, Shattuck argues, certain female writers looked askance at what today would be called personal liberation. In the classic 17th-century novel by Madame de La Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, a married woman who renounces the man she loves, even after the death of her husband, is shown to achieve a deeper understanding of the human heart through renunciation than through indulgence of her desire. At the close of the romantic period, Shattuck finds a similar "self-restraint and withdrawal" in Emily Dickinson. "In that context," he writes, "eight lines of a single poem ["Charm"] . . . , because they describe the rewards of renunciation, bear comparison with Mme. de La Fayette's 200-page novel." It is a measure of our current condition that Shattuck devotes a long and intricate chapter to explaining "the pleasures of abstinence," a concept that would have been understood by both La Fayette's and Dickinson's contemporaries.

In our own time, we assume that knowledge—in the form of empathy and understanding—is morally good because



it fosters forgiveness. For Shattuck, two modern novels, Melville's *Billy Budd* (1891) and Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), expose the hidden danger of this assumption. Both novels are about a murder: Billy Budd kills a sailor named Claggart; Camus's protagonist, Meursault, shoots a nameless Arab on the beach. Yet both of these novels are so successful at exploring the mind and heart of the murderers that they eclipse the condition of their victims—and the enormity of their crimes. As a result, most readers come away believing Billy and Meursault to be innocent. Shattuck reports that his students,

writing about Camus, usually dwell on the guilt of "society" without much noticing the murdered Arab. Apparently too much understanding can foster moral blindness.

Moving from literature to science, Shattuck cites Francis Bacon's distinction between "pure" knowledge, which is discovered through the study of nature, and "proud" knowledge, which trespasses on theology and revelation. We still make this distinction when we take scientific knowledge, at least prior to technological applications, as an unalloyed good. Yet Shattuck shows that the separation of natural science from moral issues is not so sharp. He cites J. Robert Oppenheimer's worries after the success of the Manhattan Project, and recalls the self-imposed restrictions of scientists pioneering DNA recombination. One such researcher summed up the unavoidable moral dimension of his work: "It is no longer enough to wave the flag of Galileo."

The Human Genome Project, for example, threatens to violate the integrity of the human species while blithely holding to the fiction that we know enough about "genetic material" to cure diseases without hazarding potentially horrifying consequences. Shattuck foresees a "Sorcerer's Apprentice" syndrome, whereby we succumb to forces we understand just well enough to set them in motion but not well enough to anticipate their consequences. He calls for a kind of Hippocratic oath for scientists, whose powerful position in the modern world is similar to that of clergymen and doctors in the past. Recalling the story of Odysseus and the Sirens, he asks, "Who, if anyone, can or should bind our scientists to a mast?"

Shattuck is just as demanding of his own profession. Writing of the Marquis de Sade, he notes, with dry irony, the "double presumption" that has recently fueled Sade's reputation among literary critics: "He had spent time in prison; his works had been censored. Do we need any further proof of his heroic stature?" Figures such as Simone de Beauvoir, Georges Bataille, and Michel Foucault have lionized what they see as the revolutionary aspect of Sade's sheer transgressiveness. "Thanks to his stubborn sincerity," wrote de Beauvoir, "Sade deserves to be recognized as a great moralist."

Taking these critics at their word, Shattuck traces the impact of Sade's "morality" in the real world. Specifically, he examines the influence of pornography in violent sex crimes such as the Moors killings in England and the Ted Bundy serial murders in the United States. Shattuck knows the difficulty of proving cause and effect in such cases; indeed, to the question of whether, as citizens of a liberal society, we should burn the works of Sade, his answer is that we cannot and should not.

Yet Shattuck will have none of the fashionable veneration of Sade. Confronting his fellow critics, he asks: should we "rank [Sade] as a major thinker and writer to read along with Machiavelli and Rousseau? George Eliot and Dostoevsky? Should we follow the Harvard *History of French Literature* in celebrating his work as 'the triumph of desire over objective reality'?" Sade's writings may be "forbidden knowledge that we may not forbid," but that should not preclude labeling them evil and pernicious. To do less is to play with real fire that burns real people.

Shattuck concludes with a taxonomy of the various ways in which knowledge may be thought of as forbidden. His most helpful remarks are directed toward clarifying the responsibilities of scientific and cultural institutions. If we conceive of Sade's case as being not just about free speech but also about public health and safety, then other works of art and science may also be subject to the same scrutiny. About these forms of knowledge we must continually ask: Do they embody our most responsible behavior? Or organized presumption? The answers may be crudely moralistic. Or, like Shattuck's, they may involve a sophisticated balancing of every kind of human truth against the boundless claims of a single part of our nature.

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