

# Blessings of modernity appear as a devil's benediction

*Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*, by Roger Shattuck, St. Martin's Press, 369 pages, \$26.95.

Review

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If human history has been recorded with a large dark question mark emblazoned indelibly across its every page, then for those scribbling something like a "yes" answer at each chapter's end, for these brave knights of affirmation, it can now be safely said that the news of the last several installments, Sade to Sartre, has been exponentially bad. From the Galapagos to the Gulag, from Alamogordo to Auschwitz, the blessings of modernity have been bequeathed with a devil's benediction.

Yet it goes on. We have cloned a sheep. And, to be sure, if a sheep, then a man. But as usual, when some such new horror is finally consummated, there inevitably arise the important but implicitly impotent questions of: Have we gone too far, sought to do and know what we shouldn't do or know? Can it be controlled? Have we, indeed, sinned? As the father of nuclear bombs, J. Robert Oppenheimer, said of himself and his fellows: "In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin." Have we crossed some invisible, but manifestly forbidden line, committed transgressions that will insure not salvation but our damnation?

Recently, none has posed this question better than Roger Shattuck in his *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography*. According to the cover, Shattuck is identified as a "Professor of Modern Languages and Literature at Boston University," and described as "one of America's most original and gifted thinkers." Nevertheless, despite his impressive academic credentials, he was obviously formed by an earlier, less abstract, experience. In World War II young Shattuck, as a combat pilot in the Pacific, became convinced that his life was "probably saved" by Hiroshima. Shortly afterward, he flew his B-25 over and observed "forbidden knowledge" spread out in its



Cover art, 'The Crucifixion of Saint Peter,' by Michelangelo Buonarroti, courtesy of St. Martin's Press

most tangible form: "From a thousand feet in the shattering silence of the cockpit, we could see a flattened smoldering city." He states: "I have lived out my biblical portion of years with a warning light constantly flashing in my peripheral vision. It continues to signal that we have strayed off course, that some mechanism has malfunctioned."

Shattuck implicitly maintains the tension of this metaphor throughout. Indeed, he seems like some desperate, but knowing, passenger who has struggled into the cockpit of our time and is frantically trying to alert a lunatic at the controls about this blinking warning light.

He poses his warning as a question: "Are there things we should not know? Can anyone or any institution, in this culture of unfettered enterprise and growth, seriously propose limits on knowledge? Have we lost the capacity to perceive and honor the moral dimensions of such questions?"

"Moral dimensions of such questions?" "Limits on knowledge?" These doubts grate upon the contemporary ear as some kind of obscurantist heresy. But, as he outlines

so brilliantly, the modern attitude is contrary to thousands of years of moral thought—Greek and Hebrew. Exploring these, he traces the traditional view concerning the "moral dimensions" of knowledge.

In the beginning there is Genesis. Eve (the Hebrew Pandora) eats from the Tree of Knowledge in her quest for divinity. Shattuck asserts that "no other extant creation myth displays greater vividness and concentration in dealing with forbidden knowledge." Genesis begets the Noachic, Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, each asking permission "to look upon the Lord." But Moses is told: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall be no man see me and live" (Exodus 33:20-23). Implicit in this arrangement between God and man, according to Shattuck, is an invitation to "both companionship and rivalry," but he warns that what is safely granted is not a total but partial, or finite, knowledge. That humanity is to have an understanding of effects or phenomena, not absolute knowledge of the thing-in-itself—or, if you will, man shall presume to look upon the face of God at his peril.

From Prometheus to Dante, Mil-

ton to Goethe, Shattuck traces this seemingly iron law of moral limits. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, our "presumptuous pilgrim" is admonished against desiring to know the "secrets of Providence" in the beautiful lines:

The truth you seek to fathom lies so deep  
in the abyss of the eternal law,  
it is cut off from every creature's sight.

And tell the mortal world when you return  
what I told you, so that no man presume  
to try to reach a goal as high as this.

Or Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Heaven 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. . .

These represent the finest thoughts of the finest minds, yet we plunge onward, thirsting for something without fully understanding what that something really is. Is the modern experience so Faustian that we have forgotten Mephistopheles? Bored with the mortal gifts of gold, glory and pleasure, Faust, like Eve, ever weary of Paradise, wishes for the unreachable, for what the Greeks call *Pleonexia*—to become divine.

"Our greatest blessings confound us," Shattuck says—our insatiable will to power has unhinged our moral equilibrium. In our lust for knowledge, joy in ordinary accomplishments is lost, and absolutely nothing shall do but the attainment of the unattainable. But, as he indicates, Goethe could not resist blending the Enlightenment with the Romantic, and he transformed his Faust into something of a heroic mode—Faust in search of *godhead*.

Yet leave it to a 19-year-old girl, Mary Shelley, wife of Percy, and friend of Byron, to write a novel that may be the most prescient of the last

century. Created while contemplating the splendors of Lake Geneva, the very cradle of Rousseau's Romantic vision, her *Frankenstein* is the antithesis of the Romantic idea of which she was at the epicenter. In a tale of unrelieved horror, Mary Shelley does not flinch and she outlines with a certain Old Testament power the price to be paid for our moral presumption of replacing God.

For Shattuck, however, the true Frankenstein of our time was hatched not by a fictional scientist realizing his obsessions among the immensity of the Swiss Alps, but by a living writer scratching out his self-titillating horrors in the secret dungeons of revolutionary France. That is, when the mob surrounded the Bastille demanding heaven on earth, the answer was not the one expected. Echoing back was the voice of an aristocrat, not a *sansculotte*, the Marquis de Sade's—a revolutionary laughing at politics with an irony that resonates ever more loudly. For Shattuck, Sade epitomizes today's obsession with all that is taboo. "For almost two centuries, the Marquis de Sade had lain buried and preserved in the cultural unconscious of Europe," he says. But released, he, like Mary Shelley's brute, rages unfettered through the cultural wasteland of our "post-modern" psyche.

Shattuck explores the rehabilitation of Sade. He quotes Foucault that Sadism is "the insane delight of love and death in the limitless presumption of appetite" and L.G. Crocker that Sade formulated a "complete system of nihilism with all its implications . . . Nihilism is the worm at the core of our culture. It is the flaw we must constantly overcome." We see, then, perched upon the lip of the Age of Reason, reason's incipient fall, and what remains is little more than an egoistic thirst for power and pleasure where "ordinary prudence loses ground to ambition, greed and the sheer momentum of discovery." Can this be anything but apocalyptic? Will we not soon have to answer Nietzsche's terrible question of, "Why man at all?"

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