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## Roger Shattuck, *The Forbidden Experiment* (Book Review)

Edward Malin

*Sacred Heart University*, [maline@sacredheart.edu](mailto:maline@sacredheart.edu)

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Roger Shattuck, *The Forbidden Experiment*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980. 220 pp. \$10.95.

Review by Edward Malin

Titles may seduce the bookshelf browser by suggestively misrepresenting a volume's content. I have seen copies of Fromm's *The Art of Loving* offered in the same rack with manuals of sexual technique. A similar misapprehension might accompany *The Forbidden Experiment* by Roger Shattuck, whose title conjures images of proscribed probing into the mysterious unknown. Those readers whose favorite taboo is carnal or whose preferred intrigues involve international crime will find little satisfaction between these covers.

Barely three months after Napoleon's coup d'état brought a

tenuous peace to France, a small mute boy was captured from the forests of southern France, was swept briefly into the currents of political and intellectual change, and was permitted to sink into obscurity. The Wild Boy, naked and animalistic, had been caught stealing vegetables from a garden. Victor, as he was later named, would have probably remained unknown if not for the attentions of Constans Saint-Esteve, a local commissioner. Constans sought to garner favor with the new Parisian government by reporting this remarkable find. He believed that Victor had survived "from earliest childhood . . . in the woods, a stranger to social needs and habits." And so Victor passed into the hands of a series of public officials, clerics, diletante anthropologists, and scientists who, with varying degrees of objectivity, saw in this wild boy the opportunity to support their own theories of human nature and to advance their own reputations and careers. For some, he was the uncorrupted innocent. For others he was the primeval savage. Eventually Jean-Marc Itard, a young medical student, conducted an ambitious six year study (1800-1806) of the boy's capabilities. All investigators, in turn, abandoned Victor when his behavior failed to confirm their theories. Victor died in obscurity at the age of forty.

The plot is simple. Shattuck has, however, succeeded in using this story of the Wild Boy of Aveyron as a medium to explore the excitement and frustration of early attempts to investigate the basis of human nature. He exposes emerging concepts of human dignity as they respond to the scientific, sociological, and political forces which have molded modern western intellectual pursuits.

The modern controversy which debates the relative importance of heredity and environment for determining the development of an individual has its roots in eighteenth-century speculations on the nature of humanity. Philosophers and naturalists of that time were rethinking established beliefs about religious dogma and the assumptions which supported hereditary aristocracy. New ideas depicting humans as basically cooperative (Rousseau) or essentially destructive (Hobbes) suggested new political structures. Lockean empiricism claimed that knowledge was written on the "blank slate" of the mind by interaction with the environment. A formal test of these hypotheses would require that some children be raised in total

isolation. Without the presence of social or cultural influence, without the possibility of learning from other people, and without the benefit or handicap of civilization, such children might develop within a "state of nature" into the essential humans. Such a test could measure the effects of society, determine those characteristics which are naturally human, and describe the degree to which culture determines behavior. The innately "noble savage" might emerge. However, a world which had recently certified the equality of all mankind and the human rights associated with that equality could not tolerate the manipulations implicit in this research design. The experiment to reveal the foundations of humanity could be imagined but was ethically forbidden. The appearance of the wild boy provided an opportunity to perform the forbidden experiment. If it were true, as Constans asserted, that Victor had lived all or most of his life in the forests without human contact, then Victor represented the primeval human. The succession of eager observers who studied the child were frustrated as much by their own inadequate methodologies and limited theories as by the fact that Victor apparently was isolated from human contact for only about three years.

Shattuck's is not the first chronicle of these events. His contribution lies in his sensitive consideration of the contextual forces which infuse this case. A flavor of the time is created so that the reader becomes aware of the emerging concern for human rights, and the developing scientific curiosity of the early nineteenth century. Empathetic concerns and intellectual drives as well as perceived opportunities for self-aggrandizement motivated these early researchers, some of whom believed so strongly in their theories that they were blinded to the realities.

While Victor does not represent a good test of the forbidden experiment, his case should remind modern social scientists how an investigation can fail to be objective. In addition, Itard's work with the boy presages many aspects of modern behaviorism and studies of autism. Shattuck senses greatness in both Itard's extensively personal involvement with the case and his considerable application of talent to Victor's development. Victor, too, achieved greatness. He had "escaped from culture and sturdily resisted any return to it." Yet,

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given the limits of his handicaps, he excelled by surviving. The author concluded that Victor is a good example of the traumatic effects of prolonged isolation, and the story of his life, comparable in many ways to such figures as Alexander Selkirk (the model for Robinson Crusoe), Merrick (the Elephant Man), and Helen Keller, is compelling, dramatic, and rewarding to those who would attempt to understand human nature.