



Ignorance  
and Bliss

*On Wanting  
Not to Know*

Mark Lilla

# Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know

Mark Lilla. Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
\$27 (256p) ISBN 978-0-374-17435-4

Historian Lilla (*The Once and Future Liberal*) provides a freewheeling exploration of the human “will to ignorance,” a term coined by Friedrich Nietzsche to describe an attitude of “deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one’s windows... a satisfaction with the dark.” Analyzing ignorance in literary, religious, and psychological contexts, Lilla outlines Freudian notions of self-delusion as a tool to sublimate the “unruly desires that churn our souls”; religious and

cultural taboos against the pursuit of knowledge; and the concept, reinforced by the Protestant reformation, Saint Paul, and some ancient theologians, of the pure, “empty” human soul as the ideal vessel in which creativity, genius, or holy inspiration occurs. Lilla’s conversational foray through a broad array of religious, philosophical, and historical examples produces many surprising, thought-provoking insights. For example, he notes that some Christian teachings frame children, whose innocence is a kind of ignorance, as “symbols that can orient us” in an immoral world, but they become symbolic “of the bad seed planted in our souls” if they fail to follow certain scripts. In other places, he stretches the point a bit thin (one chapter frames nostalgia as a kind of ignorance of the present, which Lilla then somewhat awkwardly links to fascism). Still, this will provide the intellectually curious with more than enough to chew on.

*(Dec.)*