Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form

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INTRODUCTION

The Storyteller in American National Romance

THREE immediately popular and long influential American historical romances, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Owen Wister’s *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902), share a certain narrative poetics: In the form and language of their narratives, these three texts represent nineteenth-century American culture by interweaving known and planned communal self-definitions (from celebrations of independence and cohesion to belief in manifest destiny) with fragmentary images of unremembered, even secret, historical moments. Layered with elements of romantic design and cultural mystery—layered so densely, in fact, that these symbolic polarities at times may be confused with one another—these novels are expressions of particular cultural moments sharing an impulse toward memory. Within these texts, memory is figured as the temporal and spatial codification of a passing time self-consciously lived as the end of an era. Building the monuments of national independence, America in 1821 was learning of the mortality of the revolutionary generation while also sensing the lasting power of that set of political events. Cooper’s writings bear out his interest in this complex shift in cultural understanding. Particularly in *The Spy*, Cooper offers an experiment in memory that points to both the closure of an age and the exhilaration of hope, even as accompanied by anxiety. Hawthorne (we know) wrote *The Scarlet Letter* with an anxious eye toward rising antebellum tensions; his twin revivals of Puritanism and revolution as key historical themes place him at a somewhat different point (from Cooper) in the codification of memory. His work questions—for a breaking or broken nation—the efficacy of the fundamental, if now remote, paradigms through which his culture had been defined to date. Like Cooper in 1821, Owen Wister at the
turn of the century writes a novel that is part of his contemporary culture's industry of monuments. From dime novels to the Buffalo Bill shows, Wister's United States eagerly consumed images designed to signal both celebration and nostalgia in the passing of the frontier. Each with some measure of celebration, these three authors put to work familiar gestures of closure, but not without surprisingly close attention to an anatomy of its costs.

The following chapters pursue the specifics of these cases in depth. These three major texts are products of similar moments, moments when the culture from which each emerged was suspended between the ability to receive and the ability to articulate newly updated and urgently needed stories of communal identity. Each text, that is, suggests an understanding of itself as an expression of a world at a moment of transition. These are cultural moments imagined and predicted to be significant not only to their contemporary audiences but also to future generations. What characterizes each historical moment studied here is a sudden sense of times and places falling with more than ordinary speed into remoteness.

First, this argument is situated in the nationalism of the early nineteenth century, among the constructed memories of the revolutionary era at a time when so many of its major actors died; then I turn to the antebellum period, the challenges to that young nationalism in the name of homegrown ideological conflict. Finally, with Wister, the argument focuses on the reassessment of nationalism after the Civil War and expansionism, bolstered by a new mythos of the frontier West. As a whole, this book proposes that, by looking at the particular cases of these crucial moments in the first century of American fiction, we find among the layering of texts a revealing pattern. This emerging model for American cultural self-definition is rooted in a paradoxical dynamic between narrative designs and unspoken secrets. Specifically, these secrets—while still unspoken—are textually rendered as moments from history that linger, without context, in present consciousness. In this silent but extraordinarily powerful sense, narrative designs and secret histories have combined in these landmark texts of American historical fiction to generate stories so deeply rooted in cultural consciousness that they may function as archetypes.

The evolution of these archetypal stories begins with the persistence of those irreducible fragments or traces of past experience, unerased by even the most determined of narrative designs. Such historical fragments are carried into present consciousness, meeting with it necessarily (at first) in moments of silent reception. Once recognized (even if in this silence), these fragments continue to be surprisingly resistant to present understanding. In this encounter there emerges a profound epistemological
crisis both for the particular cultural moment into which such fragments arrive and for later readers as well. For the immediate (contemporaneous) audience, this crisis offers two choices: the choice to remain in silence, turning from the unknown, or to accept such ambiguity and thus to move into a process of interpretation of uncertain depth and breadth, in search of stories to explain the mystery at hand; these texts mandate the latter response. Similarly, later readers may receive the moment of this crisis by reversion to familiar answers or, again, by an acceptance of the open-endedness of interpretation; again, a full reading of these texts makes the latter response compulsory. For both early and later audiences, the outlines of these central archetypal American stories lie between that crisis and these interpretive responses. The archetype formed in this suspended state of betweenness derives its raw (represented as fragmentary) subject matter from the words surrounding it and finds the shape of its particular incarnation as it emerges into a field of silences, an altogether different dimension of human expression.

Placing this pattern in the context of these crucial moments in the development of nineteenth-century American self-consciousness, specifically within the growth of literary nationalism, this book moves from Cooper (by many estimations, the country’s first successful—not to mention best-selling—novelist) to Hawthorne (a figure of centrality in his own literary world as well as in virtually all assessments of U.S. literary history), and finally to Wister (the presumed inventor of the Western). These three examples offer connections suggestive of one sweeping tradition of American self-definition. In turn, the connections among the three texts suggest a trajectory of narrative method, indicative of recurrent techniques used at the height of America’s adoption of the historical romance as a vehicle to imagine national identity—techniques common within the canonical tradition to which all three authors belong. However, the identification of such a pattern is meant neither to ignore countless intervening moments lying along this historical path nor to deny the presence of other compelling traditions. These remain, then, first and foremost, examples—primarily sites of depth rather than breadth.

My argument proceeds through attention to the peculiar narrative poetics inherent to the representation of the indecipherable life of Cooper’s Spy, the Scarlet Letter, discarded in the dusty corner of the custom house attic, and the elusive, impersonal agency that provides Wister’s West a power long lost from American symbolic thought by the time he animates it in his turn-of-the-century hero. I hope this study will provide an anatomy of the imaginative layering between agency and language in the process of accumulating cultural archetypes, myths, and legends.
This project necessarily works from traces. Part of my argument is that the images these traces suggest—images so central to national iconography (an understanding of revolution embodied in the Spy, Hester Prynne's manifest knowledge of divisions within her culture, and the Virginian's experiential awareness of the changing West)—never gain more than fragmentary narrative life in the texts themselves. In fact, it is precisely because they are (and necessarily must remain) in exile from a context that would supply ready meaning to them that these historical traces grow (between and among the narrative designs employed to frame them) into stories with almost mythic power. In these examples from the American tradition of historical fiction, such fragments of the past escape or otherwise resist the designs of romance. And yet, here they become the single most powerful tool in the writer's ability to link remote history to present culture: They become archetypal imaginings shaped among patterns of narrative silence, the failures of language.

The ways in which readers may fill out—reimagine—these traces are temporally bound, determined by the functions of language within immediate history. But the transtemporal life of these imaginings is not so limited; these traces and the silences enveloping them eventuate in archetypal stories which may be reclassified as secrets. Thus those moments of cultural transition that give rise to each of these texts are recast most effectually not in plot or character, but in these secrets. Those cultural transitions, then, are indicated metonymically, in the formal patterns of expression that reveal the limits of the symbolic vocabulary, as it exists at the level of plot romance. From among these silences comes a critique of the resolutions of romance. And this critique speaks to ongoing patterns involved in establishing the common texts of cultural knowledge, putting at issue questions of historiography and agency, communal and individual.

THE FORM OF THE PROBLEM

History is vulnerable to the narrative tricks by which both personal and communal memory operate, and it is a critical commonplace to note that the subjectivity of memory restructures history, whether by intention, misfortune, or chance. This process is inevitably distorting, but it is also liberating and even necessary: Borges’s “Funes the Memorious” lies incapacitated by a memory so thorough and compelling that remembered time is equal to, or greater than, lived time; the filters of memory—indeed our failures to remember—are all that we have to free us from that fate. There is a certain predictability in the transformations that history undergoes as
it enters larger cultural narratives. Less predictable are the shifts in the
designs of those ongoing narratives at the points of reception—points of
entry as residual fragments of disorderly histories rupture established pat-
tterns. One effect, I argue, is that as these fragments enter memory, long-
hidden stories of past experience may be reanimated. In the matrices
formed by the crossings of transmission and reception, latent patterns are
newly outlined. Tales and events that did not fit the evolving shape of his-
torical memory may be glimpsed, whether minimally or more deeply,
though the mediating lens of contemporary culture always remains. The
accumulation in this lens of a palimpsest, newly inscribed at every reading,
demonstrates that in this way, narrative designs, long known for their pow-
ers to manipulate history, are shaped by the histories they may be said to
subsume. In Hans Blumenberg's terms, “mythicization does not make his-
torical facts and identities disappear so much as it makes them become
one, and be consumed, in the typical and the figural.”11 My argument is
that a similar process is at work in the historical romances that are at the
center of this book. These texts attend to the process of national “mythi-
cization” by taking several of the culture's most sacred subjects as their
bases, and in this process, these texts demonstrate both that the secrets of
history are never gone and that the designs of narrative never fail
absolutely; those designs simultaneously obscure and reveal the ambigui-

ties of each historical legacy.

Layered with popular imaginings, the rhetoric of high art, and the
experiences of history, the three novels studied here are thus built upon two
codes of cultural expression, first on their apparent separation and then by
their persistent bond. As I have been suggesting, these codes may be
defined as (1) narrative design, a consciously devised system of meaning,
most concretely associated with plot and its resolutions, including those
generically associated with the romance; and (2) secret histories, eluding
representation in speech or action, meanings not readily transmissible
through the operations of referential language.12

This second level of expression is related closely to Walter Benjamin's
notion of a “storyteller’s story.”13 From Plato through the present day, liter-
ary theory has recognized the difference between the means and subject of
representation. With a power greater than that of narrative design, Ben-
jamin's story marks a form of expression in which the gap between means
and subject is—in defiance of all of our expectations—somehow eclipsed
or suspended. In the texts studied here, that gap is never suspended fully,
yet it partakes in degree of the phenomenon Benjamin explores. Here the
gaps between means and subject speak not of the separation between sig-
ifier and signified but rather of their peculiar bond in which history and
language are fused. In these texts, secret histories eluding narrative representation are fostered and protected in the very matrices of the romance form.

I imagine this alternative layer of cultural self-expression as the product of those crafted conditions of silence—that is to say, outlined by the borders of the very secrets that the codified narratives of national identity refuse to include. This narrative poetics allows for a theoretical space within particularly aesthetic language that might be figured as an imaginative (and temporal) distance between raw experience and narrative record. In these spaces are stories with distinctly temporal dimensions—including process, motion, and growth—as opposed to their framing narratives of reconciliation and ordered design. They exist just beyond the frontier of cultural expression, and there they have the capacity to embody the outer (and the innermost) limits of the meaning of America, up to and including the present moment, the imaginary reconfiguration of that moment, and the new horizon, precisely as it appears to the present moment's eye. The space of the storyteller's story is, then, a field of silence, secrecy, and multivalent power.

This argument enters into a long-running critical discussion of the defining attributes of the genre of the historical romance, including especially the role of Walter Scott. In these analyses of genre, most critics have attended first to what they have seen as the often uncomfortable juxtaposition of past and present in the making and reading of historical fiction. It would be difficult to list all of the definitions and genealogies that have been offered for this genre. Critics agree, however, that this is a richly international tradition that marks its innovations in form through literary representations of historical moments, designed to create something of a living past, as Scott was able to do, in “giv[ing] living human embodiment to historical-social types... Never before had this kind of portrayal been consciously set at the center of the representation of reality.” In particular, critical attention has been focused on the model of the hero in Scott’s fiction, the “mediocre hero,” as Lukács calls him, in contradistinction to the “world-historical man” of Hegelian theory. Among the innovations supplied by the Waverly-hero, critics have been particularly interested in studying the interplay of character and context. These textual moments provide among the sharpest contrasts to other kinds of literary-historical writings, such as those of Bulwer-Lytton, one of Scott’s more outspoken detractors, who emphasized the quantity and accuracy of historical data in his narratives as a measure of their success.

In his foundational Marxist analysis, Georg Lukács has made a strong argument for an almost precise moment of the emergence of historical
fiction as it came to be known in the nineteenth century; he sees the form emerge at the time of “Napoleon’s collapse.” Lukács’s study places Scott as the exemplar of a new mode of historical consciousness that lifted representation of character and context out of the “mere costumery” of earlier confluences of history and fiction. The historical novel as Scott created it, Lukács argues, is the product of revolutionary social forces (specifically in France), in which “the national idea [became] the property of the broadest masses.” It is not within the scope of this study to offer a new argument for the genealogy of the historical romance, but two points should be made for clarification. First, I accept Lukács’s pinpointing of the emergence of the form in a general sense; his work helps me theorize the roles of revolution and nationalism in the development of American literature. However, the historical romance, in my argument, is less the property of “the broadest masses” than an image—perhaps illusory—of the promised link between the nation’s population and its political establishment. I claim that the cultural function of the nineteenth-century American historical romance works in the service of an ideological mainstream more than in the service of any alternative subculture. Second, I argue that in each nation, the achievement of the high literary form of the historical romance is shaped not only by the richness of international dialogue but also, very distinctly, by local traditions, including the folk tale.

In addition to genealogical arguments, the seemingly simple task of assigning a label to what I have been referring to (interchangeably) as historical romance or historical fiction has been a point of controversy. Many critics have insisted upon the distinction between these categories, commonly citing long-standing conventions of romance (stock situations and characters, for example) as generic markers. Part of my argument, however, is that the texts included in this study are decidedly hybrid in form, and so I take my cue from George Dekker and others, who have objected to the sharp delineation “between novel and romance” insofar as they existed in the nineteenth century in particular; I work from Dekker’s premise that to call “a novel a ‘historical romance’ is therefore to direct attention to its extraordinarily rich, mixed, and even contradictory or oxymoronic character.” In this tradition it will not be surprising to see this mixed genre exercise has both didactic and patriotic functions as well as potentially subversive ones as it draws audiences closer to the history it represents and then ultimately resists full identification with that historical moment’s corollary ideological principles.

One of the early commentators on (and practitioners of) historical fiction, the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni, wondered that the historical novel ever succeeded at all (though he agreed that it did); his concern was
its formal dissonance, which he felt left readers utterly without ground for satisfying interpretation, placing them instead in a decidedly uncomfortable space of suspension between acceptance and doubt as they received the tale. In a sense I agree: The layering of fiction and history together, I argue, increases rather than decreases the narrative spaces of uncertainty. However, this infusion of further mystery into the representation of history does not necessarily have to become a means of increasing the culture’s distance from historical consciousness. It may be that precisely this vacillation proves deeply productive of cultural imaginings, surely that is what is suggested by the counterintuitive combination of radical plot discontinuities with exceptional cultural popularity, to which the three texts this project analyzes bear witness. This is not to say that all known aesthetic flaws in historical romance must eventually be recast as strengths; rather I suggest that the characteristic of narrative dissonance, in particular circumstances and at particular times, has functioned as an alternative aesthetic in which historical consciousness and imaginative richness may be knit together as complementary rather than oppositional and in which, despite all conventional understanding, it is not the element of fiction but of historical experience—the fragmentary story—that carries with it the weight of distortion and mystery.

It is true, however, that the emphasis on hybridity risks obscuring one strong legacy of the criticism of historical literature, the argument that a literary frame to historical events is a curative attempt, a move toward filling in the gaps in historical certainty. Indeed it is clear that, at some level, the conventional plot of the romance in such texts is a code set up to transform and so to resolve the disruptions of culture. But within the examples at hand, plot—as it interacts with its historical subjects in Cooper, Hawthorne, and Wister—does something more. We expect (and find) that the romance has certain capacities to redirect the energies of disorder and secrecy toward order and design. Beyond this, however, the romance, in Cooper, Hawthorne, and Wister, condenses cultural memory within its layers, endowing those memories with an extraordinary and concentrated power as they enter a larger frame of cultural knowledge. As the romance preserves and transmits more than the designs of its resolution, it gives expression to that second powerful cultural voice, containing its own secrets and repressions. As the subjects of this book’s attention suggest, this second voice can be woven within the official romance of popular classics that address central cultural shifts. There, because it is thus both pervasive and concealed, it may be said to create a textual interplay wherein a nationalistic literature addresses itself in the unarticulated alternatives, the silent stories, contained within these romances of national identity.
A vivid figure for such a space as imagined within the tradition of the American historical romance is the attic of Hawthorne's old Salem Custom House, harboring a story long ago lived but not yet told. Gordon Hutner notes Hawthorne's propensity for secrecy—particularly for exploring "the effect of secrecy as an animating, ineluctable condition for his fictions"—and indeed, it is America's secret, and the culture's imagined harboring of Hester's secret, that animates The Scarlet Letter. Once found in that attic, Hawthorne's scarlet A compels storytelling in a complicated and troublesome way: It is an artifact of cultural history, but it has not found a place in a museum or library; it is an emblem of personal experience, but it has not survived within any familiar context, as, for example, a family heirloom. Instead, the place of the A in the Custom House attic suggests that—as an artifact—it hovers just at the outer reaches of the narrator's interpretive responsibility. At once too hot to hold and too oblique to read, the scarlet A is an aggressively material fragment of history that must be understood in its inadequate present context as the trace of something more. The predicament Hawthorne's narrator faces as he picks up the Scarlet Letter is the unique predicament inhering in the field of vision both central to and silent within the narrator's created textual space. From Benjamin, then, I call the agent of this space the American storyteller, whose task it becomes first to transmit a story into a context at once stiflingly familiar and perilously foreign and then to find (whether through recognition or construction) places in communal memory that can accommodate not only the historical fragment, but also its remote context, its story.

By all measures, a storyteller's story represents a certain disturbance of narrative regularity. Story exists within the narrative as a vision or belief distinct from plot design and inheres in the consciousness of a character marginalized from the world of plot while privileged (because immersed) in the knowledge of the inner workings of the fiction's historical world. The storyteller, then, is a character to whom many things happen in the present tense of the fiction, but who is, for all of this, relatively undetermined by such events and whose voice and vision remain obscured within narrative expression, linked most essentially to an inaccessible time. Thus a story in this sense is a testament to the persistence of those meanings that can never be articulated, to the insufficiency of selective memory, and (implicitly) to the imagination's dependence upon the whole of history. Likewise, a storyteller in this sense stands in direct contrast to a narrator who obsessively plots a design (as Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen does, a map to make whole the fragments of a broken life); the storyteller has direct access to a vision that permeates the culture while remaining inexpressible without referent or mediation.
Because it exists beyond linguistic representation, the story remains a secret, defying traditional limitations inherent in representation. Nonetheless, the story does not stand as absolute alterity against the designs of romance, either. Instead, the story is a product of the narrative that it may seem to (and does) oppose. As narrative records the designs of particular moments within the culture, an unedited (because untold) repository stores the discarded images. From this unedited space of memory (which is not unlike the mind of Borges’s Funes), only particular images will emerge, even in their silent and then fragmentary form; these images are those that become recurrently useful to the cultural imagination. Thus both the place of this repository in cultural consciousness and the persistence of particular images together create an imaginative space for the new language emergent within the romance, the language of the story.

Although the present study is limited to particular examples, part of my hypothesis is that this repository—collectively speaking, and moving beyond the bounds of the cases set forth here—creates a dynamic structure within a large mainstream tradition of American romance and in doing so serves as a type of fulfillment of the plan for a national language, an alternative mode of expression.

I take the term “national language” from Noah Webster’s Dissertations on the English Language (1789), which both in date and in spirit coincides with the inception of this narrative experiment; here a national language is a means of collective expression designed to unite and affirm a political and social community, a public language inviting and even compelling participation. Webster’s appeal for a “new” language, Federal English, was entwined consistently and deeply with the evolution of an American literary tradition. As for Webster, so in the model of cultural storytelling I am presenting, the strength of this American language is a product of its newness, its distinction from inheritance (including the mechanics of plot, largely derived from continental and British historical romance), and its fusion with the experiential record of the country. By locating a conjunction of design and language—cultural unity and the imagination—within the particular political, literary, and linguistic context of Webster’s project, I suggest that the narrative model studied here establishes a legacy of similar concerns.

Certainly the establishment of any self-consciously new culture brings about an immediate need for a language that will fit both present and projected patterns of experience, and Webster’s Federalist perspective is one among many to express this broad concern. In his celebratory American Primer, Walt Whitman emphasizes the futurity of language’s promise, its
ability to shadow forth meanings for which the world is not yet ready: “I put many things on record that you will not understand at first—perhaps not in a year—but they must be (are to be) understood.”37 Before the new language becomes a fixed system, there are multiple possibilities for the definitions of social forms and cultural roles, and these definitions will be not only reflective, but also in some measure determinative. The case of postrevolutionary America bears additional complications, and for Cooper, Hawthorne, and Wister the role of the American historical romance is forged in this complexity. As early as 1789, in his Dissertations, Webster argues pragmatically for the importance of usage as opposed to rule in the establishment of an American grammar. By 1828—in his preface to the first edition of his Dictionary—he goes further, arguing not only that differences between American and British uses of the English language are based on customary usage but also that they grow out of national ideas and principles themselves: “Language is the expression of ideas; and if the people of one country cannot preserve an identity of ideas, they cannot retain an identity of language.”38 Thus it is that those objects and ideas that are not (or would not be) changed in form or function in the Atlantic crossing remain stable in the English language, and yet those concepts considered foreign to British practice, particularly those pertaining to American political and social abstractions, would require not only new vocabulary and grammar, but also—particularly—new stories in which to unfold the fullness of their meaning. The English language in America, then, becomes a system with balanced, oppositional, functions dependent upon one another. As language functions in established communities, English in postrevolutionary America disseminates some conformity of understood meaning; it is this stability that marks the formal properties of narrative romance. As language functions in its earliest emergence in community, though, American English also carries tremendous potential for free speculation, promising a future of almost limitless change in consensually defined meanings; such promise of change links American English to the layer of narrative expression here associated with the American storyteller.

With these framing concerns, this project explores the shaping powers of carefully crafted conditions of silence and finds in them another layer of storytelling, a layer at once alternative to, and yet still generative of, codified narratives of national emergence. Following from Webster's theories on language, it is no surprise that among the key functions of this second layer of storytelling is the expression of cultural anxieties about language itself, its narrative powers, and its limits in the task of cultural self-definition.
The storyteller’s vision, of course, would provide no cultural function if it were only receptive, trapped in a moment of inarticulate wonder or fright. It finds its cultural function by offering glimpses from a darker, more complicated world, a realm beyond pure hope: In such particular settings of cultural transition, these romances convey in their confusion a vision of urgency, of a time when history faces the familiar symbols of its culture and sees nothing of itself in the reflection. As a narrative construct, the storyteller reacts to this radical disjunction by offering an alternative, a world not reflective of the known but of something at least as important to cultural consciousness. The storyteller’s world is one of history, symbol, and metonymy—but now newly defined through the promise of full (though deferred and unspoken) transmission. In order to perform the work of culture, the storyteller does not revise but instead fully absorbs all angles of vision. No purified version of the culture’s foundation can replace the facts of its historical experience and still generate the American story. The immediacy of these experiences makes them sacred to the culture and, paradoxically, that immediacy is what the storyteller promises to restore to communal consciousness.

Thus the storyteller—with the story itself—has an ambiguous relation to narrative, being both necessary and threatening to the continuity of culture. The storyteller adds temporal complexity to the imaginative act of retrospection, helping to theorize the relationship between memory and projective cultural imaginings. Narrative conveys the known text of cultural mythology and so may include any established model for self-knowledge—for example, the ideals remembered from the revolutionary past. Requiring understanding and planning for their articulation, narrative designs suggest an essentially retrospective mode of vision. By definition the secret histories within these designs are already encoded, though within a narrative frame not yet ready to acknowledge them. So in this book’s examples, there is never a moment when narrative exists alone; the story generated as a countervoice is present from the start of the retrospective imagining. This fundamental paradox is a reminder that the revelation of the story may not be easy or benign, but that in any case it will be disquietingly relevant. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon’s central character, Oedipa Maas, wonders about the “Tristero,” the seemingly omnipresent and subversive communication system that provides a postmodern figure for the American story:

Would its smile, then, be coy, and would it flirt away harmlessly backstage,
say goodnight with a Bourbon Street bow and leave her in place? Or would it instead, the dance ended, come back down the runway, its luminous stare locked to Oedipa’s, smile gone malign and pitiless; bend to her alone among the desolate rows of seats and begin to speak words she never wanted to hear?42

Like the Tristero, both enticing and threatening in its assumed role as potential truth teller, the American stories imagined through the narrative forms of the three romances studied here always seem to be lurking rather ominously and promisingly close to the surface of things. Like Pynchon’s Oedipa, the storytellers in (and the readers of) Cooper, Hawthorne, and Wister find themselves amid an ocean of historical clues without assurance of revelation.

If we imagine the romance’s formal properties to play the role of the director of the stage play onto which the Tristero makes its appearance in Oedipa’s imagination in the passage just quoted, the conflicts of power between narrative and story may become clearer. In the scene described we assume the conventions of theater, where the director may at one level have determinative control over the performance, but only with the consent of the players. If in Pynchon’s vision, the Tristero is an actor with an equal ability to defer to or to defy the script and stage directions, so too is the story an imaginative space over which its framing narrative has only illusory control. In this sense the narrative is relegated to the status of a narrowly utopian mode of language working as a defensive impulse toward abstract order, a design to protect the culture from “words [it] never wanted to hear.” This level of abstract narration seeks to present an orderly world, but its methods prove insufficient, even damaging, to that ideal.

To encode history’s secrets within cultural consciousness, language must work both historically and imaginatively, never presenting a finished world. Only in the submerged development of the alternative story (generated in the constant interaction of the secret and the design containing it) can language unite subject and representation, history and imagination. The innately defensive designs of narrative, then, generate and encode an alternative system of meaning, and that alternative provides—within each of the romances studied here—a new cultural story beyond the romance of history. In each text the new cultural story is figured as a mystery, shaped by the potential revelations that might be given through the vision and language of one key consciousness, if only the narrative would allow the full emergence of that perspective.43

When it does emerge, the storyteller’s story—even unrealized—prompts a reconception of cultural self-definition.44 For example, despite
its elusiveness as a fixed image, the America that Cooper’s Spy clearly would have known is far more complicated than either the domestic romance or the revolutionary ideals that design the narrative. The Spy’s America includes both of these worlds, as he moves in and out of them, but it also includes whatever lies between them—the hidden threats, the secrets, the possibility of the imminent destruction of either ideal. Thus it is surprising that the same cultural consciousness that designs the orderly narrative may benefit from this more powerful form of language. Obsolete dreams, ineffective abstractions, mistakes of the culture: All of these may be infused with the story, America itself, as it has been imagined and lived. This infusion brings with it the possible fulfillment of both promise and threat, of both symbolic national identity and historical self-knowledge: At one extreme is the static ideal, a purified past and present, at the cost of a life in time; at the other extreme is the negation of symbolic value, a bare acceptance of life void of imaginative reconfiguration. Only as two inextricable components of one sustained cultural language can these forms of self-knowledge foster cultural identity without paralysis or destruction.

With the strong recurring pattern of this symbolic method, American literature—even its most mainstream components—is ensured moments, at least, of sharp awareness of alternative realities, an awareness that one layer of discourse challenges yet still sustains the next. Moreover, within these narrative designs, structural divisions—the isolations of codes of consciousness—warn about the sacrifices of this awareness, the price of living and seeing the culture as a storyteller must. When the storyteller, like Cooper’s Spy or Hawthorne’s Hester, dies, the dangers of such consciousness are transfigured: While some dangers are resolved in the death of their agent, the inheritance these characters then leave is quite different, as it becomes—potentially—the cultural privilege of a transmissible promise left to the community. Death clearly denies the agency of language from one subject—thus creating yet another remove, or layer, that must ultimately lie in between experience and narrative. Yet it also enables the authority of countless different—but not necessarily less powerful—agents of language about that subject. This proliferation of tales is the storyteller’s private, perhaps quite reluctant, inheritance left to the social world.

In this model, though, the storyteller is a creature whose knowledge has an agency transcending its original context: This is to say, a storyteller may fail to communicate, or a story may never find a storyteller, yet there will be a legacy still, even if that legacy is only the knowledge of an intangible loss, the final alienation of cultural mystery from narrative design. This is the emptiness that Pynchon’s novel explores. The Tristero has not found a storyteller in Oedipa; Oedipa ends the story as she began, hardly overwhelmed
with knowledge. Nevertheless, the novel has demonstrated that there is a space—a “vacuum,” as Pynchon terms it. Into that space, unable to imagine nothingness, character and reader alike infer—perhaps even infuse—the existence of “the separate, silent, unsuspected world,” the idea of an abstraction—not a human being—but an abstraction with an agency of its own, which must be responsible for the manifest “withdrawal from the life of the Republic,” and the all-too-clear weakness of the known world of narrative.

In short, this project centers on cases in which the consummate agent, the storyteller, is associated with silence rather than with revelation, and this silent agency finally proves to be the fundamental source of power for a certain kind of transmission of story. It is of course not a transmission without loss, but still it is a transmission of the unspoken into a form more easily told and retold. By preserving historical secrets and still soliciting belief in that unrevealed story by way of uncovering its persistent and fragmentary life in the novel’s present consciousness, the culture has shaped narrative silence into yet another layer of expression, a deeply, even archetypally, powerful layer, which indeed may function as the foundation of a new—because more richly layered—cultural story. Through an analysis of this process, this book aims to contribute to work on the material and theoretical problems of the roles of experience, language, and secrecy in cultural self-definition.

CULTURAL SECRECY IN THE FIRST CENTURY OF AMERICAN ROMANCE

Each of the three major texts studied here—in differing degrees and combinations—enjoyed some prompt and sustained popularity from literary critics and the reading public at large. In fact, each is remembered today as a landmark in American literary history. Their fictional-historical worlds, in different ways, are just at the limits of their contemporary culture’s knowledge and understanding. They record scenes too old for reliable memory, too new to fit into familiar patterns of nostalgia. Each of the three novels represents a crisis in American self-consciousness through a figurative use of the struggle for justice; the American story thus becomes, metaphorically, an arena of competing narratives over which troubling ideals of authority preside, with apparently random power. Because the cultural secret, or the story, remains shrouded in silence while the surrounding knowable worlds of narrative crumble, it may appear to be a curative alternative, a truth within a web of lies. Indeed, for as long as they remain less than fully unmasked, secrets invite just such faith; in this way,
within my argument, the secret’s call to belief allows the story to function as a truth ironically precisely through its silent indeterminacy.

The storyteller, then, whose province is that realm of cultural secrecy, invites interpretation as a prophet of sorts by representing a particular knowledge of mystery and gaining strength from that silent undercurrent to the text. The Spy, Hester Prynne, and the Virginian are associated with powers of language peculiar in their world. In order for us to accept that the plots of these novels unfold as they do, we must assume that these characters know more than they tell. Thus by contrast these storytellers point to the linguistic incapacity of their communities. Each in a different way, these characters escape from the confines of design set up by the structure of romance and the narrator’s interest. Cooper’s novel provides an example of the active creation of such a textual strategy. Hawthorne’s novel addresses the complexities of sustaining it, beyond the reliable but outworn tools of nostalgia or progressive historiography. Finally, in Wister’s novel, the strategy recoils upon itself, as the deliberate creation of a mythic American mystery ironically drains that mystery of its intrigue. Cooper’s Spy derives his particular historical knowledge in the dark forests of the Neutral Ground; Hawthorne’s Hester nurtures her untold story on the outskirts of Puritan Boston. But when Wister’s Virginian travels beyond the narrative eye, he falls mysteriously and perilously close to death. Seeking too much control, a mastery over the now distinctly separate realm of history’s secrets, the cowboy thus loses his capacities as an American storyteller, and he must leave the realm of story, now free (or doomed) to seek peace in the romance.

All of this suggests development in the narrative mode addressed here, as it is incarnated from Cooper onward. In its early forms this formal model is identifiable through certain literalizations of the idea of narrative silence: For instance, there is no place for the Spy in what Cooper calls the “visible space” of the narrative world, and this makes sense. Despite being the focus of the narrative, he is a spy, and so his mere existence is a radical intrusion on an orderly system—even if that orderly system is figured here as the system of war. As the manifest existence of such intrusion, the Spy bears witness to the existence of a second, necessarily abstract (because unknown), world. The sacrifice of his life may be read (on one level, at least) as martyrdom, but though his own life ends, there remains the haunting presence of the world to which his life bore witness, figured particularly in the random, frequent, and cruel moments of violence that are scattered with surprising frequency over the romance.

Later examples remind us that not all storytellers face (or even seem to face) their silent exile, their sacrifice of subjectivity to the cause of a cul-
tural consciousness, with the humble devotion of a patriotic government agent. Some are merely human, and their frailties are all too clear as they fail to break free from an elaborate linguistic trap. They may be characters who want love, as Hawthorne’s Hester does, or an escape to a new history, as Wister’s cowboy does. In these cases the demands placed on the storytellers may have effects that are more profoundly compromising, even tragic, at least to the storytellers and perhaps to their culture as well. Nevertheless, even with the shift toward ever more costly forms of heroism, the narrative designs encoding the life of the storyteller remain strong. In fact the narrative desire to map an orderly world apparently only gains strength from the disquieting vision of an inconsistent world, a world where martyrdom may not be much more than death. Narrative designs work harder each time these challenges arise, and those competing codes—the narrative maps and the untold stories they cover—still suppress and generate the emergent story.

The Spy, martyred to his country’s revolution; Hester, drained of passion, “a living sermon against sin”; the Virginian, a cowboy-turned-capitalist, husband, and father: In their one-dimensional forms, these central characters promise a certain reliable iconic value to the developing system of symbolic thought throughout nineteenth-century America, images celebratory of national achievement and cautionary about the futility of defiance. Those primary symbolic functions, however, work only because they have been textually predetermined to be misappropriations of complex identities. In each case the power of the icon rests in those fragments of identity that escape symbolic representation; these icons wield imaginative power precisely to the degree that they resist interpretation, turning their culture back upon itself, to question the workings of its developing cultural stories.

This is first a relation that the respective authors and their texts have with the cultures into which they write, but it is also a compact with an unknown future of readers sharing certain mythic expectations. Public interpretation—and the storyteller’s resistance to it—provide the means of studying some of the complex ties between human agency and language. The agent and language cannot be linked directly; in the development of cultural stories, it is necessary to build layers between experience and its narratives, just as in the reading of such narratives, it becomes necessary to do the archeological work of finding those layers, searching the palimpsests within each text, and in so doing, discovering surprising links as well as predictable distances. That necessity, and an anatomy of its workings, are topics of central concern in this book. Within the texts studied, those layers must make some dramatic, if not impossible, connections:
These narrative layers, I argue, link the Spy's world of meaningless violence with the patriotism his martyred body suggests; Hester's life of passion with the penance inscribed by the &; and the Virginian's ventures beyond the reaches of the law with the evolution of civilization in the American West. These examples provide models of a mode of reading that offers a new fullness to the interconnections of aesthetic and historical concerns; I hope the connections will suggest, if not a dominant tradition, at least a recurrent strategy of representation in nineteenth-century America worthy of sustained attention.

The first section of the book begins with a study of the designs of popular romance in two widely circulated and well-known tales of the revolutionary experience in New York—the mysterious and violent death of Jane McCrea, a loyalist sympathizer, and the colonial army's execution of John André, a British spy. Through an analysis of divergent accounts in newspapers, pamphlets, histories, and dramas and of the emergence of their stories in historical romance, I argue that the cultural work of these tales includes not only the creation of symbolic forms to be used in a new national story, but also the representation of a persistent voice of history that will not allow for new beginnings or self-constructed origins. This unreconciled dimension of the legends—the losses inexplicable within the teleological design of nationhood—becomes the deepest resource for Cooper's construction of historical memory in The Spy. What is at stake for Cooper and his surrounding culture in these stories is the possibility of reconceiving the American revolution as less the consensual product of public documents or the collective producer of the shared understanding of monuments, than at once the product and producer of conflicting and often personal energies. I argue that these unreconciled losses are refigured as historical secrets.

To explore themes of revolution from the perspective of a nation on the brink of Civil War rather than a nation immersed in its first age of monumental memory, I turn my attention to Nathaniel Hawthorne, another central figure in the American canon, influential in his own day and continuously counted as a classic American author. In this second section of the book I focus less on the thematic and formal establishment of this secret dimension of history emergent from the relations between disorderly experience and patterned story and pursue instead its particular workings within the competing historiographies of The Scarlet Letter.

This analysis begins with a reading of Hawthorne's “Gray Champion” (1835), a tale in which this (secret, silent) form of American history is embodied in one mysterious human figure who returns from a particularly complicated past. The New England tradition behind this tale of an exiled
regicide judge, living secretly somewhere outside of the known community and well beyond the natural span of human life, evolves to connect the story's present day to several of the most unsettling episodes in early American history: In effect, the Gray Champion's life story links the Puritan revolution and regicide, the New England witchcraft crisis, King Philip's War, and the American revolution. As Hawthorne reemploys them, these seventeenth-century contexts are recast as nineteenth-century tales; through these age-old legends with strong cultural currency in the antebellum years, these contexts become central to *The Scarlet Letter*.

Hawthorne's participation in the development of this legend, so particularly well suited to the narrative concerns of secret history, thus begins in his early writings and, I argue, culminates in *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel built upon a richly ambiguous theory of history's secrets. By way of return to the legend, then, the ambiguous historiography of the novel reaches toward another (surprisingly material) layer of meaning. Writing at a volatile intersection among the (often politically diverse) historical theories influential in his culture, from Clarendon's long-established story of Puritanism to contemporary nationalist and progressivist visions such as George Bancroft's, the crisis of Hawthorne's world is historiography itself, the pursuit of a story of national founding and continuity that might withstand the growing pressures of civil unrest. Hawthorne interrogates these models, showing the role of history within cultural consciousness to be both less predictable than a cyclical model would suggest and more relentless than the progressivist understanding of linear models can explain. His figure of history is trapped between worlds and so causes surprising shifts that challenge either mode of thought; in *The Scarlet Letter* as in his short stories, the most potent forms of history may be imagined as material artifacts, including the person-made-artifact in the figure of the mythic "Gray Champion": an exile who secretly returns to (and then insistently lingers near) a community not yet ready to accommodate his reintegration.

Moments of founding and threats to continuity invite imaginative acts of closure, and these characterize the studied texts of Cooper and Hawthorne respectively. A new context for closure surrounds the subject of the third section of this book. This final major section of the book charts the process by which the West enters cultural memory as (in Owen Wister's words) "the true America" and argues that this symbolic configuration—made possible only after the closing of the frontier—signifies an irrecoverable shift in narrative method. A literary counterpart to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, Wister's best-seller was enshrined almost immediately as the prototypical Western novel, the work that invented the cowboy hero. Certainly there is something remarkable in the way Wister
weaves a romance of American unity from known threads of discord—sec-
tional differences, vigilant justice, conflicts of gender and class—and even
a century later, critics continue to note the masterful design by which the
author allows his central character to succeed according to both eastern
and western values. Yet this is more than the evolution of one hero’s adap-
tation: This narrative pattern indicates the definitive cultural shift that
effectively marks experimentation with, and finally an end to, the narrative
strategy I analyze in this book.

Just as there was a popular embrace of Turner’s thesis, so also are Wis-
ter’s characters drawn to clear and final explanations. Overwhelmed by a
desire for stability, even closure, within a map of America’s historical
imagination, Wister’s characters—and his America—evaluate the costs of
such closure and then acquiesce to them. At stake here is something that
does not sound like a loss or sacrifice until it is reconsidered within the
narrative model established by the earlier romances: To be the hero of
twentieth-century America, the Virginian must evolve specifically in his
consciousness of his own will and agency. The leap to self-consciousness
leaves this hero divorced from the primal world before expression and
locks him within the modern human condition, fully a function of the
nationalist paradigm. Here the Virginian must live only in visible spaces
rather than crossing borders into the silences of his world.

For Hawthorne the past—as it encounters the present—splinters on
contact with the culture, forcibly embedding fragments of itself within the
fabric of everyday life and so irrevocably changing lived experience while
remaining unknown in its original form. For Wister, though, even these
fragments are remote, apparently buried beneath the newly efficient
machinery of national memory. The Spy and Hester Prynne each die as
guardians of stories of mythic origins, both feared and treasured as cultural
secrets. The Virginian’s end is different; his narrative development insists
that he leave behind his connections to such primary experience. Rather
than leaving his potential storyteller as the bearer of knowledge from an
older world of cultural mystery, Wister radically changes his hero, taking
from him his historical knowledge as necessary payment for his heroism.

From his first figural identity as the silent, enigmatic symbol of a culture
at war with itself to establish a story of nationhood, the Virginian becomes
a model of conformity and accommodation, with the struggle cast aside,
backward into the now closed nineteenth century. As should be clear by
now, the cowboy’s absorption into romance cannot dispel the secrets and
mysteries of which he was once a privileged if isolated part; he no longer
has access to them, but they remain in the text as figures that haunt an
apparently reconciled world.
In the strict sense of the term, perhaps, a cultural archetype cannot exist: It may be that there is no symbol or pattern in cultural consciousness that precedes and shapes the lives of people in history. In America, however, certain stories have grown so deeply rooted in the culture that they may function at least as archetypes. Those stories emerge in different texts and at different moments; this book offers three that have come to be central to American literary imaginings. These stories are irreducible images, "outline[s]," to borrow Michael Taussig's terminology, of "the spectral radiance of the unsaid." Such stories grow from historical fragments and their traces—the residue of past experience most resistant to present understanding, and particularly so much more resistant than it may first appear. The life of Cooper's Spy, the Scarlet Letter in the Custom House attic, and Owen Wister's West: All are figurations of a national story we cannot know with immediacy. Within their literary frames, they are in exile from any context that would supply ready meaning to them, and we come to know them as stories.

These stories with the power to function as archetypes are the unarticulated alternatives, the cultural secrets, sustained within our romances of national identity. They attest to anxieties about the development of a nation’s literature and consciousness: Foremost among these is the fear that the story of America is not as clear and grand as Faulkner's Jason Compson—whose extraordinary degree of belief fully associates him with narrative design and so precludes his status as an American storyteller—describes: "[W]e see dimly people . . . possessing heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable." Instead, maybe the connection of narrative design (and the belief in order that sustains it) is as tentative as language itself, which Quentin Compson, Absalom, Absalom's oddly refigured modern storyteller, recognizes as a "meager and fragile thread . . . by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness." What remains haunting, then, in texts where the secret history is so decidedly remote, is the very enduring fact of these stories, whose existence we glimpse but whose plots we never master.

It would be satisfying if the task of this book could be one of recovery—the reanimation of the lost stories glimpsed in the matrices of national romance. However, perhaps the foundational characteristic of these stories is their remotesness from narrative. With close attention to aesthetic layering, we can see more deeply the historical, and vice versa, but (even if we would wish to) we can never disentangle the layers themselves. Thus it becomes possible in each particular context to work toward an
understanding of what is at stake in the attention to such layering, but never to find a pure or hidden truth within. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson argues,

> [B]y definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, [and thus] they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in their turn by the hegemonic culture.

This book begins to reanimate that dialogical system—though with an acknowledgment of the impossibility of the full restoration of lost stories and still *without* recourse to an artificial reconstruction of their suppressed voices. While to say that immediate accounts of raw experience never quite reach expression in the texts of cultural self-definition is simply to acknowledge the mediations and distortions inherent in language and memory, it is a quite different task to shift the terms of inquiry, having conceded the ideological forces through which a culture overtly shapes its stories. From here we might look for those historical moments apparently lost and then find them among those official narratives of culture, working as persistent and powerful operatives within the mainstream cultural imagination. To the extent that this project succeeds, we may now see the persistence of voices of discontent, chaos, and mystery within—indeed as part of—the voice remembered and recorded by certain richly paradoxically cultural narratives. We will never learn their secrets fully, but we may see how the existence of their secrets has ineluctably shaped what we say and know about foundational moments in American literary history.