Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form

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REMEMBERING THE REVOLUTION
IN THE SPY

I am mortified to death—having just received (what I had been so anxiously expecting) a Letter... and... perceiving it contained an invisible page... I assay'd it by the Fire, when to my inexpressible vexation, I found that the paper, having by some accident got damp on the way, had spread the solution in such a manner as to make the writing all one indistinguishable Blott.

—Major Odell to John André, May 31, 1779

In *The Spy*, the American cultural imagination partakes of both the language of unspoken memory and the language of planned and articulated foundations, building on these toward a story of American experience. As the novel defines it, that imagination is the source of cohesion around which the culture circulates. The submerged development of the Spy’s character and actions throughout the book provides a figure for the evolution of the imagination he represents: Like the Spy, the cultural imagination in Cooper’s terms protects the promise of an American story, directs communal consciousness toward the acceptance of experiential history, and yet abandons any demand for the immediate and full revelation of the knowledge encoded within. Though harboring cultural secrets, this is an imagination generated by utopian hopes and fortified by a particularly nineteenth-century American national loyalty. Horace Bushnell described this loyalty as creating a communal bond “sanctified to be the matrix of the coming nationality and the Constitution to be”:1 So too these cultural imaginings of America’s future created a story that would be sacred before it functioned at all, and yet also (paradoxically) one that must be consecrated only through its workings in history. In *The Spy*, Cooper develops this notion in opposition to what he represents as the pervasive impoverishment of other cultural rituals that had been employed in memorializing the Revolutionary War. Within the novel, a different American ritual of expression supersedes the failed structure of
familiar imaginative resolution, and the replacement process illuminates a model of the relations between ideology and form in American literature through which the events of history witnessed in life—but not in writing—come to play a central role in the very narratives that most forcefully exclude them.

This becomes evident through the Spy’s position within the narrative. The novel explores the position of American memory and imagination with relation to an inaccessible past and an unknown future. Each recognizably patterned cultural story that the novel includes ultimately fails, and so the novel portrays an image of the nation as the product of unknown history and unpredictable experience. Like the symbolic tomb of a nation’s Unknown Soldier, Cooper’s text encases the elusive nexus between personal and cultural history, conceding without hesitation the irreclaimable loss of the subjective component of experiential knowledge and leaving that resonant silence to be (in Benedict Anderson’s terms) “saturated with ghostly national imaginings.” The Spy, however, has a dimension that is not fully satisfied with this modern image of a community’s consensual retrospection: The Spy’s job—as he stands on the threshold of a new state—is not only to receive such imaginings, but more specifically, to solicit the will to imagine. It is an act of primordial power, with a visionary’s belief in future promise.

In that capacity as the harbinger of a coming age, Cooper’s Spy has a familiar role in American literary history. In his classic study, *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis demonstrates the ways in which nineteenth-century American literature searched for ways of representing “a new kind of hero in a new kind of world.” Lewis’s Adam is “an individual emancipated from history,” who “takes his start outside the world, remote or on the verges,” and who must “master or be mastered by” his world’s “power, its fashions, and its history.” In his modern condition of exile from the very world he serves and symbolizes, in the new story he has to tell, in his wandering homelessness, and in his search for a community of understanding, the Spy stands as an American Adam.

His role within the emerging story of American culture, however, includes a central reversal of the Adamic model as well. While the American Adam is a character innocent of historical knowledge and “unconscious of time” who enters a “history laden environment” that he then helps to renew, the Spy is a character deeply laden with history—personal and cultural. He enters a world that has been somehow blinded to the content of its own experiences. In his case, the cultural function of renewal lies not in compensating for the injuries of time and experience through innocence but precisely in bringing about a communal acceptance of his-
torical knowledge while absorbing the disruptions that such knowledge will bring. Carrying with him the historical knowledge necessary for cultural renewal and yet standing alone in a precarious position on the brink of a new age, the Spy lives within the rift between past and future in American culture.

It is telling that the Spy is not a part of the chaotic opening scene of the novel. Amidst “chilling dampness, and increasing violence . . . of the approach of a storm,” “darkness,” “a thick mist,” and an atmosphere in which “[g]reat numbers . . . wore masks,” the Spy is “away . . . wandering” (35–37), and no one knows where. His textual absence creates a silence that is, paradoxically, a form of expression, apart from the confusions of plot. The Spy’s existence, like his silence, is (by contrast with the represented world) assumed to be saturated with private experience and the utopian project of cultural order, just as, within the novel, the shaping forces of that story come from the deepest internal knowledge and from the static narrative frame. Interdependent and unresolved, the Spy and the novel’s plot, along with their attendant layers of expression, serve as voices of American language that—through their dynamic resistance as much as through their own limited achievements—encode the story of a culture in process. It is the space between these levels of expression, the field of their interactions, that the narrative silence in *The Spy* records and that (Cooper suggests) is both the most promising and the most dangerous ground for the development of the cultural imagination.

**THE SPY’S OWN STORY**

Narrative silence in *The Spy* becomes a language unto itself—a language never received by, but still shaping and shaped by, the narrative structure. Cooper emphasizes the incongruity between experiential history and the realm of the romance as a means of illustrating the separation between these levels of cultural language. Nowhere are the limitations of romance more evident than in the novel’s fruitless struggle to bring the silence of the central character’s experience into the language of narration. The silence of the Spy’s knowledge long precedes his actual death: Both in life and in death, the Spy embodies a force and a vision irreconcilable to plot or pattern, and both his isolation and his cultural power are most clearly marked by the limits of narrative language. When the Spy is surrounded by “conversation . . . on the ordinary transactions of life, his air is abstracted and restless” (60); he finds that language in its ordinary descriptive function is no avenue to power or knowledge. Accordingly, on
issues of personal experience, passion, and devotion (“of the war, and of his father”) the Spy “seldom” speaks; when he finally meets the disguised George Washington, it is with an appropriately “silent bow” (60).4

Living a life fraught with moments of an even sublime danger, the Spy feels the inheritance of memory; it is as if the silence and the dangers help him to listen—not only to the soldiers and their plans—but also to the land itself and each symbolic claim upon it. The Spy’s disengagement from social language, along with the narrator’s distracted attentions toward the reconciliation of visible plots, combine in the novel not only to expose the representational limits of the narrative voice within available forms of language but also to associate the Spy with that distinctly potent silence, one so potent as to be imagined as a language bound closely with the deepest knowledge of history.5

For all of the Spy’s promise, there is an attending frustration left to those (within and outside of the text) who must interpret him because his promise depends upon an elusiveness that prevents settled understanding and stable knowledge. Although this “neutral ground” of character and history is a field of competing forces of language and consciousness for which no single voice can provide adequate reconciliation, Cooper’s narrator still directs all efforts toward that language of mastery. Like many of his characters, this narrator proceeds according to a single design of comfort, order, and stability. Furthermore, like Sarah Wharton, who is driven mad by the knowledge of betrayal, this narrator demonstrates no capacity to confront that which will not fit neatly within a preconceived system. Though in spirit the narrative consciousness shares the desires of the colonial “civil authority [that] thought it incumbent to examine narrowly into [the Spy’s] mode of life” (59), it is exactly this narrowness that prevents substantive knowledge: “[G]lances at him were uncertain and fleeting. The intermediate time no eye would penetrate” (146). The Spy’s travels through history and experience thus take him “where no man” (including the narrator) “will dare to follow” (372). He lives among “the imperfect culture of the Neutral Ground,” in a lawless borderland. Here, among “rough and unequal hillocks” and “the barren sterility of the precipices” (399), the Spy’s knowledge and motion are hidden by “the obscurity of the night” (137). In terms of his experiential knowledge of the Revolution, the language of storytelling, and the cultural imagination, the Spy’s world is predicated explicitly on the powerful existence of something beyond the narrator’s articulated romance, essential to the causes and events of that world, and yet beyond the acknowledged patterns of culture.

Whether the narrator is aware of it or not, the Spy’s story is the real matter of Cooper’s book. The ironies abound here, as the Spy—even
before his complicated military service begins—is virtually invisible to his culture, an impoverished man, “but little noticed and but little known” (58). However, his life enacts a story of the submerged disorder of national origins—including but not limited to the victimization of the weak, the arousal of the most self-serving instincts, betrayals, poor decisions, and needless violence. Even this disorder, though, is necessary to the culture; like all myths of origins, it cannot be replaced, not even with an easier tale of harmony or reconciliation. “One of the misfortunes of a nation,” Cooper wrote in his 1843 preface to Wyandotté, “is to hear little besides its own praises.” There, in the last of his novels of the Revolution, Cooper would issue a warning to his American audience: “[A]lthough the American revolution was probably as just an effort as was ever made by a people to resist the first inroads of oppression, the cause had its evil aspects, as well as all other human struggles. . . . [T]here is a danger of overlooking truth, in a pseudo patriotism. Nothing is really patriotic, however, that is not strictly true and just.”6 Everything about The Spy suggests that the dangers facing America in 1821 are even more grave: In this earlier novel, the issue at stake for the communal imagination is not simply an established ritual of patriotism but the process of sorting the earliest memories on the way to establishing the very essence of cultural identity. Neither heroic nor pure, these are the life experiences left out of cultural classifications. As a frequent interruption to the narrator’s dual plots, the Spy is a persistent reminder that even if these plots contain (as they quite nearly do) all of the essential action of The Spy, they hardly touch upon its story.

As George Washington’s most trusted secret agent, the Spy is the novel’s namesake, presumably the main character, and the only agent of meaningful change in his community, yet his actions rarely cross the borders into the narrative vision. Making only brief and ambiguous appearances in the knowable spaces of his culture, the Spy might be anyone; his personal history is sealed. In fact, all aspects of the Spy’s identity, and the secrets he must know, are locked deeply beneath the level of the narrative plots in a space entirely apart from the acknowledged patterns of his world.7 Thus the subject of the novel struggles for survival not only among the violence of the fictional world but also within a narrative framework that plainly cannot accommodate his story. Both within Cooper’s narrative structure and among the emerging traditions of American romance, then, the Spy is an anomalous figure.

The Spy’s ambiguity, however, functions primarily as a critique of perception: The Spy remains enigmatic only (or exactly) insofar as both his culture and even the narrative form that surround him have no adequate language for the reconciliation of his life and the expression of his story.
The emergence of the Spy’s story comes instead as the social world presented in the novel—made up of the dual plots between which the Spy exists—proves to be easily challenged and quickly proven vulnerable. A vivid example of this is the Spy’s improvisational decision as he is chased by the colonial officer, Captain Lawton, to dive to the ground and trip the officer’s galloping horse: “[B]oth steed and rider came, together, violently to the earth,” and the officer calls out for a “bone-setter . . . to examine the state of [his] ribs’” (139–40). Expecting that the Spy would either fight or flee, Captain Lawton becomes the easy victim of his inflexible imagination, making the simplest opposition devastating. Like Captain Lawton, the narrator (and reader too) rides quickly along familiar paths; it is the extraordinary distraction—even the radical intrusion—of the Spy across these paths that utterly alters perspective and expectation.

Similarly, when the Spy speaks in the text, he is most often unheeded, as when he arrives at the Locusts to warn of the impending fire (275). Ironically, within most of the plot, only the gossip-hungry Katy Haynes does the Spy “partial justice’” (201), and this because of her financially driven romantic designs on him. Reflections on Katy’s desires and on what may be the Spy’s own authentic love of money thus offer among the few—and slight—insights into the Spy’s character; he becomes, then, strongly associated with the idea of acquiring cultural currency, literal and figurative. By remaining isolated from traditional familial and social bonds, the Spy succeeds at this; he devotes himself entirely to his overtly political culture and submerges his personal experiences within this communal role. Thus within the fictional frame, the Spy’s actions demonstrate his quiet belief that the apparent deviance of the role he plays is local and time-bound—that his actions (despite his culture’s failure to understand them) will serve well in the present crisis, and that he, in a new role (or at least free of the restricting misinterpretations of his wartime identity), will be able to reassimilate into the changed society that he will have done so much to establish. One of the improved features of the new social order thus should be a larger narrative framework, expanded boundaries of knowledge, which would permit the ritual integration of a once-exiled figure.

If indeed this were the case, then the Spy’s temporary sacrifices would serve well within the familiar terms of cultural ritual. Traveling the forests to learn the higher cultural wisdom of revolutionary secrets, for a time the Spy necessarily would be “structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” according to his society’s categories of knowledge; he would be hidden beneath the concrete and fixed details of his social world, or in textual terms, submerged beneath narrative representation, awaiting an invitation to
exchange some of these powers of wisdom for social re-aggregation. Within both the Spy's fictional world and the language of the text, however, no such exchange is possible. In life and in death, the Spy maintains both his invisibility (with its narrative form, silence) and his powerful relationship toward his emergent culture. Rather than leaving a community and then returning, the Spy—consistently, actively—is engaged in the actual production of culture, the rewriting of ritual, experience, and knowledge. In his paradoxical condition of exile to the most fertile borderlands of his world (historical, experiential, and imaginative), the Spy is in constant motion, as if his life experiences were etching the signs and symbols of a new language for a new story along the changing frontier. In just one of many scenes of disguise and escape, the Spy’s borderland existence demands his social death and sustains his mortal life:

He knew that by bringing himself in a line with his pursuers and the wood, his form would be lost to the sight. This he soon effected, and he was straining every nerve to gain the wood itself, when several horsemen rode by him but a short distance on his left, and cut him off from his place of refuge. The peddler had thrown himself on the ground as they came near him, and was in this manner passed unseen. But delay now became too dangerous for him to remain in that position. He accordingly rose, and, still keeping in the shadow of the wood, along the skirts of which he heard voices crying to each other to be watchful, he ran with incredible speed in a parallel line. (138)

Rarely able to stop moving, at times inside and then suddenly beyond the borders of both social and narrative space, the Spy has neither a “place of refuge” nor a fully composed identity. Thus within the fixed structures of knowable worlds, the Spy has no voice, no means of self-expression; he is left within the liminal mode of perception in a moment of mysterious revelations requiring full immediacy of response (as figured here in his constant motion), and so implicitly denying the possibility of a retrospective description or report. Because he is unable to move far enough from the forest to be able to tell his community what he knows, the Spy finds his peculiar form of liminality no easy state to escape. The remarkable absence of reaggregation in the life story of the Spy implicates his culture specifically in a failure to acknowledge those stories that defy the definitions and classifications of accepted historical knowledge. While the boundaries of this knowledge are ambiguous, in Cooper's
text and throughout many texts of the early republic, they are boundaries notably excluding the lived history of cultural origins, the experiences preceding symbolic formulations. In the Spy’s silence, however, Cooper reopens that field of language to suggest an extraordinary range of possible results for the new revolution in storytelling that might grow from a philosophy of experience and lived history. The Spy’s silence is not just a matter of textual absence. It is a matter of labyrinthine structural forces—both cultural and narrative—directing the imagination toward a certain set of questions shaping the interpretations of the events of national origins. The inadequacies among these interpretations then suggest that secrecy, subversion, and lost or inaccessible knowledge are all laced among the familiarities of cultural reassurance; in this way, the limits of all such known patterns of life and narration are illuminated through the form of narrative silence. Suspended between the remembered and the forgotten, the Spy plays with equal importance at each end of the imagination. The Spy—as the American story making up his subjective vision—embodies process, motion, and growth; he exists at the frontier of signification. The unmapped distance between the subject of interpretation—the Spy himself, and America, too—and the language of orderly, confident representation—the narrator’s world—becomes the most expansive form of the “neutral ground” of the book’s subtitle.

In this formal rather than thematic sense, The Spy is most forcefully an inaugural expression of developments within the American cultural imagination. Like the cognitive impossibility of knowing a full experiential history of America’s cultural origins, the Spy—in relation to his narrative’s epistemological frame—permeates his world and yet (or, and so) still has no recognized place within its consciousness. As Walter Benjamin has written, while a story remains untold, the potential storyteller’s identity is inseparable from the essence of the story; in this model is a partial accounting for the Spy’s unrelieved isolation. He is story waiting to become storyteller; he has all of the potential accorded to both. While Cooper’s narrator sets out to design, control, and explain a world apart—from the safety of codified memory—a true storyteller, Benjamin writes, “will let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story.”13 With knowledge that extends beyond the power of his own culture’s language—and then framed within an imaginative structure still (in 1821) unable to sort contradictions fully—the Spy’s voice and identity indeed remain inseparable. As a storyteller, then, he can transmit his life and his knowledge only by maintaining his fidelity to a program of cultural secrecy.
THE PROBLEM OF RECONCILIATION

The Spy's only structure of community had been based on a relationship of deep understanding, sustained, Cooper suggests, by a private language perhaps formed in the closed secret of his family's tragic past; as such, it no longer promises (if it ever did) an escape or retreat from the surrounding culture. Instead it is a form of communication that the public realm has proven unable to read or accommodate. There are secrets written just beyond the threshold of narrative understanding that would perhaps illuminate the bond between the Spy and his father, the "tie... of no ordinary kind" (151) within the "sacred offices of filial love" (155). These are not private stories for a retreat of the imagination, but instead they have functioned as the generative force of belief shaping the Spy's actions throughout time. To Cooper's culture, there is something newly modern in this way of living and imagining. As Hans Blumenberg has written, a new style of "self-assertion" in history first becomes possible, even necessary, when "the vanishing point" of "human hope" is no longer clearly placed "beyond the world," when the processes of history and experience replace the visionary belief in providence and cosmological order.

Perhaps because he has lost his bearings with the loss of his family, the Spy, Cooper makes clear, cannot believe in order, only in history. The Spy's dilemma is that he lives within this modern consciousness—the conditions, as Benedict Anderson has argued, for the emergence of the nation—while his interpretive community does not. For most of Cooper's characters, life history has surprisingly little to do with predicting future experience; gender, ethnicity, and class have less than their ordinary powers as they are lost amidst a host of escapes and disguises on the lawless neutral ground. For the Spy, however, Cooper makes it clear that the precise circumstances of his identity formatively shape the range, if not the intensity, of his anticipations as he encounters his culture. For the Spy as for no other character, the "historical situation" of his life—shaped especially by his isolation and his poverty—is acknowledged to be the determining factor in his negotiations with the surrounding world. Nothing less immediate than the Spy's life, his familial history, and now his national devotion, "determine the horizon of possible experiences and their interpretation"; his own circumstantial knowledge thus embodies the 'a priori' of the world's significance for him. Superstitions and symbols dominate communal interpretation in the novel, but only historical necessity and experiential knowledge dictate the Spy's actions and beliefs.
The Spy is left to make these negotiations with history and his world alone because the alternative frame of horizons and the potential agent of his assimilation—the narrative itself—fails. Certainly throughout the novel, the Spy has gained cultural currency—both literal and figurative. Within Cooper’s framework, however, the Spy has neither asked for social acceptance nor turned from his world; thus he has become inexplicable within the language of his culture. By maintaining a silent guard over his secrets, the Spy has both served his culture and resisted its coding. This is an ambiguous and costly freedom, and the price the Spy has paid is clearly evident in the ways in which the language of his world refuses to include him. In this way both his unrelieved isolation and his exclusion from all patterns of language begin simply at the level of character interaction but then extend to the very form of the novel. In only one episode does the buried history of the Spy’s life approach the narrative surface; it is a telling moment not simply in its firm establishment of the Spy’s isolation but also in the narrator’s clear refusal to enter into the dynamics of that powerful realm of secrets.

To Katy Haynes, the housekeeper, the Spy and his father are surrounded by an impenetrable and mysterious sadness. She has overheard enough to know that years ago “a fire had reduced them from competence to poverty, and at the same time diminished the number of their family to two” (58). However, through the Spy’s “awful warning,” Katy had then learned that “there were bounds [of knowledge] beyond which she was not to pass” (59); her quest for the Birch family history is easily thwarted, and gossip or speculation serve her purpose.

Years later, though, Katy by chance has access to the story she desires, and this time there are no imposed bounds. On legitimate business she opens the family bible to look for a will, but—as if drawn back to that mystery of origins—her eyes fall immediately to the family record. She begins to “read . . . with great deliberation” from the very first page written “with the labors of a pen”; she finds the catalogue of births interrupted by a passage relating the secret tragedy both she and the reader have long waited to learn. Promising to help explain the melancholy and mystery of the Spy, the scene elicits every romantic expectation; it even evokes patterned resolutions such as the transformation of Major André’s story from “monstrous rumors” into a legend of American honor in William Dunlap’s play. Perhaps, it seems, the Spy will finally assume for his community and his readers a life story based on some words beyond idle chatter.

However, just as Katy begins to read the sentence recording the “awful day [when] the judgment of an offended God lighted on [the Birch family’s] house,” she “instinctively close[s] the book” (150), frightened, she believes,
by a ghost. With this perverse closure Cooper forever seals inquiry into the Spy’s personal past, allowing his narrator only a brief commentary, no more informative than those words Katy had overheard some time ago: “[H]ad Katy but read a few lines further in the record, she would have seen the sad tale of their misfortunes. At one blow, competence and kindred had been swept from them, and from that day to the present hour, persecution and distress had followed their wandering steps” (151). In Katy, this failure to read is an expected moment of carelessness and haste. In the narrative replication of her blindness (including this “explanation”), however, the narrator makes a significant and complex gesture—the refusal to know—thus exposing the limits of his vision in the very attempt at omniscience.

Through the ignorance of his housekeeper and his neighbors, the Spy loses all chances for private domestic happiness, and within the novel, this loss is a figure for the even higher costs of failing patterns of interpretation, too weak to understand or explain the secrets of history. Nowhere are the dynamics of this secrecy more in evidence than in Cooper’s complicated representation of George Washington as America’s historical father. In Samuel Woodworth’s *Champions of Freedom*, the natural processes of time and maturity take the young hero beyond his own father’s care, but just when he feels most bereft of support, the “allegorical” father, the “Spirit of Washington,” provides an invitation to new levels of knowledge and understanding through the comfort of wisdom and kindness. In mythic terms Woodworth’s romance argues that the familial bond is thus continued—even strengthened—through a symbolic system invulnerable to the ordinary limits of experience, the inevitable distances of time and space. In the Spy’s (ultimately impossible) transition from the ties of kin to the ties of community, however, the exchange he makes by sacrificing his personal life for a cultural role is exposed for an essential incongruity: The attempted transition is framed within the stark representation of an impoverished culture unable to supersede or even to replicate the bonds of private loyalty.

Of all of the characters on the neutral ground, the Spy had found only his father would understand him. After each of his “secret marches of danger” he would return to the “consolation” of his father’s “blessings and his praise” (201). In words never recorded in the narrative, the Spy had told stories of his journeys to his father, and in doing so he had found compensation for his utter isolation from the larger community. Within the symbolic vocabulary of the narrative, the process of the Revolution has rendered the Spy’s father weak: Although he alone has access to the immediate story of the true experiences of time and history that his son’s life represents,
this knowledge makes him only more vulnerable to history’s own powers for destruction. Living in the “single inhabited building” on “the ground on which [the novel’s] action [is] fought” (145), the Spy’s father inevitably falls victim to plunder, disease, and finally death. But to his son—who longs to retreat from the crippling falseness of his imputed symbolic roles (god, beast, enemy, in uncanny simultaneity)—the elder Mr. Birch retains a particular strength; he is a repository of historical understanding, a deep source of human recognition.

Thus when his father dies, the Spy waits with high expectations to meet with George Washington, the second father he has served. Perhaps here the symbolic and personal roles will fuse, now freeing the Spy’s locked history by means of cultural assimilation. This is a recognition scene explicitly set to counterbalance the earlier loss of the true father; it promises also to reverse the comic failure of Mr. Wharton to recognize his son in the opening scene (43). Earlier in the novel the Spy looks forward to this moment; swallowing the identifying note that would set him free from his captors, he had reminded himself of the rewards to come. When one of the American soldiers threatened the Spy by saying, “‘even the justice of Washington condemns you,’” the Spy had replied “in a manner that startled” his captors: “Washington can see beyond the hollow views of pretended patriots. Has he not risked his all on the cast of the die? If a gallows is ready for me, was there not one for him also? No—no—no, Washington would never say, ‘Lead him to a gallows’” (221). Here the Spy’s denial of possible betrayal, as well his “trembling” and evident fear, suggest both the strength of his desire for recognition and his fear that it will never come.

So it must be read as a great disappointment but not a surprise, when Cooper’s Washington claims the restraints of civil order in his deeply limited recognition of the Spy’s duties. Here, the Revolution is nearly over; the Spy has remained faithful to the cause (even to the brink of death) by suppressing all essential facts of his identity. He comes—as he once came to his father—to alleviate his isolation, to collect the justice due his memory. This time, however, the father’s recognition leads only to further isolation. There is no social parallel to the rewards of familial intimacy; Washington offers the Spy neither the laurels of cultural heroism nor even the public restoration of good character:

[A]t length the officer arose and, opening a desk that was laid upon the table near which he sat, took from it a small and apparently heavy bag.

“Harvey Birch,” he said, turning to the stranger, “the time has arrived when our connection must cease; henceforth and forever we must be strangers.”
The peddler dropped the folds of the greatcoat that concealed his features and gazed for a moment wildly at the face of the speaker; and then, dropping his head upon his bosom, said meekly—
“If it is Your Excellency’s pleasure.” (422)

The Spy, the faithful son of liberty, refuses the monetary reward and simply reaffirms his commitment; “conceal[ing]” his face again, he is apparently willing to see his life devoured by the secrets he carries, to watch the affirmation of his name on Washington’s lips once again turn him into a “stranger.” As Washington explains it, a cultural imperative now formally relegates the Spy’s personal story to silence; for the present stability and the future good of America, “it is necessary” that the gaps in perception and knowledge sustained throughout the text be reconciled only through his “fidelity” to the maintenance of an untold story (422–24).

In her 1822 review of The Spy, Sarah Hale had objected to “the manner in which Gen. Washington” is portrayed in the novel by suggesting that “too great a violence [is done] to our veneration of this immortal man” when he is represented only in actions and situations that equally would suit “an inferior agency.” Nonetheless, she admits that the dangers of assumed familiarity with one of history’s heroes—as a mechanism of fiction—can at times facilitate an aesthetically pleasing resolution. Writing fully within the vocabulary of expectations shaping the early American historical romance, she praises the recognition scene between Washington and the Spy for its reconciliation of secrets and promises. In Cooper’s portrayal of American loyalty, she finds not loss or ambiguity but a fully satisfying reward, an adequate blend of realism and magical revelation, and a just conclusion to the story:

[T]he war [draws] nearly to a close, [and] Harvey Birch has an interview with Washington, whom we now discover to have been the dignified and efficient Harper. Such is the consummate skill with which the part of the Spy is sustained, that we now learn with surprise that he has been, throughout, the confidential agent of the great father of his country—and firmly devoted to the interests of America. Under every vicissitude he had been sincere and constant, vigilant and formidable. He is offered gold as a compensation for his services, which he rejects, but receives with gratitude, a frank testimony to his merits, although he is told that he must remain perhaps, for ever, under public reprobation, as his connexion with the commander in chief, cannot be avowed.

With this scene, Hale writes, “the work might very satisfactorily have
concluded.” Hale’s appreciation of the final meeting between Washington and the Spy obscures the fact that the narrative simply does not resolve itself into harmony at this or any other point. In fact, by the time they meet, the Spy’s role and even the identity of Harper have long been clear to readers, and Washington’s “frank testimony to [the Spy’s] merits” (“to me, and to me only of all the world, you seem to have acted with a strong attachment to the liberties of America” [422]) is as much a formal command, a life sentence to silence, as it is a reward. After his father’s death, the Spy is left to find “all places . . . now alike, and all faces equally strange” (201). In his relationship with Washington, the Spy finds only further alienation, a social death suggesting the ironic inversion of the security and comfort of a father’s care. In their meeting Washington’s first words to the Spy are not of recognition but of the necessary cessation of a dialogue that—in terms of narrative representation—has never even begun. As if the voice of this founding father truly might have the power to mute all revelation, personal and historical, the Spy can only stare in disbelief and then acquiesce. He leaves as he has entered, “unheard by the officer” (422), understanding that Washington and a fragile idea of America have just condemned him “to descend into the grave, branded as a foe to liberty” (424).

If, as Hale claimed, this is the reconciliation scene of “so fair a specimen of native talent,” then it has taken a surprisingly antagonistic form. These paradoxical conditions for the convergence of narrative energy provide an image of a deep ambiguity running throughout the narrative: the persistent opposition between the expectations of romance and the events of history, extending well beyond the lives and actions of the characters. In every instance, plans and disguises on the neutral ground—plans to convey or to receive information, to give or to accept a reward—work only in the service of deception, to be challenged ultimately by the crosscurrents of experience, the changes mandated by time and history. Through these tensions the novel critiques a system of cultural interpretation in which symbols have a scarcely legible connection to the life histories they represent. Opened through the structured silence of the Spy’s story is a space for a new model of interpretation: There the American imagination would be most threatened with the loss of its ideal forms, but only there might the possibility of renewal still exist.

**MARTYRDOM OR DEATH**

It takes death to invite the Spy, story and storyteller, into the realm of traditional language. Even then, however, the revelations available through
him are limited. While he is evidence of all that is unseen throughout the book—America’s story and America’s symbol, now potentially at one—he remains impossible to read fully. He carries an identifying note—Washington’s one gift of acknowledgment—and in certain ways, the revelations it contains are both a reproach to the world of narrative and an ironically post facto offer of “arcane knowledge,” an original story that might transform that world into the inheritance of a storyteller. After “the fatal lead” of a bullet has burst through the “tin box” that the Spy keeps in the pocket over his heart, the young soldiers who find him indeed learn of his identity. In the box, and somehow divinely protected from the bullet, is a paper that reads:

_Circumstances of political importance, which involve the lives and fortunes of many, have hitherto kept secret what this paper now reveals. Harvey Birch has for years been a faithful and unrequited servant of his country. Though man does not, may God reward him for his conduct._

George Washington

In a moment of willful appropriation, the narrator allows that, in death, the Spy is finally “a martyr to [America’s] liberties” (432) and thus too finally culturally (and narratively) reaggregated.

Within this perspective, perhaps the Spy’s work has succeeded; new possibilities for human understanding seem imminent. Recording a scene within what was once the Spy’s dark landscape, the narrator sketches a clearly visionary moment in the lives of the two “favored youth[s]” who appear there, as well as in the life of the nation. As these young American soldiers wander over the past neutral ground of Revolutionary New York, they survey the land as if “for the first time”—though it is now a battlefield again, nearly forty years after independence. Yet, although there are battles still waged there, a new generation sees no dangers, only an embodiment of the “wonder” they feel for “the western world” (427). Significantly, the two men witness the death of the Spy among this paradoxical world of promise and violence; the Spy’s sacrifices, Cooper clearly implies, have done much to ensure that his “native land” will be continually “improving with time” (428). Although the Spy is never recognized or rewarded in his own time, Cooper’s narrator has certainly suggested from the start that the Spy’s life has been one of devoted and patriotic sacrifice and that his death must be the culmination of these revolutionary heroics. From this narrative perspective, when the Spy dies decades after the Revolution, his anonymity is the proof of a lifetime of successful escapes and disguises; his survival into old age is evidence of the lasting victory of his
cause, and his finally revealed identity is the ultimate reward—interment into the memory of coming generations.20

In fact, here at the close of the narrative and the death of its hero, Cooper allows his narrator to suggest that the Spy achieves a cultural (even a pseudoreligious) apotheosis, a split second of personal fulfillment and an entrance into a realm of eternal memory, of constant and immediate recognition—from the young soldiers who find him and from all who will be inspired by his sacrifice. Without offering rites of return, the Spy’s narrative world still sustains a hope that his story, which is his own self, will eventually emerge into the culture, in a sort of delayed reaggregation rite as the story that he lived becomes accepted as origin. For Benjamin, the expression of a true story requires the death of its subject: “[N]ot only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.”21 So—potentially—it is in The Spy, where the lawless, even chaotic, neutral ground harbors the experiences of revolution and the emerging new order, and where (in theory) all of these competing meanings could be resolved by the Spy’s knowledge.

However, although the narrator presents the Spy’s life and death as a unified sacrifice to the revolutionary cause, Cooper’s narrative form revises this notion.22 He suggests that it is the Spy’s untold story rather than the familiar tale of his symbolic martyrdom that becomes a symbol of foundational knowledge, knowledge of American cultural origins.23 While the Spy’s identity has finally been revealed, his secrets have not. The note that he bears tells us nothing we did not know, and thus it is only to a limited extent that even death can return him, as story and storyteller, to the realm of traditional language. While to argue that Cooper deliberately stages the Spy’s trace identity as a subversive undoing of American identity would be counterintuitive at best, nonetheless the text’s effect is to render the Spy a figure of ambiguity, paradoxically evidence of all that was unseen throughout the book.24 In his death he takes with him the experiential knowledge of the “darkness beyond” (292): the secrets kept by history (and within history), safe beyond the power of language to betray, and the sole property of subjective vision, and quite distinctly beyond authorial reach. As an embodied story, the Spy persists in death, as he did in life, as a principle of disorder and a challenge to community understanding.25

Moreover, the perpetual resistance of the narrative frame toward the accommodation (or even acknowledgment) of these challenges is nowhere more evident than in the description of the very moment of the Spy’s death. From the narrator’s imagery, it would seem that the ambiguities of the Spy are almost reconciled in the familiar image of the martyr; he is at
once national hero and individual outcast: “He was lying on his back, with his face exposed to the glaring light of the fusée; his eyes were closed, as if in slumber; his lips, sunken with years, were slightly moved from their natural position, but it seemed more like a smile than a convulsion which caused the change. A soldier’s musket lay near him, where it had fallen from his grasp; his hands were both pressed upon his breast . . .” (431).

This narrative attempt to reconcile the ambiguities of plot and character cannot hide the emergent facts within the description, including the fact that the Spy’s identity has been “exposed” only by “the glaring light” of his violent death. Even if the text suggests that this is an image of a finally fulfilled obligation to die for the state, any such obligation must be negated in the Spy’s radical absence of membership in his community.27 The time for human recognition has passed, and in the very scene that the narrator sets is another, less glorious, perspective on this death. When he dies on the battlefield a generation after his active duty has ended, the Spy is dying too late to belong to his cause: The Revolution has been won and its martyrs enthroned; worse yet, he has lived to see that the violent social struggle for which he had risked his life (and lost his name) was not so unique after all.28 Dying so late in the course of the installation of monuments for the Revolution, the Spy’s silent end is that much more poignant. Among the random fire of an unidentified battle during the War of 1812, the Spy perhaps dies only a forgotten old man whose hopes for national recognition had “long lain mouldering in the tomb with Washington” (426).

Not without reason, then, did Sarah Hale express her dismay about the novel’s (and the character’s) end. Disappointed that Cooper did not end his work with the reconciliation scene between George Washington and the Spy, she objected to the “gratuitous” event of the Spy’s lonely death in 1814: “This, we are compelled to say, is a lame and impotent conclusion. The work should have terminated with the interview in Gen. Washington’s camp, in which the reader might have been led to believe that the faithful agent had been rewarded by a competency in some part of the country, remote from the scene of his services.”29 Even in the optimistic spirit of literary nationalism, Hale cannot accept the narrator’s attempt to resolve the Spy’s death through an invocation of national martyrdom. What she reads as Cooper’s failed final scene, however, is—within the novel’s own vocabulary—a paradoxically appropriate end.

Despite the best efforts of his narrator, the Spy and his story suggest the impossibility of a bounded frame of reference for the experiential knowledge that distinguishes his voice from all others in the novel and encodes the life of history within the story of America. His life and his
death have told of Washington's weaknesses, including what is presented as an excessive dependence on the enlightenment principle of reason; he has seen and felt the turning of neighbor against neighbor, the high costs of physical and emotional violence, and the many incidental casualties of war. The Spy's life reveals these as fragments of the deepest complexities of the war, and these give us a sense of what is at stake in the new form of cultural storytelling advanced in the novel. These fragments, however, are the mere outlines of what Cooper—through *The Spy*—suggests that his culture must see in the process of enshrining the Revolution as myth of origins.

As a profoundly effective cultural symbol, the Spy is not a presence that character or narrative will contain; in fact, as a definable force, he is possible only after the end of character and the acknowledged bursting of traditional narrative boundaries. The Spy's silence can thus be claimed by America only in its form as a sustained cultural secret. Like a family secret, the cultural secret has the power to absorb and explain all kinds of disorderly results that cannot be attributed to any of the comprehensible designs of life experience. While the topic of this kind of secret is circumscribed within the interpretive community, its powers within the imagination are not. In addition, like all secrets, it has inexhaustible powers to generate stories, stories that circulate around a common center of acknowledged mystery. Building a system of cultural storytelling from the very subjects that functioned effectively only as long as they were preserved in resolutely private form, America developed a communal imagination that cohered around an unspoken center of acknowledged power.

There was something more richly imaginative in this style of narrative order than a simple conspiracy of appropriated life histories. Insofar as the evolving cultural imagination required an unspoken text for its cohesive center, it demonstrated America's need for a system of symbolic language that could revise its stories according to the shifting grounds of experience and knowledge; that secret and unspoken text became the figuration for the actual movement between interpretations and states of being. Only through such imaginative structures would history and the imagination fortify one another; only such a story was worthy of the implications of generative power that myths of cultural origins had throughout the ages. “The history of mankind . . . is full of wonders,” John Adams wrote in 1815, “and the greatest wonder of all is, the total destruction of all the monuments and memorials by which we could have formed a correct and impartial judgment of characters and events” (*Works*, ed. C. F. Adams, vol. 10, 157). In his unexplained life and his silent death, the Spy might be just another of Adams's tragic wonders. Nevertheless, in giving a particular
form to the haunting questions and paradoxes of the early republic, Cooper’s Spy—not as a martyr but as a character who dies with his story untold, and as that formal principle of secrecy within the larger narrative of cultural knowledge—embodies the dynamic potential of uncharted territories, boundary lands, constant motion, and their analogue in language, the unspoken story. Resistant to definition, these forms encode not only the promise but also the dangers to (and from) a new way of life and the revelations of history, whatever they may be.