Cultural Secrets as Narrative Form

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CONCLUSION
The Storyteller’s Legacy from Quentin Compson to Oedipa Maas

If the myth is the a priori story of history, it cannot be a mere product of imagination, or even of millenniums-long selection. The Romantic revival of the “original revelation,” this highly visible reversal of the schema of progress, becomes inevitable. While its content is not something that had withdrawn, once and for all, from any experience, it clearly is something that could not always be experiencible, because it only constitutes philosophy’s late experience of history.

—Hans Blumenberg, Work on Myth

Stories are told in order to “kill” something. In the most harmless, but not least important case: to kill time. In another and more serious case: to kill fear.

—Hans Blumenberg, Work on Myth

For purposes of suggesting how the legacy of the storyteller—from Cooper’s Spy through Hester Prynne to the Virginian—may have shaped possibilities for varieties of historical fiction in the twentieth century, I wish to close with brief considerations of one quintessentially modern text—William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936)—and one quintessentially postmodern text—Thomas Pynchon’s Crying of Lot 49 (1965). Though significantly deviating from any generic definition of the classic historical romance, both of these extraordinary novels address questions familiar to that genre and prove themselves to be deeply rooted in similarly complex relations among history, language, and nation building. To see the legacy of the narrative model discussed in the previous chapters within these later fictions, the defining terms of narrative design and secret history might be broadened a bit to allow for the span of years, techniques,
and ideas that separate Faulkner and Pynchon. Narrative design in this context may include any attempt to order the received world through a totalizing imaginative vision, and secret histories may include whatever events of lived history influence the present day by yet standing in need of definition. These secret histories may be considered to be equally strong whether manifest as an emergent topic of preoccupation or a more fully elusive topic, falling outside of the present consciousness of the text.

In the introduction to this book, I noted that in the examples of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Wister, my argument offers sites primarily of depth, not breadth. Yet, as I also note at other times, there is a teleology implied in my argument. Particularly in the study of The Virginian as a text marking a shift away from formal and historical patterns linking profound cultural knowledge with silent marginality, this book implies changes unfolding throughout the nineteenth-century American historical romance. My argument positions the Virginian as a character enacting a shift from storyteller to ideologue, and in this I see a paradigm for the cultural institutionalization of literature that occurred between the ages of Cooper and Wister.

To see the Virginian—as he exists at the end of the novel—outside of the model of the storyteller is to see his silence as a space mapped not by raw conflicting energies of consent and discord but by a crude form of ideology, close to what we might term propaganda. By this I mean that in The Virginian, the central character’s mysteries are absorbed into a story whose ideology is monologic, a force of stabilization and transmission, while the force I imagine in the process of cultural storytelling—reflective of the condition of the Spy, Hester Prynne, the Virginian in his early episodes, and, as I argue below, later characters from Faulkner and Pynchon—certainly is still ideological but is a force of destabilization and transmission, demonstrative of a cultural condition in which the story to be told necessitates a disruption in historical consciousness.

Of course, this argument implies the lesser cultural (as well as aesthetic) elasticity of The Virginian when compared with The Spy or The Scarlet Letter, but that is not to say that such elasticity would never again be a part of narrative silence in romances of American national identity. It is to emphatically correct any such implications that I choose here the examples of Absalom, Absalom! and The Crying of Lot 49, both of which provide us with images of silence and secrecy that have not been made safe by the ideological forces of their world; these are dynamic, even culturally risky, historical fictions.

Both Absalom, Absalom! and The Crying of Lot 49 play upon the precisely wrought expectations of American culture’s reception of the histor-
ical romance, and both do so in similar ways. Both novels—though each differently—return their audiences to the predicament of the reader of the nineteenth-century American historical romance. In order to enter into the fictional world presented, readers are compelled to believe in the powers of narrative design while at the same time remaining open to the radical challenges of historical experience that resonate just below the surface of the plot. Both fictional worlds lock character and reader perception within a specifically, self-consciously, American world, one now distinctive not for its neutral grounds awaiting definition, but rather overdetermined by history.

Here in this new America, language is superfluous, at least insofar as it carries none of the traditional powers (or burdens) of creating or shaping cultural experience. In both novels experience has long since eluded the containment that language has traditionally enforced. For Faulkner, the idea of containing history within narrative remains a compulsion, but one doomed to fail; his various narrators provide an array of different avenues to the same end, the degeneracy of language and the (haunting) persistence of the history beyond its bounds. Here history is the force that, in its inevitable reemergence, shatters the false coherence offered by narrative or even language in general. The relationship between history and language in *Absalom, Absalom!* is fundamentally a struggle for sole dominance that must leave one category decimated, and despite the best efforts of many of the narrative voices, history—again, in the sense of lived experience—will prove the stronger.

For Pynchon, all forms of history, personal and cultural, are deeply buried beneath an outer shell, a shell covered all too profusely with apparently symbolic designs that seem to hold experience together as an abstract coherence. But those designs—collectively, as the apparent coherence they suggest—in turn point only to their own emptiness. In this way, designs in Pynchon's text indicate that something has gone wrong in the text's fictional world: The intricacy of these designs asks that we assume foundational creative and interpretive energies in this narrative world, only then to insist upon the meaninglessness of what they create and interpret.

No less than Faulkner's world, this too is a trap, simply one of a different order. For Pynchon history itself is a puzzle, for which language—like all other vehicles of potential order, such as time—is simply one reservoir of clues. The entrapment within these clues in *The Crying of Lot 49* threatens not the decimation of history or language, but its less violent twin, utter confusion. Here, if history and language could negotiate one another's demands, a fundamental epistemological reality would emerge as a puzzle solved, but the very possibility of such negotiations, Oedipa's
fruitless search will show, is illusory. This trap—this mad collection of clues in pursuit of a truth that may no longer exist, if it ever did—is dangerous not only because of the decidedly indistinct relation between clue and puzzle but also because of the manic proliferation of such clues, which creates an aura of expectation and hope by means of which the journey is extended indefinitely.

In the nineteenth-century texts studied in the previous chapters, secret histories within narrative designs function as expressions of extraordinary anxiety. In the twentieth-century texts discussed here, that anxiety has risen to the point of madness. In Faulkner’s novel, madness takes the form of terror, while in Pynchon’s novel it reaches beyond terror to a space in consciousness where only paranoia offers a comparatively safe refuge.

“A MEAGER AND FRAGILE THREAD”

*Absalom, Absalom!* draws attention to the shift in narrative balance that distinguishes the modern and postmodern variations of the model of cultural storytelling from the nineteenth-century studies in this book. Despite the extraordinary efforts of each of Faulkner’s narrators and despite their formidable set of defenses including an almost impenetrable southern gentility, history and not romance takes the upper hand in his novel. As we have seen, the nineteenth-century historical romance in America characteristically employs narrative designs to frame the culture’s mysteries. Even the most challenging of these mysteries, secrets, or silences—challenging to the stasis represented by plot—are perhaps haunted, but not dominated, by history. Those earlier romances suggest an awareness that narrative designs cannot dispel the ambiguities of experience, but what they can do, apparently, is encode them. Here in Faulkner’s text, though, history will not remain buried, whether dispelled or encoded. Instead the form of the novel enacts a battle that results in a shift in power from the romance vision to history; with this shift, we can see in twentieth-century American fiction a trend toward historical consciousness tinged with a madness brought on by an inability not only to master but even to frame its own memories.

The narrative designs of Faulkner’s central characters—Thomas Sutpen, Quentin Compson, and Rosa Coldfield—offer three variations on the modern limits that restrict the power of narrative to quiet the discord of history. Faulkner shows us that each of these characters is animated by a dream of making sense of a disordered world. Each narrator must confront the implicit promise of language that encourages the attempt to tell a full, whole, story, and yet each finds that—when mapped onto lived history—
such a narrative is no more than a “meager and fragile thread . . . by which the little surface corners of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness” (313). For Cooper, “darkness” lurked “beyond” all “visible space” of the narrated world; for Faulkner, darkness is the normative state, against which small fragments of reason may cast their vain hopes for the light of order.

Thomas Sutpen's vision of his dynasty represents the blindest of all dreams in the novel, but as Rosa says of him, “If he was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not his methods” (207). With obsessive logic, Sutpen plots his design onto the course of his broken life. Yet his task is impossible, as even he knows. Nothing more clearly signals the futility of Sutpen's demands to control history completely and to live in a world of separateness and fixity than the fact that this design has been conceived in a moment of history's most brutal intrusion into his consciousness, his realization of his class status, which has determined and will continue to determine his social identity.

At the age of fourteen, Sutpen's “innocence” is shattered (or his social identity is confirmed) by a black servant who, in turning him away from entry at a front door, calls attention to the boy's evident poverty and low social standing. The event reveals to Sutpen his relation to the social world, which he, as a young man, is about to enter. In order to make this necessary transition—that is, literally to live in time and history, he must make sense of this new (and unwelcome) consciousness of his own place in this culture. Sutpen's task, that is, is to accommodate the loss of innocence through which knowledge comes; however, he finds himself unable to translate this moment.

Instead, Faulkner narrates the flowering of madness through every word and action of denial. Sutpen responds with a vision of his conscious self as if suddenly separate from the world. He cannot, will not, understand himself as he must exist in the world of experience, and so—within his own fantasy—he wills himself back out of time and history. There, in a realm where a fixed and simplified vision of the past denies the existence of the present, Sutpen will live out the rest of his life, denying any human truth that he sees shaded with the taint of time or historical experience.

Echoing the process of early nation building in colonial and nineteenth-century America, Sutpen spins his romance by entering upon a project of world making. He responds to his trauma by going to a new land and learning a new language. Upon arriving in Haiti, Sutpen feels the necessity to master the French language, or else, Faulkner writes, “that design to which he had dedicated himself would die stillborn” (309). If we consider Sutpen's relation to the French language to be emblematic of the
powers of narrative over lived experience, we can see the devastating irony of Faulkner’s vision of narrative design. As Sutpen willfully begins his dynasty, he chooses the name “Bon” as the French surname for his son, in effect naming him “Charles [the] Good” (331).

Ironically, that act of naming is not just the first but also the final exertion of control that Sutpen has over this son; Charles Bon is raised to be, and indeed fulfills the role of, “the dynamite which destroys the house and the family and maybe even the whole community” (382). In fact, the haunting trace of this particular effort toward mastery is the final defeat of Sutpen’s line—the narrative survival of the invented name and the historical survival of the family become one in Jim Bond, “the scion, the last of his race” (468). Bond’s altered name and distant mind represent the degeneration of Sutpen’s ideals into a different form of madness, one well beyond the control of language.

The designs imposed over history in *Absalom, Absalom!* thus implode upon themselves. With this disintegration, there is a parallel and ironic intensification of the terror of historical consciousness. This terror is located in the book’s secret histories, those stories that language neither fully reveals nor fully conceals; they emerge with a power most threatening to Quentin Compson, the designated heir to the narrative. Like Sutpen ninety years before him, Quentin is the young and unwilling recipient of particular knowledge fundamental to the social and political workings of the world he is about to enter. Like Sutpen, too, Quentin wants nothing more than to escape to a new life, free of the entanglements of history, culture, and the determinism imposed, in his case, by family. Toward the close of the novel, when narrative responsibility is completely suspended and without personal voice, Quentin’s impulse to avoid the impending knowledge is clear; so too is his impulse to sustain the narrative gap—the buffer between his own knowledge and the realities of history. He approaches Sutpen’s old home “telling himself, recovering himself in that same breath: ‘I am not afraid. I just dont want to be here. I just dont want to know . . . ’” (456):

He could not help it. He was twenty years old; he was not afraid, because what he had seen out there could not harm him, yet he ran; even inside the dark familiar house, his shoes in his hand, he still ran, up the stairs and into his room and began to undress, fast, sweating, breathing fast. “I ought to bathe,” he thought: then he was lying on the bed . . . he said “I have been asleep” it was all the same, there was no difference . . . waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived. (464)
Quentin can run, try to sleep or bathe, but there is no escape. History will be his grave, and language will be his winding sheet: History has come for him through the very language with which he had tried so hard to keep it at bay.

History’s forces, furthermore, do not end with the reception of the emergent story, because they insist on regeneration by insisting on finding their storyteller. The story of the house is transmitted to Quentin, and what becomes even more devastating is that it is up to him, on the last page of the novel, to provide an answer to Shreve, his Canadian roommate, who asks (again): “Why do you hate the South?” (471) Quentin is the chosen recipient of what remains of that narrative design’s power over his world, but simultaneously, he is also a sacrificial martyr to the powerful persistence of history’s unremitting challenges to that design. For Quentin as for Sutpen, the more the story is told and retold, the more the secrets of history rise up, closing in on the shattering of narrative design.

By the time Quentin and Shreve have finished their storytelling marathon, power has shifted so completely away from language and toward history that Quentin’s voice itself fails him. In the last words of the book, Faulkner indicates the shift away from Quentin’s capacity for speech. Referring to the South, its history, and his family’s entanglements within it, Quentin fights his own self-consciousness: “I dont hate it,” [he] said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I dont hate it,’ he said. “I dont hate it” he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; “I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (471). The narrative defenses of the book have been exhausted, and this scream of denial, at a pitch beyond human speech, reflects a final tragic conflation between the degeneration of language and its ironic parallel, the revelation of an experiential knowledge that cannot, even must not, be brought into the shared narrative of culture.

Here, the monologic narrative of design has been stripped away to its essential element, denial, but it is in fact a recognizable reworking of the same design that began in Sutpen’s Hundred, this time showing forcefully that the historical consciousness of an individual, a family, or a culture remains potent—indeed, perhaps intensifies—even when the means for the expression of it do not. For both Sutpen and Quentin, stories not only prove to be an inadequate buffer against history, but they also become the actual conduits through which time and experience shatter imaginative order. Although there is a difference in their respective madnesses—Sutpen’s so cruel and exploitative, Quentin’s so filled with fear—Faulkner dooms them equally, dooms us all equally, to the inevitable resurgence of the tide of history within our words.
Narrative designs are not enough to allow Rosa Coldfield to make sense of the outrages of history, either, but because she fatalistically understands the limits of language—its tragic association with romantic design—her manipulation of it provides her with a form of vengeance against Sutpen, who had mortally offended her many years before. With all of her own designs broken, Rosa is not destroyed but instead has a peculiarly rich sense of the catastrophic; within this, she may see the tragic futility of language. Rosa's acceptance of the inherent limits of communication comes clear through the very abundance of her words:

I will tell you what he did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the bold blank naked outrageous words just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief I knew when I comprehended what he meant; or take three thousand sentences and leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost fifty years.) But I will let you be the judge and let you tell me if I was not right. (208)

Rosa's narrative is told with the strong presence of her latent knowledge that she is participating in the inevitable disintegration of all narratives of design, and I think it is not too much to see in her storytelling some measure of vengeance for Sutpen's willing subjugation of all that is human to his impossible design. She tells her story not to preserve history, which is only humiliation to her. But in recalling Sutpen's barbaric assaults on her very existence and that of others, perhaps she chooses to participate in the further unraveling of Sutpen's story. Rosa passes her version of the story on because she wants it told and retold within that insufficient medium—language—so that she can fail as a storyteller and further doom others to the same failure. Her failure, I would argue, is the means by which she can do the most damage to Sutpen; it is the means to the absolute contamination of his master design through the repeated contact of the world of life and time that is necessary for the manifestation of the storyteller’s voice. The force of Rosa's vengeance is not her condemnation of Sutpen's actions, nor any intentional distortion of his history. It is the perpetual regeneration of a story that, with every thought, word, and action of the teller or listener, necessarily moves farther away from the purity of design to which Sutpen had dedicated his life.

Rosa and Clytie, Sutpen's daughter born of his slave, ensure that Sutpen's
design will be broken beyond repair, and that—in ever more distorted fragments—it will endure well into the unknown expanse of future generations, a haunting mockery of the denial of time and history at the center of his vision. Clytie sees to it that what remains of the design is finally the sole property of a madman—Jim Bond—who, as Faulkner's appendix tells us, “disappeared from Sutpen's Hundred” in 1910, living still, “whereabouts unknown” (477). She awaits the discovery of the wasted Henry Sutpen by Rosa and Quentin, for they would breathe life into the story again and again, their lives thus becoming reenactments of the failure of Sutpen's design just as she had allowed Jim Bond to escape the burning house, to go running through the wilderness moaning and bellowing. Her vengeance is not so much the burning of the house as it is the perpetuation of the dynasty in a form that parodies every one of Sutpen's original ideals—from his racist desires for “purity” in his lineage through all of his other dreams of order. Faulkner writes:

... and then for a moment maybe Clytie appeared in that window from which she must have been watching the gates constantly day and night for three months—the tragic gnome's face beneath the clean headrag, against a red background of fire, seen for a moment between two swirls of smoke, looking down at them, perhaps not even now of triumph and no more of despair than it had ever worn, possibly even serene above the melting clapboards before the smoke swirled across it again—and he, Jim Bond, the scion, the last of his race, seeing it too now and howling with human reason now since even he could have known what he was howling about. But they couldn't catch him. They could hear him; he didn't seem to ever get any further away but they couldn't get any nearer and maybe in time they could not even locate the direction of the howling. (468)

No dramatic annihilation in flames can redeem this story of the south because it exists to be told and retold in so many distorted and fragmented voices. Jim Bond's cries provide a telling example of one of those configurations of that story; in a dialogic sense, his voice simply responds to every past failure of narrative design by merging the madness of the dream of order with the madness of the method of telling; along with Quentin's inability to speak as the novel closes, Bond's words, the novel suggests, stand as one of the most efficient accounts of the history surrounding Thomas Sutpen; it is thus fitting that when Shreve asks Quentin, “you've got [Bond] there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Don't you?,” Quentin says only, “Yes” (471).
To return to the terms of my analysis: the narrative form created by the interactions of romantic designs and historical secrets first may suggest repression or the failures of memory, but as Faulkner’s novel emphatically shows, that form also provides avenues through which—for better or worse—the residual life of history may reenter present experience. History is never gone, and language is never bankrupt, because their limits and failures together form a space apart, where secret histories may gain the strength to become the most vital forces in, or symbols of, culture. Once fixed or appropriated, symbols lose their dynamic potential, their capacity to transform the communities they serve; they become possessions of culture rather than creative agents of it. But outside of the security (and corresponding restrictions) of known cultural patterns, these symbols generated by historical secrecy may work instead in regions of limitless possibility and undirected energy. In these gaps of definition, rather than in known or named functions, cultural symbols gain their power and sustain their life.

The dual legacy of the function of narrative silence within romantic design—its capacity to solicit both fear and reverence—provides the framework also for the issues of language and history in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa Maas, Pynchon’s central character, quite accidentally falls into a pursuit of history fueled through an exploration of the powers and limits of language, and it is a search destined to end in a form of exile. *The Crying of Lot 49* is a novel about the possibilities of language, about what it can bring to life and what it cannot; it is a story built around a quest to find some interior meaning and to identify the avenues or impediments to that meaning. The immediate problem in Pynchon’s America is a sense that all historical knowledge has been lost and that there are no known avenues to its recovery; thus the novel explores the opposite terror from Faulkner’s, where history is all too close. In Oedipa’s world, those characters who devote themselves to an understanding of the past—even simply of one very limited event or symbol of the past—are pushed outside of the workings of everyday life. To be a working part of Pynchon’s America, one must accept that in this already too crowded present, there surely is no room for the past. This point is made vividly within the text, when Metzger, the former child-actor, now lawyer, is questioned about the fact that innumerable graves were plowed up in order to build a new freeway: he explains simply that the dead “had no right to be there, anyway” (61).

Oedipa wants to know why America has tended toward dissipation even as it has grown more crowded, seemingly more fully labeled, more
easily defined. It is as if the culture’s surface has become so completely covered by names, freeways, buildings, and billboards, that it is hard to tell what—if anything—is underneath, holding it all together. Maybe, the novel implicitly muses, this surface of America is just a flat plane of dispersed atoms, with nothing underneath it but what is already dead. In fact, maybe even the dead have been broken apart, as they were under the San Narciso Freeway. But even if this is true, even if the legacy or history that Oedipa pursues is this image of America, she has dedicated herself to making sense of it: “So began, for Oedipa, the languid, sinister blooming of The Tristero. Or rather, her attendance at some unique performance, prolonged as if it were the last of the night, something a little extra for whoever’d stayed this late. . . . [It seemed] as if a plunge toward dawn indefinite black hours long would indeed be necessary before The Tristero could be revealed in its terrible nakedness” (54). Pynchon places us in a world where there is a double danger to language. It is dangerous if we give up, if we say that the clues given by words and symbols are enough, that they don’t have to signify something more. The danger there is clear: the world would be left devoid of any imaginative structure. But it is dangerous too if we try to follow meaning to its end. Maybe those secrets to be revealed would be less fulfilling than terrifying. This double danger to language in Pynchon’s novel is a legacy of American self-definition in the tradition of the nineteenth-century historical romance. It leaves his hero trapped, afraid to stop searching for what she still fantasizes might be “the Word,” but afraid, too, of what that and other words might say.

Oedipa is faced with the overabundance of clues and the inaccessibility of sure knowledge. Unlike Thomas Sutpen, she cannot respond by blindly projecting a new design, a new language, or a new symbol system over her world; there is, literally, no room left for that. There may not even be enough room to discover—or recover—what has been done and said already. When Randy Driblette, the director of the revenge tragedy staged in the novel, says to Oedipa, “you could waste your life assembling clues and never touch the truth” (80), he is undoubtedly right, but that is only half of the problem to which Pynchon draws our attention. He also wants us to ask where the world would be left if no one made the effort to assemble clues anymore. Melville’s Ahab, too, may have wasted his life by assembling clues about the white whale, and certainly he crossed over into madness. But judged by other standards—specifically by romantic or visionary standards—both Ahab and Oedipa might be said to maintain a different kind of responsibility, the responsibility to assert the power of imagination in a world that will never confirm their vision. In the Tristero, Oedipa senses that there is “a secret richness, a concealed density of dream”
For her, its great draw is not only its mystery but also its specific offer of possible communication. Perhaps this secret system might provide an entire network of communication, which would compensate for the failures of the mainstream culture. This speculation is the closest that anyone in Oedipa’s world can come to the formulation of a romantic design; it is the interpretation of the barren spirit of modern America as a shell that must be enclosing a dynamic system. Somewhere, the seeker then believes, is a prize—so alive as to seem to bear its own agency, and thus eagerly awaiting the arrival of its own discoverer.

But the Tristero system, the secret that propels Oedipa’s journey, is a subversive system of language, a communication system thought to be a threatening alternative to the U.S. Mail. Oedipa is not a naturally subversive character. It seems unlikely that she would want to see the government postal system overthrown; she is, after all, a suburban housewife whose past refuges have included Tupperware parties, television, and the Young Republicans; Oedipa cannot think about the possibility of discovery without some elements of dread and shock. The best qualities of the Tristero as she imagines it are also those that make it most frightening: it provides an image of a separate world, an undefined alternative to the emptiness she knows. It also helps her to explain the emptiness she knows: maybe, she thinks, the Tristero system damaged America, caused the lack of connection and general dissipation of the world she knows. But if so, then that once-subversive system is now more appealing: it may be a storehouse of energy and communication that she can access in order to retrieve those powers for her own world.

Caged in this world of paradox, Oedipa needs nothing short of a miracle to achieve what she imagines. An anarchist from Mexico whom Oedipa meets on her journey explains to her that a miracle is “another world’s intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there’s cataclysm” (120). Miracles are hard to come by in Pynchon’s world, and it is not entirely clear what might be gained when those two narrative worlds—the worlds of order and of secrecy—do meet. In fact, it is surely significant that the Tristero, which stands for the world of revelation—is, if it exists at all, by definition a counterfeit and a fraud. But what Pynchon’s book shows is that both of these worlds are necessary to the imagination, even if the world of design is weak and easily contradicted, and even if the world of historical knowledge is just another fantasy.

Just another fantasy—not the revelation of history but a deeper layer of fiction: this postmodern dilemma makes this novel at once more and less terrifying than *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner frightens us with the vision that all imaginative forms lead back to an unspeakable nightmare of his-
Pynchon reminds us that that nightmare is our own, relived as it is re-imagined. Oedipa's decision in the face of all of this is a decision in favor of the intrusion of historical consciousness, whatever it might bring, into an otherwise weak, depleted, and altogether inadequate present consciousness. She chooses paranoia over emptiness: “For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia” (182). Oedipa's paranoia might be her chosen form of madness, her assertion of a design narrative that, she hopes, may remain vulnerable to contradiction, to the infusion of miracle, while also helping her to appropriate a sense of order into her life. More so than most narratives of design, Oedipa's paranoia is particularly powerful because it provides a complex means of acknowledging greater depths of experience than are accessible otherwise, while simultaneously transforming whatever might lurk in these depths within a controlled structure of the imagination. But for whatever liberation it provides, paranoia surely is a trap as well; like a fun-house mirror, it is a trap of infinite self-referentiality.

The compensations that these twentieth-century American narratives offer for the recognition of the limits of language in the face of history are small but not insignificant—Quentin's speechless denials, Oedipa's consuming paranoia. Although these texts suggest that one form of madness or another is the fate of these storytellers who are doomed by the brittleness of language, still in that madness they imagine a site of consciousness beyond the recognition of the limits of language. With these final scenes of silent creativity conflated with historical consciousness, these characters remind us of what the martyrdoms of the Spy and Hester Prynne, as well as the losses of the Virginian, deferred from their own times. When both language and history seem to fail in perhaps such different ways from one another, then particularly there is much work for the resonant silences of culture to do, drawing together the fragments of each into a new, if still residual, language.

None of the narratives studied here fully enacts that language, and their attendant secrets change form as they move through history. As Georg Simmel has written, “the secret is a form which constantly receives and releases contents: what originally was manifest becomes secret, and what once was hidden later sheds its concealment.”1 Even if it were possible, then, to uncover what is hidden in each of the studied narratives, that process would not make the narrative form studied here redundant. Just as we come to see some of what destroyed Thomas Sutpen, for example—
that is, precisely during the very moments in which we have been figuring that out—new matters have accumulated. Returning to Borges’s Funes: just as we come face to face with some matters of memory, personal and collective alike, we push others aside. However, as Pynchon’s novel so brilliantly demonstrates, that process makes the quest to understand the past look futile only until we consider the alternative, the utter loss of history and memory, a willing submersion in the business of the everyday (such as the world from which Oedipa has come, the world of “Tupperware part[ies],” “the greenish dead eye of the TV tube,” “Muzak,” and “supermarket booze” [9–10, 13]). And so to look for what history has to say, to listen to the resonant silences of culture, may be forever to await revelation, even at times to be caught looking at the banalities of the everyday as if they were indeed revelation. Or, it may be to find revelation not in the transcendent but in layers, in histories, in fragments embedded in our world. But even in the high parodic form of this condition of desire—as it is imagined in the final scene of The Crying of Lot 49—Oedipa, as she waits and listens, has come a long way. Eager for the auction cry of “Loren Passerine, the finest auctioneer in the West,” Oedipa waits in a deeply resonant narrative silence of her own; and there, just as in the secret histories within the American narratives studied throughout this book, that silence continues to entice her imagination and ours, while still resisting cultural definition. The parody is evident, but still, with Oedipa, readers feel in this silence—as in others within the romances studied in this book—the continued encoding of both the promises and the dangers of what history might have to tell. Pynchon writes all of this into his extraordinary closing scene:

Loren Passerine, on his podium, hovered like a puppet-master, his eyes bright, his smile practiced and relentless. He stared at [Oedipa], smiling, as if saying, I’m surprised you actually came. Oedipa sat alone, toward the back of the room, looking at the napes of necks, trying to guess which one was her target, her enemy, perhaps her proof. An assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment. Passerine spread his arms in a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel. The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49. (183).

Perhaps the passivity of expectation is Oedipa’s one mistake: the silences of these narrative worlds do not seem prone to speaking to us; they offer instead a call to interpretation. It may never be fully clear what historical
forces drive the creation of narrative silences, but it must be clear that—
aesthetically and historically—it is imperative that we notice these
silences, and further that we do what we can to excavate them, to read what
they have to tell us about history and art, cultural process and aesthetic
form.