CHAPTER 5

WHISPERING SECRETS TO A DARK AGE

To my ear one of the most beautiful of all Latin words is the onomatopoeic *susurrus*, whispering, which evokes in me a measure of regret over the loss of so many medieval mutterings and airy thoughts that would, had they survived, have promised (though that too, I realize, is an illusion) to complete us and make what we do whole. Or is history like the courtroom where hearsay should be dismissed as untestable evidence by responsible weighers of fact?

Still, if we listen carefully, we can almost hear the faint whispering of the early medieval court, almost see two powerful courtiers draw close to a window outside the emperor’s bedchamber in the palace at Aachen to talk quietly about stolen saints’ bones. They spoke in hushed tones, but then one of them was an overt and the other a covert thief, and neither of them dared to disturb the emperor. Years later at another palace window the powerful archbishop of Rheims could be overheard deep in quiet conversation about the fate of his nephew, the brash bishop of Laon. Over the next twenty-four hours, he met and spoke *secretissime* with other bishops, covertly received documents, and hid them in his gown; all in an attempt to straighten out a crooked bishop.

Early medieval courts were full of such scenes: of powerful individuals slipping away to private places to talk in lowered tones, of private meetings and dinners where business was done and conspiracies hatched, of meaningful glances and penetrating eyes, of nods, winks, and special signs. To look at the famous Presentation Miniature of the First Bible of Charles the Bald is to gaze from the outside upon a world rich in gesture, declarative dress, and the grand sweep of processional motion that animated Carolingian court society (see figure 1.14).

Historians probably think too little about the degree to which, because of their fixation upon the written record, they have allowed their inquiries to be shaped by the inscribed noise of the past rather than its quiet
opposite, the whisper that wants not to be heard. Those matters that the actors of an age attempt to hide from one another may be the most important ones of all or, perhaps, the very act of trying to hide them has only worked to heighten their seeming importance, and that too is part of the point of keeping secrets. For to create and hold a secret is to define and, more importantly, to delimit an audience, privileging and empowering a select few by virtue of their access to and protection of the ‘hidden’, but excluding all others who are automatically cast outside the secret’s circle. Secrets thus shape identities and define membership within a group. Those on the outside want in and their drive to uncover the hidden tends to grant advantage to the secret’s holders, who can trade on their special knowledge and reinforce the superiority of their situation.

Keeping secrets is a dynamic social and political activity that wants investigation, but how does one go about looking for the hidden, for what is not supposed to be present in the received record? While it may be impossible to recover things successfully covered, by testing the seeming silence and examining those moments when secrecy failed, we may come closer to history’s great *tabula obscura*, to the hiders and the hidden. 6

The court societies that formed around kings, counts, and bishops in the early Middle Ages were particularly susceptible to intrigue and gossip, for theirs was a world crafted out of personal contacts and oral contracts in which literacy rarely held the upper hand and the spoken word was almost always more important than the written. 7 Their common sign for silence is one familiar to us over a thousand years later: “put a finger to your mouth,” advised Alcuin. 8 But the whisper almost always won. At Mersen in 851 three royal brothers, who had fought a desperate war against each other a decade earlier, agreed that they would now act openly and honestly toward each other and would not “willingly listen to the manufactured lies and slanders [reported to them] by secretive and whispering men.” 9

In theory there were no secrets in the early Middle Ages that could or should be hidden to God or to his chief representatives on earth, clerics and kings. 10 Three of the Gospels contain Christ’s warning that “Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, no secret that will not be known.” 11 Or as Auden said of the unkeepability of secrets:

> At last the secret is out, as it always must come in the end.  
> The delicious story is ripe to tell to the intimate friend. 12

But for the early Middle Ages God was no intimate friend; he was instead a scrutinizing and fearsome omnipresence. Among his many names was *inspector secretorum*; he was the examiner of secrets and revealer of hypocrisy. 13 Job had invoked him as the *custos hominum*, as much the watcher of humans