Chapter 1

A History of Secrecy

Secrecy is concerned above all with what human beings want to protect: the intimate, the dangerous, the profane, the fragile, the sacred, and the forbidden.

—Mary Mulvey Roberts, Secret Texts

Locating Secrecy

Historical evidence supports a distinction between privacy and secrecy as counterterms to public. According to Raymond Williams, eighteenth-century rural England was transformed from an “intricate land of mystery and surprise” into “a predictable land of wide views, sweeping sameness, and straight lines,” that is, into “knowable communities” (Williams 1973:165). Enclosure acts, planned highways, and ‘modern’ farming techniques, instigated by motives of efficiency and profit, seem to replace irregularly shaped groves, caves, hollows, and hamlets obscurely connected by winding footpaths. Human intervention into the natural world, Williams implies, increasingly puts everything on display as if to accommodate consumerism and merchandising. Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers object that the “planned countryside of straight lines” and open views, oversimplifies agrarian change: “the process none the less was in part a closing-in” (4). By the time Jane Austen wrote Persuasion, for example, some 200,000 miles of hedges had been planted, “at least as much as in the previous 500 years” (4), creating the blind corners and barriers that would allow Anne Eliot to overhear without detection a conversation between Frederick Wentworth and Louisa Musgrove.
Urban growth seems to follow a similar process of rationalization and integration, of increasing openness and coherence congenial to geniuses of architectural design like Sir Christopher Wren. Defoe extols London as “the most glorious sight without exception that the whole world at present can show since the sacking of Rome . . . and the burning the Temple of Jerusalem” (Tour, Letter 2:61). But the urban landscape equally was made up of “unknown rookeries” of “anonymity and crime”; “well-dressed men and women were often robbed in daylight, their goods rapidly fenced through a network of receivers, their assailants . . . lived in the innumerable alleys and courts that abutted the main thoroughfares” (Hay and Rogers, 8). Thus Defoe’s city was both a place of manifest beauties and a sink into which transgressive outcasts like Moll Flanders could disappear. The secret urban underworld is inseparable from the public sphere. Both country and city undergo changes that maintain and invent new hidden spaces; the processes of modernization seem to heighten their persistence and necessity. The phrase “to be let into the secret,” idiomatic in scores of texts, implies a desirable space. A character in Eliza Haywood’s The British Recluse: Or, the Secret History of Cleomira “would have given almost one of her eyes to have been let into the secret of the whole Affair” (13).

Places of public assembly like the coffeehouse and the theater also change. If groups of literate men gathered in Addisonian ‘little senates’ to discuss the latest publications and participate in the democratizing effects of print culture, some important secrets challenge the coffeehouse as a setting for liberty’s growth, among them “the invisible commercial sinews” (Walvin 1997:10) of the English economy. Men who debated political authority also sipped the products of slavery—coffee, tea, and sugar. Trafficking in women’s bodies through prostitution, according to recent research, also complicates the picture of Habermas’ “fourth estate.” The theater, where “between 1637 and 1737, stage and state were scarcely a letter apart” is another important public venue, perhaps even more inclusive in terms of gender and class. Politically charged performances could provoke government retaliation: prosecution of authors or theatre closure. However, the technology of the stage was newly reconfigured to accommodate a special platform, “now accompanied by painted scenes that could be rolled away to reveal an upstage, ‘internal,’ or ‘discovery’ space” (Lowenthal, 121). Or props, like the box containing the crucial secret of Congreve’s Way of the World, serve as visual metaphors for the ways of a world governed by the unseen. These visual metaphors have epistemological significance. The physical stage was redesigned to hold in view the promise of a secret that might eventually be revealed. Members of the audience themselves attended performances in masks. Is such a place less indicative of emerging enlightenment culture?