

Victorian Secrecy

Economies of Knowledge and Concealment

Edited by

Albert D. Pionke and
Denise Tischler Millstein



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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: Victorian Secrecy: An Introduction <i>Albert D. Pionke</i>	1
1 Hidden Agendas: The Secret to Early Nineteenth-Century British Burial Reform <i>Sarah Hoglund</i>	15
2 Harriet Martineau's "only political plot": Assassins, Duels, and Corn-Law Repeal <i>Deborah A. Logan</i>	29
3 Secrecy and Reticence in John Henry Newman's <i>Loss and Gain</i> <i>David J. Bradshaw</i>	47
4 "What Connexion Can There Be?": Secrecy and Detection in Dickens's <i>Bleak House</i> <i>John McBratney</i>	59
5 Concealing Minds and the Case of <i>The Woman in White</i> <i>Maria K. Bachman</i>	75
6 A Victorian Picture Puzzle: Richard Dadd's <i>The Fairy</i> <i>Feller's Masterstroke</i> <i>Eleanor Fraser Stansbie</i>	95
7 Detecting Business Fraud at Home: White-Collar Crime and the Sensational Clergyman in Victorian Domestic Fiction <i>Tamara S. Wagner</i>	115
8 George Eliot's <i>Felix Holt</i> , <i>The Radical</i> and Byronic Secrets <i>Denise Tischler Millstein</i>	135
9 The Perverse Secrets of Masculinity in Augusta Webster's Dramatic Poetry <i>Robert P. Fletcher</i>	149
10 Victorian Conjuring Secrets <i>Michael Claxton</i>	165

11 A Secret Censorship: The British Home Office v. <i>Town Talk</i> <i>Allison L. E. Wee</i>	179
12 Secrets, Silence, and the Fractured Self: Hardy's <i>Tess of the</i> <i>d'Urbervilles</i> <i>Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell</i>	193
<i>Bibliography</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	223

Introduction

Victorian Secrecy: An Introduction

Albert D. Pionke

The benignant efficacies of Concealment,' cries our Professor, 'who will speak or sing? SILENCE and SECRECY! Altars might still be raised to them (were this an altar-building time) for universal worship. Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule.

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

It may be tempting, given the still-popular view of the Victorians as afflicted with “hyper-honesty”¹ and opposed to “subtlety and obliquity of any kind,”² to dismiss this rhetorical effusion from Diogenes Teufelsdröckh as just another example of Carlylean hyperbole. Indeed, Carlyle’s great North American disciple and popularizer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, admiringly identifies “national sincerity” as a defining “English Trait,”³ one that sets the English apart from both Americans and, crucially, the French: “An Englishman understates, avoids the superlative, checks himself in compliments, alleging that in the French language one cannot speak without lying.”⁴ In his 1970 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University, subsequently republished as *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling draws upon these remarks by Emerson and other contemporary observers to conclude that, “in the nineteenth century there was widespread belief that England produced a moral type which made it unique among nations ... This moral type which England was thought uniquely to have produced had as its chief qualities probity and candour.”⁵

¹ John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 6.

² James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), 65.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*, in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 5:117.

⁴ Emerson, 5:118. On pp. 4–17 of *The Power of Lies*, John Kucich offers a fascinating “sketch of the cultural prominence of Victorian truth-telling” that places Emerson’s remarks among a broad range of assertions of honesty made by Victorian moral philosophers, Utilitarian reformers, social and natural scientists, and many others.

⁵ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971), 110.

This type famously assumed normative and ahistorical dimensions in 1983 during the run-up to the general election, when Britain's Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, called repeatedly for a return to "Victorian values."⁶ Had Thatcher been more cognizant of the direction in which our modern hermeneutics of suspicion was leading Victorian studies, she might have reconsidered her prescriptive nostalgia.⁷ Already four years prior to Trilling's lectures, and then again five years after—and thus thirteen and eight years before Thatcher's election-year rhetoric—Steven Marcus and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, in *The Other Victorians* and "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction," respectively, had unearthed a set of Victorian values distinctly at odds with probity and candor, not to mention the Conservatives' 1983 political agenda.⁸ Much subsequent research has revealed the extent of the Victorians' rather poorly concealed fascination with sexual and criminal transgression broadly conceived.

A more particular selection of scholarship has investigated Victorian secrecy itself. Alexander Welsh's foundational *George Eliot and Blackmail* (1985), for example, charts the emergence of our modern information culture in the Victorian period and explains how the resulting pressures exerted upon individuals' privacy

⁶ Thatcher first used the phrase "Victorian values" during a January 16 interview with Brian Walden for London Weekend Television's *Weekend World*. She subsequently repeated it during a January 28 speech to the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, a February 17 address to the House of Commons, and a May 31 press conference on the general election. These and all of Thatcher's subsequent uses of the phrase "Victorian values" are reprinted and fully searchable on the website for The Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/default.asp> (accessed September 11, 2007). To be precise, the values to which she principally alludes are self-reliance and personal responsibility, both values popularized in Victorian England by Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859). However, as Kucich has shown, a demand for honesty forms the basis of Smiles's doctrine. See *The Power of Lies*, 9, esp. n.16.

⁷ My use of the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" is intended to invoke the sense in which Paul Ricoeur defines this term in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970). In this work, Ricoeur locates two opposing poles in modern hermeneutics, poles which he labels the hermeneutics of faith, dedicated to restoration of meaning and descended from theological inquiry, and the hermeneutics of suspicion, "a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises" derived from the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (30). Although either hermeneutic has the potential to uncover secrets—witness second-wave feminists' recovery of forgotten Victorian women writers—since the 1970s it is predominantly scholarship grounded in a hermeneutics of suspicion that has revealed those aspects of the Victorian scene most at odds with Thatcher's Conservatism.

⁸ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study in Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1966). U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and The Woman in White" in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, *Harvard English Studies* 6, ed. Jerome H. Buckley, 351–69 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975).

led inexorably to widespread practices of secrecy.⁹ Focusing his argument specifically through the life and works of George Eliot, Welsh contends that Victorian novels with blackmail plots often end by reconcealing the truth as the proper end of ethical behavior.¹⁰ John Kucich, in *Repression in Victorian Fiction* (1987) and *The Power of Lies* (1994), draws upon psychoanalytic theory and historically-attentive close reading to argue for the productive power of repression, whether sexual or textual, in the development of Victorian emotional, intellectual, and professional life.¹¹ According to Kucich, managing secrets, through behaviors ranging from sublimation to outright deception, grounded middle-class claims to cultural authority. James Eli Adams shifts the emphasis of this prolonged inquiry in Victorian secrecy onto the question of manliness by showing how those accorded the public status of gentlemen had subtly to indicate that they were reserving an essential part of their characters from the public gaze. This performance of reserve leads Adams, in *Dandies and Desert Saints* (1995), to reinsert the subversive and unstable figure of the dandy back into such popular Victorian constructions of manliness as the priest, the prophet, the soldier and the gentleman. Finally, in *The Culture of Secrecy* (1998), David Vincent uses the Post Office scandal of 1844—when it was discovered that the Post Office regularly opened suspicious mail, including potentially that of Radical MPs—as an introduction to the ways in which certain forms of information were secreted from public view in the name of national security.¹²

Perhaps prompted by such scholarship, careful readers of Victorian texts will perceive a tremendous variety of positions on the issue of secrecy adopted by Victorian authors. As he does on many subjects, Anthony Trollope comes close to articulating the normative Victorian middle-class standard on the practice and valence of secrecy. Reflecting on the difficulties experienced by the too-clever police in solving the multiple thefts of the titular Eustace diamonds, Trollope's narrator remarks, "Perhaps, on the whole, more power is lost than gained by habits of secrecy. To be discreet is a fine thing—especially for a policeman; but when discretion is carried to such a length in the direction of self-confidence as to produce a belief that no aid is wanted for the achievement of great results, it will

⁹ Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985).

¹⁰ Welsh, 13–15.

¹¹ John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987).

¹² David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain 1832–1998* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998). Welsh also briefly addresses the Post Office scandal on p. 54.

often militate against all achievement."¹³ It is important not to take the narrator's declaration on secrecy at face value; however, since Trollope's narrative openness is not normative but strategic, a part of his larger effort to secure authoritative status for the realist novel at the expense of sensation fiction,¹⁴ and professional status for the realist novelist on par with that enjoyed by doctors, lawyers, and, in this case, the detective police.¹⁵

From the eschewal of secrecy, for whatever reason, in Trollope's *Eustace Diamonds* we pass to its celebration in Christina Rossetti's "Winter: My Secret."¹⁶ The poem's first nine lines show Rossetti's finely nuanced appreciation for the practice of secrecy irrespective of the content of a particular secret. The poem begins bracketed by a vaguely threatening pair of "I's"—"I tell my secret? No indeed, not I" (1)—read as eyes, which appear to promise a secret of the self for the "too curious" auditor (4). It moves quickly, however, to the almost coy opening of the second stanza—"Or, after all, perhaps there's none: / Suppose there is no secret after all, / But only just my fun" (7–9)—which seems both supremely aware of the emptiness of the claims to knowledge embedded within appeals to secrecy and encouraging of the implicitly male auditor's attention. The speaker uses her "secret" to attract the auditor's opening gaze, even as she tweaks his now—impotent power to penetrate her mystery. The poem, argues Isobel Armstrong, "is ... a poem about secrecy and reserve, prohibition, taboo, revealing and concealing ... It is about and is itself a barrier."¹⁷ Armstrong connects "Winter: My Secret"

¹³ Anthony Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, ed. David Skilton, intro. by P. D. James (London: Trollope Society, 1990), 456.

¹⁴ Readers of sensation novels like Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), who have to undergo rather extreme measures to discover the fate of the titular jewel, for example, are told immediately the precise location of the stolen Eustace diamonds; the narrator goes on to declare that he "scorns to keep from his reader any secret that is known to himself" (422).

¹⁵ Trollope's consistent commitment to establishing writing as a legitimate profession can be seen in his *Autobiography*, ed. David Skilton, intro. by John Sutherland (London: Trollope Society, 1999), 134; in *The Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. John Hall (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983), 110; and in Trollope's work on behalf of the Royal Literary fund, the last painstakingly documented in Bradford Booth, "Trollope and the Royal Literary Fund," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 7 (Dec. 1952): 208–16.

¹⁶ Christina Rossetti, "Winter: My Secret," in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, 3 vols., ed. R. W. Crump, 1:47 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1979). Hereafter parenthetically cited by line number in the text. Angela Leighton, in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1992), uses "Winter: My Secret" as a point of entry into a more pervasive "secretiveness which at times seems to be the very subject, rather than just the technique, of Rossetti's poetry" (155). See her entire subsection on "Winter Secrets" on pp. 154–63.

¹⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 357. Figures of concealment appear throughout the poem. In the second stanza alone, the speaker refers to "a shawl, / A veil, a cloak" (10–11), "my wraps" (16), and "my mask" (17). And, of course, the ubiquitous secret runs throughout, acting as the

and its many modes of concealment to the nineteenth-century expressive theory of poetry.¹⁸ However, Rossetti's speaker is not merely an expressive poet; rather, as her dismissal of the secret's content in stanza two suggests, she is a self-reflexive and self-critical performer of expressive theory. In other words, her denial of her own secret makes her appeal to an expressive aesthetics of the pre-linguistic secret into a parody, one acutely conscious of and ready to exploit the status, meaning, and power dynamics of secrecy itself.

Rossetti's fellow Victorian woman poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, offers an entirely different perspective on secrecy in "The Mask."¹⁹ For Barrett Browning's speaker, secrecy is not a game, but an unavoidable fact of living in polite society, which unwaveringly requires "a smiling face" (1), "a jest for all" (2), a "prison-grate" for its members' "souls behind a smile" (11, 14). Her indictment of this almost pathological demand for gaiety is summarized in the penultimate seventh stanza:

But in your bitter world, she said,
Face-joy's a costly mask to wear;
'Tis bought with pangs long nourishèd,
And rounded to despair:
Grief's earnest makes life's play, she said. (31–35)

Barrett Browning's speaker's secret is her grief, which her everyday auditors expect her to keep hidden behind "a costly mask." Among those enforcing the speaker's emotional self-repression the poem includes the reader, addressed

most effective method of concealment even as it complicates the meanings of these other items. If there really is "no secret after all," then there may also be no body beneath the shawl, no face behind the veil, no self apart from the mask. The speaker makes clear that power lies not in the revelation of content, but in the practice of secrecy and surveillance itself. However, her awareness of this hidden dynamic of power allows her to use secrecy to her advantage, to capture her auditor's gaze and force it to engage in a winless guessing game—winless because "there is no secret after all."

¹⁸ Armstrong's reading of the poem in this way is useful less for its individual explanatory power than for its ability to provide a theoretical context for an alternate idea of secrecy: "Expressive theory becomes morbid either when the overflow of feeling is in excess or when it is unable to flow at all, and repressed into a secret underground life. For expressive theory is above all an aesthetics of the *secret*, the hidden experience, because the feeling which is prior to language gives language a secondary status and is often written as if it cannot take linguistic form at all" (339). By casting the secret as beyond or prior to language, expressive poetics appears to support the panoptical search for repressed truth. In fact, Armstrong's reading of "Winter: My Secret" as an expressive poem which both flaunts and conceals the truth of the speaker's sexuality demonstrates just how seamless such a connection between panopticism and expressive poetics can be (357–9).

¹⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "The Mask," in *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Oxford Complete Edition, 287–8 (London: Henry Frowde, 1904). Hereafter parenthetically cited by line number in the text.

directly in the second person in lines 5, 10, and 36, and indirectly through the second-person possessive in lines 27 and 31. Ironically, the poem's own reliance on a dramatic speaker, the anonymous "she" indicated in the first and last lines of each stanza, implicates Barrett Browning in the very system of emotional self-censorship that her poem laments. Not only does the poem decline to expand upon the "death-chime" apparently at the root of the speaker's unhappiness (9), through the use of that speaker it manages to silence any overt echoes of the poet's own beloved brother Bro's drowning at Torquay: the likely impetus for the poem itself. "The Mask," then, is itself a mask, one that reveals an especially painful aspect of modern life even as it conceals the private inspiration for its own critique.

In the appropriately titled "Night Shadows" chapter of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens shows himself every bit as aware as, if considerably more sanguine than, Barrett Browning about the ubiquity of secrecy in everyday life. The chapter opens with the narrator's reflections upon this "wonderful fact," that

every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!²⁰

As it is in all of his novels, secrecy in *A Tale of Two Cities* is both alluring and dangerous for Dickens, who attempts to manage the subject by constructing a binary opposition between the licit private sphere of the Manette family in England and the illicit conspiracy of the Jacquerie in France. The famous conclusion of the novel, in which Sydney Carton imagines the future happiness of the family that he has preserved through his own heroic, and secretive, self-sacrifice, appears designed to reassure readers that the omnipresent secrecy alluded to earlier need not be a source of anxiety or unhappiness, so long as it is practiced in the safety of the domestic sphere. As Catherine Gallagher observes, however, Dickens's solution to the problem of secrecy in the novel remains somewhat duplicitous, since it obscures the degree to which he as author manipulates the concealment and revelation of secrets in order to ensure a pleasurable reading experience.²¹

²⁰ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Norman Page (London: J. M. Dent, 1998), 13.

²¹ Catherine Gallagher, "The Duplicity of Doubling in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 12 (1983): 125–45. Gallagher writes, "Both the Revolution and the Dickens narrator need to transgress against the private, and, to justify their transgression, they must create a belief that dark things (plots, conspiracies, vices) lurk everywhere, needing to be revealed. The belief in secrets creates the need to expose, but the need to expose is reciprocally dependent on the invention of secret plots" (134). In other words, the novel relies on the very conspiracy that it labels illicit, the Jacquerie, to support its binary opposition between privacy and conspiracy.

Eighteen years before *A Tale of Two Cities*, in his first historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens had dealt at great length with the problematic of collective practices of secrecy and their potential to ignite social unrest. Set during the extreme anti-Catholicism of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and culminating in the Gordon Riots of 1780, the novel devotes considerable attention to chronicling the rise and fall of George Gordon's Protestant Association. In the twenty-seventh weekly number, the narrator attempts to account for this organization's mass appeal by referring to its proclivity for keeping secrets:

To surround anything, however monstrous or ridiculous, with an air of mystery, is to invest it with a secret charm, and power of attraction, which to the crowd is irresistible ... when vague rumours got abroad, that in this Protestant association a secret power was mustering against the government for undefined and mighty purposes ... when all this was done, as it were, in the dark, and secret invitations [were given] to join the Great Protestant Association ... then the mania spread indeed, and the body, still increasing every day, grew forty thousand strong.²²

Collective action of any kind is always suspect for Dickens, who reserves special condemnation and fictional retribution for institutional acts of concealment—these lead in *Barnaby Rudge* to “mania,” to mob violence, and ultimately to death for the rioters and imprisonment for Gordon. Dickens's desire to punish those who have engaged in collective secrecy leads him quietly to violate the very history that he purports to represent, however: unlike his fictional counterpart, the real Dennis the hangman escaped without serious repercussions for his participation in the riots.

A less violent, but considerably more disturbing version of London serves as both the backdrop and the subject of the very peculiar invocation of collective secrecy in James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*.²³ Before ever setting out on his evening tour of the metropolis, the poem's world-weary speaker seeks to bind himself to his reader through a series of rhetorical questions and answers, concluding with the following bleak pair:

O sad fraternity, do I unfold
 Your dolorous mysteries shrouded from of yore?
 Nay, be assured; no secret can be told
 To any who divined it not before:
 None uninitiated by many a presage
 Will comprehend the language of the message,
 Although proclaimed aloud for evermore. (38–44)

²² Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 347–8.

²³ James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, intro. Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993). Hereafter parenthetically cited by line number in the text.

This final stanza of the Proem employs a curiously strained rhetoric of secrecy to divide potential readers into two camps. The first group is cast as members of a “sad fraternity” who have already “divined” the secret of *The City*, and who therefore presumably do not need to read the poem. By contrast, the second group of “uninitiated” cannot “comprehend the language of the message,” even if they hear it “for evermore,” and so it seems that they need not read the poem either. The speaker thus appears to have eliminated all of his potential readers at once. Victorians did (and Victorianists still do) read the poem, of course, not least because its very appeal to a rhetoric of secrecy that discriminates between initiates and outsiders cannily plays off of readers’ fascination with secrets and secrecy, thereby prompting them to keep reading. At the same time, Thomson’s speaker warns these readers that the secret he is about to share may not be one that they will be glad to know. Ultimately, all those who read the poem and learn the secret join the “sad fraternity,” a collective identity constructed out of this shared unpleasant knowledge.

The range of representational strategies and qualitative judgments offered by this limited sample of period literature hints at the complex of motives behind the Victorians’ secrets. Trollope’s invocation of the police points to the many ways in which secrecy was brought to bear in the maintenance of existing networks of social control, from government censorship, to the suppression of the under-enfranchised, to the imaginative construction of conspiracies.²⁴ Rossetti’s playful fun, by contrast, recalls how practices of secrecy were deployed to resist social control, and sometimes social change.²⁵ The question of whether such strategies actually resisted or merely contributed to the regimes of power that provoked them defies easy answer, and often requires critics to tack dialectically between the theoretical perspectives offered by early twentieth-century sociologist Georg Simmel and late twentieth-century post-structuralist Michel Foucault.²⁶

²⁴ In his account of the draconian policies of the English government during the years of conflict with post-Revolutionary France, for instance, E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), contends that, for the first twenty years of the nineteenth century, “the Government *needed* conspirators, to justify the continuation of repressive legislation which prevented nation-wide popular organization.” (485).

²⁵ Welsh cites some of the social changes during the Victorian period that might have prompted resistance in the form of secrecy: “we can discern three conditions of society that affected individuals directly and indirectly intensified the need for privacy or secrecy, and these conditions are interrelated: a self-regulating economy; social mobility and choice of occupation; and representative government. Each depends on the rise of knowledge and communication and partakes of that liberated condition that in turn enforces a new sense of accountability; each contributed to a weakening of the sense of community” (72).

²⁶ In “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 11 (1906): 441–98, Simmel shows not only the capacity for meaningful resistance offered by membership in a secret society (470–98), but also the inevitability,