Introduction: secret springs

A few days after Ralph Waldo Emerson's death in 1882, Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend or lover Otis Lord, declaring that "the Ralph Waldo Emerson – whose name my Father's Law Student taught me, has touched the secret Spring."[1] Dickinson's "secret Spring" draws together three concepts, corresponding to different senses of the word *spring*, that converge at the center of my book. First, a secret spring is an originating cause, understood by comparison with certain natural phenomena. On one hand, this secret spring evokes the source of a stream, as Emerson does when he asserts: "Man is a stream whose source is hidden."[2] On the other hand, "secret Spring" names a season of rebirth, whose work goes unnoticed: something like the season Samuel Taylor Coleridge imagines when he writes, "The Frost performs its secret ministry."[3] Unlike the secret headspring that depicts vital power as pushing up out of a particular piece of ground, the secret springtime portrays power as working atmospherically and for a particular period of time.

Dickinson's "secret Spring" also suggests a mechanical device the touching of which grants access to something hidden. For instance, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) the multigenerational conflict between the Pyncheons and the Maules turns on competing claims to an "Indian deed," whose hiding place in a wall of the Pyncheon house is disclosed dramatically when the artist Holgrave touches a "secret spring."[4] This kind of secret spring is a piece of artifice, a "contrivance," as Hawthorne puts it, that allows the unknown to be made known.[5] Such a secret spring represents unknown but discoverable technical knowledge. The kind of secret spring that permits access to useable power necessarily involves one in questions of technique, law, norm, code, calculation, and prediction. In short, this "secret Spring" is a metonym for everything that links knowledge to action. Such a spring underscores the importance of secrecy in politics.

Finally, Dickinson's "secret Spring" portrays Emerson, that ardent follower of the leaps and bounds of thought, as springing into an unknown place or time. This secret spring – a blind leap, or an ungrounded movement into the unknown – is an apt figure for the chance of transforming the self and its relationships with others. The secrecy of this spring suggests that leaving the ground means losing contact with the known. Here it is worth recalling that Dickinson invokes her "secret Spring" in response to a death. She suggests that by dying Emerson assumed the leaping attitude of which he had so often written. Like the other writers featured in this study, Dickinson calls upon secret causes to articulate the implications of mortality. That is, she uses secret causes to account for the occurrence, the inevitability, and the mundaneness of events by which something changes utterly and irrevocably. When Dickinson writes that Emerson "has touched the secret Spring," she claims what she cannot know. Stated as if it were a matter of fact, her assertion both attests to the event of Emerson's death and registers an inability to comprehend what has happened. The spring is "secret" because even if one could know that Emerson touched it, one would not know what such a touching would be like. The claim that it is a "Spring" that has been touched emphasizes the power, movement, and hope that might attend an irreversible loss.

Dickinson's "secret Spring" connects the notions of a hidden source of power, an elusive but discoverable technique, and an ungrounded movement into the unknown. Her use of this figure to mark Emerson's death seems fitting because no one more urgently than Emerson called antebellum writers to attend to figures of secrecy. From the "A" on Dimmesdale's breast to the crew of Ahab's whaleboat, antebellum U.S. literature is studded with secrets. Although some of these secrets are disclosed, like Dimmesdale's branded flesh, others are never revealed, and many simply cannot be made known. It is these "secrets which do not permit themselves to be told," as Edgar Allan Poe calls them, that constitute the nucleus of this book.[6] *Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature* examines how six major nineteenth-century U.S. writers use figures of unrevealable secrets to confront the epistemological optimism of their time: a seemingly limitless satisfaction with the means of knowing. In 1840 Alexis de Tocqueville attributed such optimism to all "Americans": "They readily conclude that everything in the world can be explained and that nothing surpasses the limits of intelligence."[7] The well-known "transparent eye-ball" of Emerson's *Nature* (1836) epitomizes this stance: it sees all, as if everything that mattered could be known. Clearly a thinker drawn to skepticism, Emerson repudiates epistemological optimism most

intriguingly when he insists in "Experience" (1844) and elsewhere on an unknowable "secret cause" capable of bringing about nothing less than revolution. Five of Emerson's most careful and inventive readers – Herman Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs – likewise craft forms of skepticism that affirm political and ethical experiences that overrun the limits of what can be known.[8]

Some of the best and most surprising political thinking achieved by Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Douglass, and Jacobs emerges in moments of intense engagement with what Stanley Cavell calls "skepticism's thesis or conclusion, namely that there is something fundamental to or in our existence that we do not know."[9] Emerson thinks of this fundamental something as the elusive power, or "secret cause," that can change one's "mood," the basic framework that shapes experience of the world (e.g., EL 473). The six writers I focus on work out the political consequences of Emerson's idea that we inhabit such moods, individually and collectively, and that changing them requires forces we cannot fully understand or control. I find this political thinking in canonical texts such as Emerson's essays, Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), and Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860); in increasingly read works including Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853) and Hawthorne's *Septimius* manuscripts (1861–63); and in neglected writings like Hawthorne's tales "The Christmas Banquet" (1844) and "The Snow-Image" (1850), a lecture on "Reform" that Emerson delivered on the eve of Lincoln's first election to the presidency, and Emily Dickinson's collection of poems known as Fascicle 24 (about Spring 1863).

Access to the most adventurous antebellum thinking about skepticism and mood takes a slower way of reading than is commonly practiced in Americanist scholarship: a reading that tugs against the scholarly inclination to treat a writer's political thought as eminently identifiable, locatable, and comprehensible. It is not so much that one must dig beneath a text's surface to discover its buried secrets. It is more a question of attending patiently to the complexity of textual surfaces: the connections waiting to be drawn, the resonances there for the hearing.[10] This book shares with two of its intellectual guides, Cavell and Jacques Derrida, a commitment to what Friedrich Nietzsche called a demand to "read slowly, deeply, backward and forward with care and respect, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes."[11] Cavell, Derrida, and other philosophers from David Hume to Emmanuel Levinas help me argue that the political and ethical significance of the most enduring antebellum literature lies only partially, and often weakly, in its most overt

engagement with political issues like slavery, revolution, industrialism, reform, and war. Rather it is when this writing is most philosophical, figurative, and seemingly unworldly that its political and ethical engagement is most profound.[12]

For Emerson and his most provocative readers, the figure of the secret cause proves to be a particularly supple and powerful tool for addressing questions of the day, as well as those inherited from the European philosophical tradition. In 1838 George Ripley, a Unitarian minister and soon-to-be founder of Brook Farm, wrote: "Our national taste – as far as it is formed, – may certainly be said to repudiate all mystery and concealment."[13] Early nineteenth-century U.S. writing is rife with promises to serve up secrets laid bare. Urban gothic fiction brings to light hidden truths about poverty, crime, and sexual dissolution; *Blackwood's*-style tales of terror exhibit in minute detail the sensations of narrators undergoing outlandish forms of peril, suffering, and even death; antislavery texts offer white readers opportunities to feel as slaves do; millenarians calculate the timing of the Second Coming; and conspiracy theorists expose the sinister machinations of Masons, Catholics, and abolitionists. The writers featured in this book invoke secret causes in order to shake a widespread confidence in the power to unveil secrets. But they also treat the secret cause as a way of engaging with central insights of eighteenth-century Europe's most influential philosophers, Hume and Immanuel Kant.

The forms of skepticism I describe converge in depicting the grounds of life as increasingly unstable. In this sense Emerson and the others respond to events that predate Hume: the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientific studies of Copernicus, Newton, and others, as well as Descartes's philosophical response to this work. As Cavell argues, Descartes introduces a new form of skepticism whereby "the issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world."[14] Many antebellum writers claimed that empirical sciences were consistent with divine revelation. But books like Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) still threatened faith in the literal truth of the bible, reinforcing earlier challenges posed by the German "Higher Criticism" that sought historical evidence for Biblical stories. Moreover, the grounding of national unity in the U.S. Constitution was called into question during the nullification crisis of 1832–1833 and in the growing popularity of William Lloyd Garrison's view of the Constitution as a pro-slavery document amounting to "a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell."[15] The sectional

identity of the "soil" was threatened by the Compromise of 1850 and by the Supreme Court's decisions in *Prigg* v. *Pennsylvania* (1842) and *Dred Scott* v. *Sanford* (1857).[16] Although sectional tensions over slavery certainly elicited confident assertions of knowledge concerning morality and the will of God, often in the name of a "Higher Law" that superseded the Constitution and other positive laws, such tensions also fueled skepticism concerning the constitution of social relationships.[17] Skeptical moods intensified and spread during the Civil War. Months after the war began, Oliver Wendell Holmes claimed: "Many have the feeling in their waking hours that the trouble they are aching with is, after all, only a dream, – if they will rub their eyes briskly enough and shake themselves, they will awake out of it, and find all their supposed grief is unreal."[18]

In richly varying ways Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Douglass, and Jacobs strive to dislodge readers – and their own writing – from a set of assumptions and perspectives that I bring together under the heading of epistemological optimism. I use this term flexibly to describe a variety of ways of hitching value to knowledge. An epistemologically optimistic stance might assume that everything that matters can be known, dismissing as irrelevant whatever cannot be known. Such confidence might be general, applying to every part of life, or limited to a particular domain of inquiry or experience. Although by no means ubiquitous, currents of epistemological optimism ran through many areas of antebellum writing including essays on moral and natural philosophy, reformers' lectures, political addresses, poems, and works of prose fiction. For instance, the prominent antebellum natural historian Benjamin Silliman could claim that astronomy offered "a splendid record of the thoughts of God."[19] And a widely held antebellum interpretation of the Scottish Enlightenment, associated especially with The College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), maintained that things in themselves were immediately available to knowers, so that "individuals directly knew right principles of benevolence *and* the basic substances, mind and matter."[20] Writing of the period between 1815 and 1848, Daniel Walker Howe states: "Revelation and reason alike, Americans were confident, led to knowledge of God and His creation."[21]

Epistemological optimism is not restricted to the view that things will turn out well, or that the good will outweigh the bad, or that every misfortune will yield a profit. I have in mind something broader and more varied than what Myra Jehlen calls the "doctrinally optimistic American Renaissance," which can only imagine tragedy in terms of a "belief in transcendent creativity."[22] A pessimist who is sure that everything is and

always will be terrible takes an epistemologically optimistic stance. Epistemological optimism can even take the form of a certain skepticism. Consider an 1858 essay in the Boston-based *Universalist Quarterly and General Review*. Claiming that "men . . . demand knowledge" concerning the reality of life after death, the author warns that faith in philosophy's capacity to achieve such knowledge could result in a dangerous "skepticism": "The flippant tyro in philosophy is apt to imagine that he has full and free access to the fountains of knowledge in all things, so that he can solve all problems and understand all mysteries. Failing in this, . . . he will not fall back on faith, but claims the right to be skeptical."[23] But the danger does not stop with the novice or "tyro." The author proceeds to assert that "science itself has become skeptical," through an unwarranted faith in its own comprehensiveness:

> Philosophy has busied itself properly with the material universe; for, behind that, science can never go. But it has been *so busy*, and has met with so much of success, that it has become a little vain of its own powers, and in some measure ignored the invisible realities that exist beneath all forms and appearances; and imagined that the forms themselves are the essential reality of things.

What science "ignore[s]" is as important as that to which it attends. So "chemistry," for instance, "becomes skeptical of the reality of any thing that it cannot reach by analysis."[24] What binds together various forms of epistemological optimism is a conviction, tacitly assumed or asserted outright, that reality can become epistemically available to us.[25]

The restriction of thought and experience to the boundaries of knowledge has an affective dimension that antebellum writers often characterize in terms of comfort, security, and good conscience. But Emerson calls this way of feeling "despair" and "secret melancholy," distinguishing epistemological optimism from hope and emphasizing that it need not feel pleasant (EL 599, 600). At times antebellum writers portray epistemological optimism as a know-it-all attitude, as when Emerson writes of an "impudent knowingness" that is worse than "the grossest ignorance," or Hawthorne warns of the dangers posed by "wise men" who "know everything" (EL 475; TS 1102). But more frequently they depict this stance negatively, suggesting its imposing heft through the intensity of their resistance to it. The writers featured in this book are concerned most urgently with the political and ethical implications of the epistemological optimism they find around them: their political and ethical thinking accounts for ways in which human relationships remain stubbornly opaque.

Epistemological skepticism plays a major part in this book, but it is not the main event. The skeptical rejection of knowledge remains secondary to the affirmation of social possibilities that defy easy articulation. In other words, a secret cause says yes before it says no. On one hand, a secret cause can be an origin, condition of possibility, or enabling force that cannot be rendered as an object of knowledge. For example, Hawthorne suggests that wrestling with nihilistic skepticism can be resolved only by gaining access to "the mystery – the deep, warm secret" whose power cannot be understood (TS 863). On the other hand, a secret cause can be an unregistered political movement, a struggle whose purpose is not fully defined. Melville argues that the two kinds of secret cause converge when it comes to revolutions: his novel *Pierre* finds in revolution a painful unknowability that pervades both its origins and its outcomes. Dickinson formulates a poetics of survival that strives to meet the competing demands of the living and the dead, offering a heretical and potentially devastating account of the war's consequences while working to conceal this account. Douglass and Jacobs consider how writing might forcefully alter readers' moods, bringing them around to the antislavery cause even without their consent. All six writers use the concept of causality to conjoin philosophical concerns with political ones, suggesting that theories of political power are inseparable from philosophical accounts of how causes produce effects. So Emerson, for instance, invokes an "ineffable cause" not only to quarrel with Kant's conception of causality, but also to reimagine what it means to be politically engaged (EL 485). Some of the most provocative political thinking left to us by antebellum writers imagines political transformation – and the impetus for writing – as occurring in secret.

The American Civil War is the primary historical event around which my six writers converge as they seek answers to the questions raised by Emerson's claim that secret causes produce fundamental changes in perspective. Concerned with what Sacvan Bercovitch calls "loomings of national cataclysm," Emerson and Melville describe civil war's conditions of possibility in terms of the logic and history of revolution.[26] The French Revolution of 1848 touches off Melville's thinking, while Emerson's is sparked by the 1860 U.S. presidential election. Sharing a commitment to the idea that secret causes can remake the world, Douglass and Jacobs suggest that antislavery writing might succeed by quietly and violently transforming white readers whose skepticism about slavery resists reasoned argument and sentimental appeal. After the Civil War begins, Hawthorne and Dickinson lean on Emerson as they ponder the difficulties and possibilities the war affords a writer.

The writers featured in this book reckon with the prospect, or the events, of war by returning to ideas Emerson developed in the early 1840s, in essays whose primary historical referents included the Panic of 1837, the Cherokee removal, the prospect of war with Mexico, and myriad reform movements directed toward the enslaved, the poor, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised, and other vulnerable groups. Emerson's thinking about the world's capacity for reform lends itself, all six writers suggest, to understanding the causes and consequences of civil war in postrevolutionary America. In other words, they take reform and civil war to be rooted in common ground: the sturdy but mutable underpinnings of experience.

My central argument invites comparison with the "paranoid style" of politics that Richard Hofstadter famously defined in the early 1960s.[27] Hofstadter argues that the American political scene has always accommodated vocal minorities who share an "obsession with secrecy" and view "conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events."[28] My work on the political importance of unknowable secrets seems to reverse the "paranoid" assertion that history is determined by *knowable* secret causes. Emerson and his interlocutors repudiate the conspiracy theorist's claim to fully disclose history's inner workings. But they do not trade that claim for one that would install unknowable secrets as the engines of history. Instead they seek points of articulation between what can be known and what remains beyond knowing. In other words, their conceptions of political history make room for aspects of experience too slippery to pin down satisfactorily. In doing so, they call into question Hofstadter's own confidence about "what can cause a revolution" and what constitutes the "actual machinery" of power.[29]

This book is in part a response to the longstanding and ongoing importance of the categories of the public and the private in studies of the antebellum period. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841, 1843), and other works of the time understood antebellum society to be divided into separate spheres: a masculine public sphere and a feminine private sphere.[30] Americanist scholars have shown that the separate spheres model fails to account for the complexly gendered nature of antebellum social life.[31] But publicity and privacy remain central terms of analysis, with the best work accounting for both the complicated borders between the two, and the internal heterogeneity of each term: the many interrelated and historically specific senses of publicity and privacy.[32] Concepts of publicity and privacy clearly are valuable analytic tools, and I have no wish to

abandon them. But I ask what might be overlooked when the public/private distinction governs our conceptions of antebellum writing, politics, and social life.

Politics and Skepticism in Antebellum American Literature seeks to account for the striking fact that some of the most thought-provoking antebellum writers were invested in a form of secrecy that is neither public nor private. Secrecy clearly has affinities with privacy and interiority, but the secret causes elaborated in antebellum literature cannot be confined to a private or interior space, any more than they can be presented in a public arena. Dickinson's household copy of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1844) defines secrecy as "properly, a state of separation."[33] My project follows the ways that antebellum writers use secrets not as figures of interiority, but instead as markers of exteriority or separateness. This separateness meant that "secrets" were not legally or socially intelligible in the ways that publicity and privacy seemed to be. The very existence of secrets was open to question, as Dickinson suggested when she wrote that "'Secrets' is a daily / word / Yet does not exist –" (Fr 1494, 1–3).[34] And unlike public or private objects, secret causes cannot belong to anyone: they slip through the fingers of those who seek to possess them. Secret causes go against the grain of liberal individualism; but inasmuch as they exert power while remaining radically incapable of becoming property, such causes are not particularly friendly to any economic or political order. Permeating the texture of everyday life, rarely acknowledged and never known, secret causes at every moment threaten to splinter the grounds of experience.

By writing of secret causes that are neither public nor private, I might seem to indulge in a continuation of privacy by other means. One might object that a secret cause is simply more private than a private sphere: more inward, further separated from action. But the antebellum thinking I describe does not separate politics from public life or privatize the political. The forms of skepticism I follow are hostile to the view that, as Jonathan Arac puts it, "in the characters of separate individuals, matters banned from public politics could be resolved silently and privately."[35] But distinctions between public and private strain to accommodate antebellum precursors of Nietzsche's audacious claim that nothing is less known than an action. In *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) he suggests that "there neither are nor can be actions that are the same; that every action that has ever been done was done in an altogether unique and irretrievable way . . . that as one contemplates or looks back upon *any* action at all, it is and remains impenetrable." Does Nietzsche simply dodge questions of

political engagement and social responsibility when he asserts that "every action is unknowable," grasped neither publicly by witnesses nor privately by an actor?[36] Or might we find in thinking like his a call to reappraise the significance of philosophy, and skepticism more particularly, in mid-nineteenth-century U.S. writing?

Because secret causes are figures of exteriority and separation, they evoke the terms by which nineteenth-century cultural analysts defined individualism. In Tocqueville's influential view, individualism tends to engender loneliness and political debility: "Individualism [*L'individualisme*] is a reflective and tranquil sentiment that disposes each citizen to cut himself off from the mass of his fellow men and withdraw into the circle of family and friends, so that, having created a little society for his own use, he gladly leaves the larger society to take care of itself."[37] Arising in democratic societies and linked especially to equality, individualism leads people to "treat one another as strangers" and to develop the habit of "thinking of themselves always in isolation."[38] Individualism promotes a naïve disregard of the power of social hierarchies, governments, and associations; those under its sway "are pleased to think that their fate lies entirely in their own hands."[39] Secret causes run counter to individualism. Such causes are not subject to voluntary control and cannot belong to liberal individuals.

Neither do secret causes belong to a subset of society, like the "separators" that Emerson describes in his 1842 address, "The Transcendentalist." Emerson speaks of persons of a certain "kind" who "withdraw themselves from the common labors and competitions of the market and the caucus, and betake themselves to a certain solitary and critical way of living" (EL 199). These "separators," as Emerson calls them, "hold themselves aloof" (EL 200, 199). "Lonely," he states, they "repel influences" and "shun general society" (EL 200). The separateness of secret causes is not the choice of a few, but rather a condition of living, common to all, making each answerable to others. Secret causes expose a finite self to something, or someone, beyond it. The "egoism" that Tocqueville sees as the inevitable outcome of individualism represents an evasion of the pressures that secret causes exert. Like Emerson's separators and the "optative mood" they exemplify, secret causes are marked by "the extravagant demand they make on human nature" (EL 201). Just as the "unconcealed dissatisfaction" of separators "expose[s] our poverty," secret causes have little truck with the conservative force or "inertia" that Emerson identified with "individualism" (EL 202).[40]