In confronting their tumultuous time, antebellum American writers often invoked unrevealed secrets. Five of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s most inventive interlocutors – Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Douglass, and Jacobs – produced their most riveting political thought in response to Emerson’s idea that “moods” fundamentally shape one’s experience of the world, changing only through “secret causes” that no one fully grasps. In this volume, Mastroianni frames antebellum and Civil War literature within the history of modern philosophical skepticism, ranging from Descartes and Hume to Levinas and Cavell, arguing that its political significance lies only partially in its most overt engagement with political issues like slavery, revolution, reform, and war. It is when antebellum writing is most philosophical, figurative, and seemingly unworldly that its political engagement is most profound. Mastroianni offers new readings of six major American authors and explores the teeming archive of nineteenth-century print culture.

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I am deeply grateful to Ray Ryan and Ross Posnock. Their enthusiasm for this book cheered and raised me as I completed it. So did the smart and generous responses of the anonymous readers they secured; their work improved the book immensely. I thank the production staff at Cambridge University Press, especially Caitlin Gallagher. An earlier version of the Melville chapter appeared in *ESQ*, where Jana Argersinger, Augusta Rohrbach, and the anonymous readers provided exemplary criticism and support. I thank The Melville Society and especially the 2012 Cohen Prize Committee members for their confidence in my work.


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This book began as a dissertation written at Emory University under the supervision of Michael Elliott, Ben Reiss, and Geoff Bennington, and with the support of a George W. Woodruff Fellowship. Michael is a better mentor than anyone has any business hoping for. Most of what I know about writing a book I learned from him. Ben provided, and continues to provide, invaluable guidance; this book owes much to his incomparable knack for finding and articulating the heart of an argument. Geoff devoted hours of his time to listening to my accounts of Kant and Derrida and sharing his encyclopedic knowledge of their work.
The ways of reading and thinking pursued here can be traced to many wonderful teachers, including Deepika Bahri, Kate Brown, Cathy Caruth, David Crystal, Pamela Fox, Lawrence Jackson, Dalia Judovitz, Walter Kalaidjian, Jim Lamiell, Michael Magrogan, Claire Nouvet, Jill Robbins, Henry Schwarz, Joe Sitterson, Bruce Smith, Steven Strange, and Deborah Elise White. Lori Merish and Christine So have been terrific mentors. David Kadlec and Michael Ragussis did not live to see this book published, but their warm, rigorous teaching continues to inspire.

For research support in the form of a Lightsey Fellowship and numerous Faculty Research Fellowships, I thank Clemson University’s College of Architecture, Arts, and Humanities; my department chairs, Lee Morrissey, Barton Palmer, and Sean Williams; and my deans, Chip Egan and Rick Goodstein. I thank The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society for a Subvention Award, and Clemson’s Department of English for a Faculty Research Completion and Support Award.

I thank my fantastic colleagues at Clemson, especially the members of the junior faculty writing group and its leaders, Cameron Bushnell and Brian McGrath. For their intelligent responses to a draft of the introduction, I thank Cameron Bushnell, David Coombs, Mike LeMahieu, Brian McGrath, Kim Manganelli, Angela Naimou, Elizabeth Rivlin, Will Stockton, and Rhondda Thomas. The book came along in conversations with all of the above and with others at Clemson and beyond, including Susanna Ashton, Scot Barnett, Rachel Bowser, Jonathan Beecher Field, Erin Goss, Sean Morey, Lee Morrissey, Catherine Paul, Sarah Peterson, Jessica Sellountos, Aga Skrodzka, Emily Sun, and Jillian Weise. Eyal Peretz taught me the name of Stanley Cavell.

I thank my students for reading and thinking with me, and especially Amy Quist for her insights about Jacobs’s “realizing sense.” I’m grateful for the friends who have helped me along, especially Amy, Becca and Bill, Brian and Rachel, Chandler, Dave, Elena and Peter, Emily and James, Eyal and Yfat, Gabe and Karen, Genelle and Mike, Greg and Tanja, Heidi and Larry, Jenna, Jeff and Meredith, Joey, Josh and Sarah, Kalan and Saara, Kimi and Mike, Maggie and Mike, Marty, Michelle, Moe and Paul, Puja, and Seoka. For the sustaining gift of music I thank my co-conspirators, especially Peter and Bill.

Trying to acknowledge my family properly would take another book. I haven’t found the words to thank my dad, Ennio Mastroianni, my mom, Rita Moldovan, and my brother, Anthony; my grandma, Rita Fatula, and my nonna, Josephine Mastroianni; my aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews; and the family members I’ve gained through marriage.
I love you. I think Joseph, Uncle Jim, Pappap, and Nonno Bruno would have been particularly proud to see this book in print. I’m indebted to, in awe of, the grandparents, great-grandparents, and other relatives who left home for harder work than I’ve ever known.

This book is dedicated to Heidi, Luca, and Isabel. Loving and knowing them is the miracle of my existence. Each is the world to me.