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Distancing English

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CHAPTER 1

A TALE OF TWO LANGUAGES AND WHITMAN'S PREFACE

Most of those settlers who had elected to come to America, and their descendants, spoke English at the time of separation. Observing that “there were no ‘Americans’ amongst the founders of New England,” Norman Pettit asks, “How, then, did the colonists think of themselves in the period leading up to Independence? By the close of the seventeenth century those who had been born in New England clearly did not think of themselves as aliens. Nor did they think of themselves as Americans.”¹ “Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they thought of themselves as Englishmen,” he points out, “with the rights and privileges thereof, for they referred to themselves as such” (30).² This self-regarding, of course, extends to language.³ Yet the desire of distancing the colonizer’s language from the settlers’ self-same language is far from simple. Notwithstanding their ties to a native language, their desire to distance English in the new country suggests their need for an uneasy separation from both themselves and England.⁴

My look at self-distancing ends in this chapter with Walt Whitman’s Preface of 1855. A carryover of this English self-perception into the lan-

guage peaks both after the War of Independence and again after the War of 1812 (in the so-called “paper war,” which heightens the growing schism of self-separation concerning the land’s suitability for emigrants). Mixed in with a new-found foreignness toward the English and the language after political separation are kinship and residual loyalty. At times, the loyalty crimps; as one reviewer in 1838 writes, “We are too much in letters the province as well as colony of Britain.”⁵ The fear of having “no national existence” in language or literature⁶ leads to the widely famous sting: “[i]n the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?”⁷ Yet pride in American literature waxes in Theodore Roosevelt’s end-of-the-century denunciation of writers who even appear to prefer English literature. The biographer Edmund Morris notes Roosevelt singling out Henry James, “whose preference for English society and English literature drove Roosevelt to near frenzy.” For Roosevelt, James is an “undersized man of letters,” who “finds the conditions of life on this side of the water crude and raw . . . finds that he cannot play a man’s part among men, and so goes where he will be sheltered from the winds that harden stouter souls.”⁸ Thus, side by side with a kinship is its near relative, a bullying defensiveness.

There is, then, a built-in “civil war” of language, a perceived problem of an overlapping English language (I will from now on refer to this “perceived problem” as a “problem” to avoid the repetition of “perceived”). The impasse can seem unavoidable. The felt doubling of the English language becomes an increasingly urgent matter following the War of 1812. Walter Channing explains in 1815: “peculiarities of country, especially the great distinctive characteristick ones, and manners likewise, can be perfectly rendered only by the language which they themselves have given use to. I mean a peculiar language.”⁹ Yet avoiding the companion language is as difficult as losing a shadow. John Pickering’s book in 1816 is titled straightforwardly, *A Vocabulary, or Collection of Words and Phrases Which Have Been Supposed to Be Peculiar to the United States of America*. But the review of it in the *North American Review* is far from simple. The review acknowledges and conservatively praises “efforts [that] have been made to preserve the English language in its purity.”¹⁰ The reviewer Sidney Willard singles out “one of the principal excellencies” of Pickering—his “enabl[ing] us to see what words are peculiarly our own” (358) while continuing to admonish that there remains the opportunity “to adopt what is necessary and useful, however new, and to guard against needless or pernicious innovations, which many, perhaps unconsciously, had before been promoting” (359). This self-debate regarding the English language, with roots in England,¹¹ can also seem to reflect the “want of fixity of national character”¹² (later a strategy of turning this “want of fixity” from a dis-

advantage to an advantage would become a trademark). Inside efforts to domesticate it, the English language can appear to remain both foreign and all too familiar. As late as 1850 a reviewer in *Harper's* is able to say that the "true secret seems to be, that the Americans, as a people, have not received that education which enables a people to produce poets," in part because "[w]riting English verses, indeed, is as much a part of an American's education, as writing Latin verses is of an Englishman's."¹³ Seventy years into independence, English can still be seen as an uneasy tool for articulation.

As such, it is often seen as leading to a historical dead end: "America is an independent empire, and ought to assume a national character. Nothing can be more ridiculous, than a servile imitation of the manners, the language, and the vices of foreigners," writes Noah Webster, echoing concerns toward the English after the War of Independence.¹⁴ Webster begins his dictionary in 1828 with a note toward redefining words as one way to approach the problem of sameness of expression:

No person in this country will be satisfied with the English definitions of the words *congress*, *senate* and *assembly*, *court*, &c. for although these are words used in England, yet they are applied in this country to express ideas which they do not express in that country. With our present constitutions of government, *escheat* can never have its feudal sense in the United States.

But this is not all. In many cases, the nature of our governments, and of our civil institutions, requires an appropriate language in the definition of words, even when the words express the same thing, as in England.¹⁵

More simply put, he suggests that English is a perfectly adequate language for those living in England. As David Simpson says, it is impossible after Webster "to be unaware of the argument about language as a *national* argument" (24).¹⁶

A few years before the War of 1812, the Federalist Fisher Ames writes (with a mix of defensiveness and transatlantic deference):

Nobody will pretend that the Americans are a stupid race; nobody will deny that we justly boast of many able men, and exceedingly useful publications. But has our country produced one great original work of genius? If we tread the sides of Parnassus, we do not climb its heights; we even creep in our path, by the light that European genius has thrown upon it.¹⁷

Out of this concern about the adequacy of the English language emerge questions of inadequacy and degeneration. The English language, for instance, clearly does not have its roots in the new country, and (influenced

by naturalists) the language can be at risk, therefore, of what Willard calls a “rank growth of what is gaudy and disgusting, [which] may be forced to a pernicious maturity.”¹⁸ The War of 1812 helps to set the stage for this surge in the politics of language and especially literary nationalism. As John C. McCloskey argues, “American triumphs on the sea in the War of 1812 tempered the American mind into a belief in its power to express itself in a literature independent of any foreign influence.” He adds that, “with America’s victory in this second war with the mother country, a new-found note of confidence came into literature.”¹⁹

McCloskey’s account of self-confidence drawn from such “triumphs” is a good example of a climate for self-assertion running ahead of itself. Amid considerable internal political opposition, America fights to a draw, yet acts as if it has won a victory. “Far from bringing the enemy to terms,” writes historian Donald R. Hickey, “the nation was lucky to escape without making extensive concessions itself.”²⁰ Notwithstanding many mismanaged campaigns (as shown by Walter R. Borneman²¹), declarations to the contrary proliferate. The country’s weak *casus belli*, grievances about British interference with American shipping and British impressment of American citizens, rebound in bellicose statements made by James Madison, Henry Clay, and others, functioning as classic speech acts, attempting to enact the very thing they are talking about. Before war is declared, Madison writes, “We behold . . . on the side of Great Britain a state of war against the United States.”²² Going to war hinges on the British response to an ultimatum by Congress, and unbeknownst to Congress, the British have caved in, suspending the Orders in Council that had interfered with American shipping. Without the delay in communications across the Atlantic, many historians believe that the war might never have taken place; the declaration of war may have been “a bluff, designed to shock the British into concessions” (17). In the end, victory is declared, much as war has been initiated, in the seam of a language calling for a severance from its origins.

The following is a good example of the deployment of “unsupported” assertion. The “Battle of New Orleans was of no military significance to the war,” Borneman has shown, “but politically it came to fill a huge void in the American psyche—not only propelling Andrew Jackson to the presidency, but also affirming a strong, new sense of national identity” (2–3). On the heels of a negotiated political victory, the issue again after the war is linguistic and cultural severance. “Somehow, with British armies arrayed along its borders and a British blockade locking up its ports, the United States managed to sign a peace treaty on Christmas Eve, 1814, that preserved its preexisting boundaries, even if it made no reference to one of

the war's most egregious causes" (2). On the eve of war, language becomes part of a trilogy of inseparables in the House of Representatives—"we are identified with the British in religion, in blood, in language"²³—that marks the experience of civil separation, and the basis for framing oneself anew. On December 11, 1811, Richard M. Johnson picks up on this trilogy: "The ties of religion, of language, of blood, as it regards Great Britain, are dangerous ties to this country, with her present hostile disposition—instead of pledges of friendship they are used to paralyze the strength of the United States in relation to her aggressions" (460). Exacerbated by the war is the pointed concern with language because, as Benjamin T. Spencer has noticed, "it was in the patriotic exultation after the War of 1812 that there arose, especially in certain periodicals, a sustained movement for the creation of a literature the relation of which to British letters should be as worthy as that of our military and naval forces to those of England."²⁴ Among the first generation after the War of Independence, the war could be seen as a watershed in self-aggrandizing identity, an object lesson not just in self-assertiveness but in staying power.

The war, to overstate the case, is won by saying it was won: Hickey sums up a wide consensus of historians: "although most Americans pretended they had won the war—even calling it a 'second war of independence'—they could point to few concrete gains to sustain this claim."²⁵ The saying-so betokens a formal assertiveness. In turn it would beckon a future to "back up" the present. For the literary elite, especially for a group of writers who would shortly help to found the *North American Review*,²⁶ a trumped-up dependency on the English language paradoxically stands for a sense of entitlement that they felt was being left behind. Writing of perceived inadequacies, Francis C. Gray distorts facts, as he unifies language with nation:

Our language presents another obstacle to the celebrity of our writers. The excellence of modern authors is estimated by comparing their productions with other works written in the same language, most of their readers being masters of one language only. This comparison is just in Europe, where those who write in the same language generally reside in the same country, and possess the same advantages. But our language, our literature, our taste are English, and we determine the merit of our literary productions by comparing them with those of men, who enjoy better means and stronger motives for the cultivation of letters than America affords.²⁷

In the years following 1812, there arises a discourse that concerns framing for the "same language" and for the inexpressible. Alliances and

divisions are not straightforward. While opinions “radical in the realm of language”²⁸ promote the confidence for a national literature in journals such as *The Portico*, the *North American Review*, or the *Port Folio*, many conservatives have less certainty, if indirectly relishing the idea. Clearly lamenting the break with the classical, clergyman Henry N. Day draws from American know-how:

[W]e shall not look for proof of the widely diffused prevalence of an aesthetic awakening and growth in society at the present time, in the number of our professional artists, or in the perfection of their products, as compared with those of other ages. We must seek it in the useful, rather than in the fine arts. We must not reject it because it shows an immature, rude, or even a gross and perverted taste.²⁹

From several directions, periodicals and essays promote an “awakening,” and Webster begins his massive project of separation, *The Dictionary of the American Language*, for a society in which “the circulation of information and opinion through print was held to be of the greatest importance.”³⁰ The linking of language, especially written, to the creation of nationhood, of course, has long roots. Tracing the formation of how language becomes a “language-of-power,” Benedict Anderson singles out the printer-journalist (he uses the example of Benjamin Franklin) as creating an imagined community based on written language.³¹ For Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, “the spread of a written vernacular” is central to a conceit of nationhood: “When an ethnic group’s language develops a wide literature of its own it can go on to develop into a nation; where it does not, it is likely to fail in such a development.”³² The rhetoric that joins writing to an idea of nation is central to what Homi Bhabha calls “discourse,” here an “attempt . . . persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress” (1). Further, he states pointedly that this ideology focuses on the nation “*as it is written*” (with its display of “temporality of culture and social consciousness”).³³

Looking at writing after the War of 1812, Joyce Appleby stresses the importance of readers in the early nation: a mature generation born right after Independence “took on the self-conscious task of elaborating the meaning of the American Revolution” and wrote for a nation composed increasingly of “participating readers.”³⁴ Edmund S. Morgan notes that George Washington’s reputation is premised on his performance in reading and writing. He shows how Washington continually transforms “what looked in the historical record like shortcomings” into triumphs through formal and written acts of “conscious creation” of character.³⁵

It is difficult to understand roots and conceits of nationalism. Historians, thus, have come to see national identity more in terms of an effect than a cause. Even when ethnicity is a mainspring of collective identity, Richard Jenkins argues, in an allusion to Max Weber, that “the belief in common ancestry is likely to be a consequence of collective political action rather than its cause; people come to see themselves as belonging together—coming from a common background—as a consequence of acting together.”³⁶ Weber suggests that speech acts or acts of assertion enable a nation to perceive itself. Many New England settlers, for example, often did not feel themselves described by their geographical designation. They saw themselves, as noted by Spencer and Wollman (31), as more faithful to the written code of the Bible and its vision of Protestant England than the English themselves. In this sense, as Stephen Fender argues, their Protestantism was portable, requiring neither churches nor clerics to be moved to a new locale: an “essential precondition of emigration, the thesis of portability.” There was “no need of confession, absolution or extreme unction, or even of admonitions and moral support from the local vicar.”³⁷ Thus, what many, such as Stuart Hall, Ernest Gellner, and Tom Nairn, explore in terms of production or narration of nation premised in a long past³⁸ can translate for these settlers into a premise of acting together, even coercion. Cressy notes that “The Massachusetts government attempted to control the flow of opinion” (22) and to dispel English perception of New England as a “distant backwater” (32), shorn of continuity.³⁹ Even on the eve of the twenty-first century, the poet and cultural critic Robert Pinsky echoes this recurring question of acting together, in his example without a priority of a perceived past: “Reason is dismayed or humbled . . . by an implied quandary: How can memory do its cultural work in the absence of continuity?”⁴⁰ “Acting together” can take on dramatic and literal urgency. What Pinsky regards as acts of cultural memory plays out in early self-conscious demands: George Washington, as Morgan explains, “wanted honor” and famously “carried himself as though he merited it.”⁴¹ Discourse that begins with such self-translation ends by restoring that which was never conceived or realized as always conceived or desired. In this construction, disadvantages are recast as advantages, and inadequacy is limited. In other words, “acting together” can defensively blur what one is not and, on the offensive, claim what one wants to be without naming conditions or costs. In this emphasis of claiming without naming, Washington literally acts out what he is not (yet) but is (framed to be).

The discourse of the inexpressible proves to be invaluable in this rhetoric of claiming what cannot be named or achieved. Its inadequacy and loss are recast instead upon a slowly widening definition of adequacy. Let

us look at, for instance, how Charles Brockden Brown in 1801 props up a perceived inadequacy by his dangling of the word “enlightened”: “We are united by language, manners, and taste, by the bonds of peace and commercial intercourse, with an enlightened nation. . . . In relation to the British capital, as the centre of English literature, arts, and science, the situation of *New and Old-York* may be regarded the same.”⁴² But, he asserts, America “will, at length, generate and continue a race of artists and authors, purely indigenous, and who may vie with those of Europe” (iv; emphasis added). Impatiently shortening that length, he points not to the absence of this pure production, but to its lack of public recognition or, more to the point, to its own self-acceptance: “This period is, *probably, at no great distance*; and no means seem better calculated to hasten so desirable an event, than those literary repositories, in which every original contribution is received, and the hits and discoveries of observation and ingenuity are preserved; and which contain a critical examination of the books which our country happens to produce” (iv; emphasis added). The temporal dare of “probably” will reappear fiercely in Walt Whitman’s pivotal Preface of 1855, as we will see, notably without a definitive change in status or behavior, but in perspective. Brown then undermines the critic who might derail the journey from absence to presence. He sets up the foil of the inability of writers to withstand scrutiny: “It was thought that American writers would not *bear* criticism: that, as this was a *young* country, its authors must be treated with peculiar indulgence, and be encouraged by praise, rather than intimidated by censure.” But this position, he says, is “applicable rather to the supposed incapacity of the critic, than to the business of criticism itself. If the critic have formed to himself an ideal standard of excellence of the most elevated kind, or is enslaved by the authority of any individual example, there is danger” (iv–v). Brown tilts the seesaw toward the future author, but only in relation to a warning, a dare of immanence, as well as imminence. Critics have second-class status, as he says, because their ideal standard of excellence may be too elevated or be “enslaved by the authority of any individual example” (v).

In April 1799 the Friendly Club founds *The Monthly Magazine and American Review*, edited by Charles Brockden Brown. Its first issue offers a self-referential letter to the editor that begins, “You have undertaken, it seems, to amuse the world with a monthly publication. I hope you have well considered the difficulties that lie in your way, and have not forgotten the old fable of the farmer and his ass. . . . I am far from thinking that your publication will deserve the fate of the ass; but I am much afraid that such a fate will befall it.” In a conservative double bind, the letter promises “to extract the quintessence of European wisdom; . . . to speculate

on manners and morals in the style of Addison and Johnson" and, then, warns (and again, dares): "You have promised all this; but you will excuse me if I question your power to perform it."⁴³ This appears at first a surprising discourse. Brown and Fisher Ames, for example, are among a redoubt of conservative members who, like those of their less conservative counterparts, impatiently imply an achievement of "genius" (nearly) as good as done. Writing about Ames in "Federalist Criticism and the Fate of Genius," Edward Cahill perceptively notices that Ames "struck a rather odd pose for such a thoroughgoing advocate of conservative Federalism."⁴⁴ Cahill explicates that posture in Ames. Instead of pointing to deficiencies in letters and suggesting the appropriate patience fitted to an inferior, Ames sees genius as "an omnipresent and timeless force, and that the circumstances of American society have only rendered it *inactive and invisible*" (687; emphasis added). Ames's Federalist politics allows him to embrace, as ever-present if as yet inexpressible, a future Milton or Shakespeare, who in effect remains openly buried (and potentially animated) by the public who desires to bury their great writer in something akin to a Poets' Corner.

Walt Whitman famously assumes the mantle of reanimating inactivity and invisibility. Many others transform disadvantage to advantage, absence to presence, defensiveness to victory, but Whitman's 1855 Preface especially draws on the vitality of the topos of the inexpressible, exploiting the vitality of frames, personae, metaphor, voices, joke structure, parody, and mimicry. Well known for an inventory of progressive signs, his Preface especially ranges over the youthfulness of Americans, leisure, and patience. Each of these, though, has already been regularly scapegoated in journals and articles. In Whitman's well-known phrase, the discourse almost instantaneously "overturns" or recasts these perceived deficiencies; in his phrase, "the signs are effectual" (26). The adjective is unerringly and contextually precise for same-language inexpressibility, and, as part of the topos of inexpressibility, the line is itself a notable frame. To say the signs are effectual is to make the sign into an action, as frames can do. "[E]ffectual" conveys not just a sense of adequacy but what might be vulgarly called a direct hit (and a set-up as in "being framed") for the English language. Under compression of a frame, an end is fully adequate to its unarticulated means. The framed voice of the Preface has thus concluded: "[The English language] is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible" (25). Ames takes similar steps to convert the inexpressible into action: "Genius," he writes, is "to the intellectual world what the electric fluid is to nature, diffused

everywhere, yet almost everywhere hidden, capable by *its own mysterious laws of action* and by the very breath of applause” (emphasis added). Ames continues that such action is capable “of producing effects that appear to transcend all power, except that of some supernatural agent riding in the whirlwind. In an hour of calm we suddenly hear its voice, and are moved with the general agitation. It smites, astonishes, and confounds, and seems to kindle half the firmament.”⁴⁵

Although critics have always noticed the historic importance of Whitman’s Preface of 1855, its relations to the history of inexpressibility and to the actions of what is “yet *almost* everywhere hidden” (emphasis added), have not yet been looked at carefully. In the Preface resides the full spectrum of claims for imagining literary and national communities, ranging from “the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures . . . but always most in the common people” to more sweeping assertions, such as “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” (5–6).⁴⁶ Perhaps most overlooked is that the Preface harbors the topos of the inexpressible, of which even the Preface’s profuse expression is but the tip of the iceberg. The impasse of inexpressibility building after independence—a doubt of failure or silence in the English language—is embedded in the Preface. How the Preface goes about adapting a poetics of the inexpressible is both immediate and longstanding, entwined in rhetoric, strategy, and politics: literary anxiety, tensions with the past, and perceived cultural loss, amid national and imperial expansion, are conjoined with the topos of the inexpressible and poetic framing.

Inside the body of the Preface of 1855 is an articulation of the inexpressible that turns perceived cultural disadvantage to advantage. The rhetoric of turning disadvantage to advantage dates back to settlement and, earlier, to discovery. “So urgent was their [the emigrants’] need to turn their cultural loss to advantage that they fell upon, as if inventing it anew, a whole, traditional rhetorical complex,” writes Fender.⁴⁷ An early example of this kind of turn in promotional writing can also be seen in a move away in early reports of voyage from “the stony reality” (2) of potential problems of settlement toward persuasion:

Influenced by the promotional writings of the Richard Hakluyts (uncle and nephew), and building on the experience of the Roanoke settlement of the 1580s, a sequence of sea captains explored the coastline between Virginia and Newfoundland looking for a place to establish a colony. The reports of their voyages, often written to gain funding for future expeditions, presented America as a land of plenty and immeasurable promise.⁴⁸

Rhetoric of promise and praise, joined with a state of being “unequal to the subject,”⁴⁹ has a history not only in promotional writings of settlement but also in the topos of the inexpressible. “The English language befriends the grand American expression,” the Preface again suggests; “[i]t is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.”⁵⁰ “Well nigh” suggests almost, but not quite. “Well nigh” undercuts “the grand American expression” because “American expression” appears already to be undermined by the same-language problem of the English language itself, not always perceived as its “friend.” “National literature seems to be the product, the legitimate product, of a national language,” Walter Channing has written in his now famous summary of 1815.⁵¹

This impasse, the articulation of a language condemned by its same-language history to a curtailed or truncated future, is stamped throughout. It is forged under the longstanding topos of the inexpressible, and recognizable conceits of expansionism and temporality attributed to the Preface are thrown into a different light. Its discursive strategies of literary potential and projected independence, established primarily in the Preface of 1855, are not unique. Yet this discourse needs to be heard in the context of its time, and an understanding of how important the history of poetics, in particular the inexpressible, is to a discussion of the English language as a medium for what it may not *yet* express. The Preface offers characteristic textual strategies that pose a series of questions about a moment of language, discourse, and history. How do local contexts and historical genres inform its language of inexpressibility, this discourse, this *framing* of English to distance itself from itself? What does it mean exactly for desired language in the Preface to lie ahead of (“shall well nigh”), but already lie inside, its own and current body of expression, namely English—and suggest itself at the same moment as a “medium” for what it is not yet expressing? What impasse occurs here that perpetuates such circular arguments?

It is important to step back momentarily and acknowledge that most concerns with Whitman's language have been identified not with his prose, but with his poems, including a longstanding look at Whitman's style. Harold Bloom's controversial claim in 1994 for “Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon”⁵² rests primarily with an analysis of style in the poems, and a steady and diverse following continues to discover in Whitman's style justifications for Philip Fisher's description of Whitman as “a grounding fact for all later American culture, as Homer was for Greek culture, or as Shakespeare became for England.”⁵³ Such identifications of style in Whitman's poems include continuing discussions of Whitman's groundbreaking free verse, but also more recently the injection

of “intellectual and aesthetic activity”; as Helen Vendler corrects in *Poets Thinking*, for instance, “Whitman has never been granted much intellectual capacity.”⁵⁴ Yet, even at the outset, a reviewer in July of 1855 from *Life Illustrated*, focusing on style, practically gives up even trying to name it, landing on his own inexpressibility: “[L]ines of rhythmical prose, or a series of *utterances* (we know not what else to call them).”⁵⁵ Later that year, in September, another reviewer in the *United States Review* tautologically decides to let Whitman’s style speak for itself, saying, “The style of these poems, therefore, is simply their own style. . . .”⁵⁶ A conundrum in style can sometimes yield to a compensatory and exaggerated focus on statement. “If Poetry has passed him by,” Oscar Wilde quips in 1889, “Philosophy will take note of him.”⁵⁷ William Carlos Williams in 1955 pursues a similar drumbeat, finding a message where he expects “light,” alluding to poetry: “He had seen a great light but forgot almost at once after the first revelation everything but his ‘message.’ . . .”⁵⁸

In brief, Whitman’s “message”—what Charles A. Dana names in 1855 “bold, stirring *thoughts*”⁵⁹—continues to pick up the long thread of a particular focus on an inordinate style. At present such discussions, often located on the spectrum between unity and lawlessness, appear in larger contextual references, best described by Betsy Erkkilä in an excellent collection *Breaking Bounds*: “rethinking the very meaning we bring to such terms as American, literature, history, culture, and Walt Whitman himself.”⁶⁰ Earlier, addressing Whitman’s style directly, Erkkilä writes,

These clusters [in *Autumn Rivulets*, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, and *From Noon to Starry Night*] radiate in ever-widening concentric circles from a focus on self, life, body, light, day, and the social world toward a focus on the cosmos, death, soul, darkness, night, and the spiritual world. At the same time, the clusters and the poems they include continually fold back on one another chronologically and thematically, temporally and spatially, in a manner that suggests the image of ensemble—of “form and union and plan”—that is the final design and desire of *Leaves of Grass*.⁶¹

As difficult a register as style creates for his poems, the poems have consistently been granted release for their innovation, formal experimentation, and social responses. In Harold Bloom’s essay on Whitman, for example, a search for style and design yields ground to an analysis of another of the founding tropes commonly cited for Whitman—originality.⁶² Whitman’s prose has not always fared as well. It has been denigrated as “not very good” as or having the “unfortunate result of distracting critical attention from Whitman’s finer achievements. . . .”⁶³ Even the Preface of 1855

is often ignored by those searching for style, reconfigured as “meaning,” adjudicated through “thoughts” or discourse. For the most part, it is often cited as an adjunct or notation to the poems, not as the independently substantial document that it is.⁶⁴ Yet the Preface proposes certain histories and futures not found in the poems themselves. It provides, therefore, new insights into the period, the culture, and poetics. In terms of rhetoric it reveals framing, overwriting, and a humor that all but empties itself of meaning. To hear all this, however, it is necessary to know a background in poetics as well as the contemporary documents. Detailing strategies of control in still earlier literature of the settlers and founders, Robert Ferguson interestingly articulates something, difficult to name, that is important about the rhetoric and a struggle pertaining to style of foundational papers in this way: “. . . it is the combination that counts. Thematic simplicity and rhetorical complexity seem a peculiar blend, but they always connect in a language of political statement.”⁶⁵ This combination of “thematic simplicity and rhetorical complexity,” still difficult to parse, usefully helps to put a finger on why so much attention is paid to “meaning” (or crises of meanings). Yet, in terms of poetics, we can begin to hear once more Whitman’s historically mediated “thoughts,” what Ferguson, again, aptly names a problematic “language of many levels” (25).

To see the complex exploitation of “levels” allows us to overhear, at first, Whitman’s overdetermined voices that have not been heard in relation to the topos of the inexpressible. We will hold off on the formal inquiry into the inexpressible and begin simply by touching upon the elements encircling it, such as questions of a received language and its inheritance. The English preacher Jonathan Boucher is noted for framing such self-consciousness of American language: in 1807, he writes: “Thus, the United States of America, too proud, as it would seem, to acknowledge themselves indebted to this country, for their existence, their power, or their language, denying and revolting against the two first, and also making all the haste they conveniently can, to rid themselves of the last.”⁶⁶ Such frames of inadequacy spread in America to rings of self-doubts and self-defensiveness regarding not just language but literature and culture. Evaluating America’s “moral and intellectual power” in 1830, William Ellery Channing for example asks, “The great question is, how far is it [the country] prolific of moral and intellectual power.”⁶⁷ He adds, “These are the products by which a country is to be tried.” He perorates, “Do we possess, indeed, what may be called a national literature? Have we produced eminent writers in the various departments of intellectual effort? Are our chief resources of instruction and literary enjoyment furnished from ourselves? We regret that the reply to these questions is so obvious” (275). Whitman’s Preface

of 1855 does not address this proliferating attitude that we have seen in kind.⁶⁸ It draws from the history of the topos of the inexpressible, a topos of human inadequacy; and it draws from framing inadequacy (of a language, a literature, a “genius”) that is inextricably linked with it. Because these frames, surrounding a received language, grow out of the soil of contemporary criticism, I pause and listen to the self-debate among these earlier critics. In 1822 George Tucker, for example, all but concedes a fate of exclusion from “genius”: “It will scarcely be denied, that if we examine the individuals of the two continents, with a view to compare their senses and their bodily powers, no difference can be observed.” George Tucker concludes that “genius is not the exclusive gift of any country.”⁶⁹ In an 1856 letter to Emerson, Whitman’s stance calls up Tucker’s self-protective claims that no poet presently is up to the mark: “Of course, we shall have a national character, an identity” (1336). In a shade of difference, it reappears in terms of producing character, nonetheless to blindside mimicry: “The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to *our genius*” (1330; emphasis added).

Faithfully representing naysayers, the temporal frame in the Preface first accurately recapitulates and mirrors the perception of the missing “genius,” who is still only yet to come, a replacement for the “priests”: “There *will soon be* no more priests” (24; emphasis added). Such an utterance, held for a moment as truth, at first seems initially and routinely expanded in a bare shift to unreliable narration. After we hear that the “superior breed” (24) has yet to “arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth” (25), the shift begins: “The English language befriends the grand American expression” (25). The temporal frame, that is, shifts, exaggeratedly rescinding mimicry and the apparent acquiescence, making it a matter of choice: “[i]t is the *chosen tongue* to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage” (25; emphasis added). According to Washington Irving, it has been anything but; in 1838, he writes, “Perhaps, with the same language, a lingering allegiance to their models, good or bad, and the similarity of our manners and tone of mind, arising from a common origin and maintained by the tremendous influence which their literature, disseminated cheaper than our own, exerts upon us, this [the absence of a national poetry] is unavoidable.”⁷⁰ The blatant unreliable narration of the initial voicing in the Preface makes this seemingly nonfictional account fictitious, this stance, a fiction.⁷¹ Through such frames around the inexpressible “chosen tongue,” point of view is repositioned.

This readjustment of point of view has a long social history in the discourse of choosing to come to America. David Cressy calls “the climate

of hyperbole and expectation," as he notes in tracts such as William Morrell's *New England, or a Briefe Enarration of the Ayre, Earth, Water, Fish and Fowles of that Country . . . in Latine and English Verse* (1625), and premised on the literary convention of an idyllic setting, *locus amoenus*,⁷² a "poetic encomium."⁷³ A practice of adapting literary conventions is established, and the topos of the inexpressible, already the epitome of adjusting point of view, becomes central in this history. Framing around what can never be expressed in a received language refits and recategorizes what is made to appear stable. One part of the the Preface's temporal frame—oversimplifying I will, for the moment, designate it simply as a "first" voice—echoes the arguments of those who profess inadequacy, such as Orestes A. Brownson: "Feeling ourselves inferior, we could have not confidence in our own taste or judgment, and therefore could not think and speak freely. We could not be ourselves. We could not trust the workings of our own minds. We were safe only when we thought as the English thought, wrote as the English wrote, or sang as the English sang." He continues:

We Americans in literary matters have had no self-confidence. There is no repose in our literature. . . . This proceeds in a great measure from the fact that we have found our model of excellence, not in our own minds and hearts, nor in human nature generally, but in the literature of that land from which our forefathers came. Instead of studying man, we have studied English literature. . . .⁷⁴

In the Preface, this voice is picked up in an action of contemporary mimicry, colluding as a record of the voices which speak of a country's lagging achievement in language and literature: "but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislators" (5). He adds, "[i]t *awaits* the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" (6; emphasis added). A "second" voice of the temporal frame, as we will see, takes the offensive, refits expectations of achievement to state the achieved but, given the absence just established, does so self-consciously.⁷⁵ This voice depicts not only the unreliable narration of the first voice (as a lie), but its very genre (fiction). This slippery temporal move renders the initial "facts" more unreliable than they first appear. The framing of generic and fictional unreliable narration, within the nonfictional mimicry, sets up competing discourses of disbelief. There is first a genre switch from nonfiction to fiction. The nonfiction is the first voice's recapitulation of the state of letters, the underachievement. Making the first voice's account a fiction, the second voice frames a different fiction: the achievement is immanent, actually here. The pivot is a time difference between one sense of "fiction"

as untrue if framed by another “fiction” in a narrative. When the first recapitulation of underachievement is refitted from nonfiction to simply a narrative in the second’s presentation (of achievements as immanent), its mimicry is pinned to narration, rather than to documentation: here, mimicry is translated into fiction, as is a perceived inadequacy of desired language and character.⁷⁶ Thus when the formerly “reliable” mimicry of the first voice (heard as nonfiction since it is recounting the palpably obvious) is made into a fiction and a lie by the second voice’s decision of narrative, a once reliable speaker, speaking of underachievement, is *framed* for a moment as a fictional inner speaker: the narrator, thus, who refits the first voice’s mimicry into a fiction, creates an “unreliable” character out of what appeared to be a solid speaker of certain standing perceptions of literature. As this local unreliable character is created (through the second voice), so too the larger inadequate character is recast for a moment from its freight of failure, its being tied to the binding and instantaneous “fact” and documentation. When the first voice with its mimicry and recapitulation comes back (as it does), it has been tinged with unreliability, even though the second voice framing it has told “lies” too in the process. In this set of choices between unreliabilities and what constitutes “fact,” the opinions that denigrate literary strength are dared from competing fictions of narration, creating joke structures (which I will go into further in chapter 4) and new nonfictions. Facts, framed as fiction, are replaced by claimed self-evident truths, such as the one that the nation’s champions have arrived and are available.⁷⁷ *Time* has been injected into the frame of the inexpressible; what at first appears a factual dead-end is transformed into a future as a dare. The Preface, thus, depicts competing defeats of defensive mimicry and, in the collision, an offensive unreliability (represented by the second voice). They all are framed in mock declarations of simplicity by the statement: “What I tell I tell precisely for what it is” (14) and “How beautiful is candor!” (19).

Within the Preface the verbs often carry the temporal frame of inexpressibility. “The American poets *are to enclose* old and new for America is the race of races,” the first voice says in future tense: “Of them a bard *is to be* commensurate with a people” (7; emphasis added). Then the unreliable narration slips out: “To him the other continents *arrive* as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake” (7; emphasis added). The mimic’s future construction (“is to be”) gives way grammatically to the unreliable narrator’s plain present tense (“arrive,” “gives”). Though they look as if they are present-tense verbs, “are to enclose” and “is to be” have divested themselves of their residual present-tense quality of lacking (what would have been suggested by “encloses”

or “is”) and “are to enclose” and “is to be” acquire instead a resonance of possibility. Between two denotations of possibility—“chance” and “realization”—lies the changeover from the mimicry, who speaks but of the future, to the unreliable narrator, who stays in the present (and marks it with present-tense verbs). Therefore two presences that have not yet been shaped except as constructions in a frame are presumed: the step into the future, as present momentarily creates the real present as past (that is, finished, done, over—and one that does not exist as it has existed, that is, as in the manifest “contributions”). In this exchange the reader is presented with a frame of disbelief: a slip from the future (initiated by mimicry) into the present (framed by an unreliable narrator). Future achievements pass for the past. They are realized. The complexities of time shifts and genre are thereby elastic, assimilated and condensed into a seemingly simple presence.⁷⁸

Therefore these verb tenses are functional. In the Preface, for example, the first voice, initially designed to represent “fact,” historically refers to the “endless gestation of new states” as a source for poetry that has *yet* to come: again, “Of them [the American poets] a bard is to be commensurate with a people” (7). Contradicting in present tense the second voice speaks, designating poetry as immanent, *not* predicated on the future:

To him [the American bard] enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the weather-beaten vessels entering new ports or making landings on rocky coasts—the first settlements north or south—the rapid stature and muscle—the haughty defiance of '76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution. . . . (7–8)

The first voice's free fall sets up the second narrator's dead-serious stand.

The verb tenses of the speakers, thus, are integral to the tension. The first voice, preferring the future tense, appears to echo contemporary critics who fan out impatience, acknowledging the absence of what it wants (which covers both desires and lacks): a national bard. The non sequitur of a second voice, who at first is cast as more unreliable than the first, recasts the first, pulling a straight present tense from a future command. Thus mimicry carries anxiety in contemporary voices, but is undermined by the unreliable narrator. This narrator formally renames the first voice, turning it, redundantly, into foolish nonfiction. Fisher Ames has expressed constrictions of imitation: “Is there one luminary in our firmament,” asks Ames, “that shines with unborrowed rays?”⁷⁹ Ames's rhetorical question

proclaims that there is no “luminary,” and the first voice acknowledges the same in the Preface by using the future tense. In contrast the second narrator, reconstructing that report, refutes contemporary verdicts and edicts. The mimic who returns reasserts a current lack: “The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen” (6). By being forced to separate and put back together what at first appeared to be one voice, the listener, in effect, is dared to keep the facts straight (precisely what the second voice has been suggesting in his claim for a “national” poet).

Celia Britton describes a related strategy: “[r]ather than seeking a solution to the problem as defined by the dominant culture, it changes the terms of that definition—twisting the parameters of the subject’s situation in such a way as to turn lack, negativity, and otherness themselves into a means of resistance and self-representation.”⁸⁰ Though the formerly dominant culture of England in this case is but a beat from a newly dominating culture in the U.S., she has caught some of the dilemma of the mid-nineteenth century of settlers recently revolting against an imperial power. Rhetoric twists what the local critics call “lack” into advantage. For example, the 1807 *Port Folio*, surveying American literature, sees a decline: “with no people, whose history is recorded, have letters flourished” in a time “[p]rior to this auspicious period” of “ample leisure.”⁸¹ Leisure, far from a flaw, is actually positive by the time the second voice appears again: “His [the American poet’s] love above all love has leisure and expanse . . . he leaves room ahead of himself” (12).⁸²

Within the Preface the projected language (or its perceived absence) becomes a prop. “Embouchure,” for example, appears: “His [the bard’s] spirit responds to his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not *embouchure* where they spend themselves more than they *embouchure* into him” (7; emphasis added). “Embouchure” is not just found fit for use but is made fit by relegating its humor to the framed first voice, thereby offensively removing the language’s potential to be mocked. By adding a French word and frame, the first voice can remake English, which has been at the center of potential postcolonial debate, just one of the many sources for American English.⁸³ Here, framing helps to explain, therefore, the preponderance of borrowed language in his Prefaces. From the Preface of 1872, “n’importe” (1000), “surplusage” (1000), “*eclaircissement*” (1001), “*sine qua non*” (1002), “literatuses” (1002) rain down on us.

There is another layer of metaphoric resonance. The first voice has echoed earlier critics, and much of Whitman’s rhetoric and cast reappears;

George Tucker, for example, has examined and compared the “individuals of the two *continents*” in an attempt to find Americans *not* wanting, and Royall Tyler has cited “manners, customs, and habits of a *strange country*” imported in the “English Novel” that “renders the homespun habits of her own country disgusting.”⁸⁴ For the second voice in the Preface neither the potentially superior continent nor, from the other side, its looming “looms” of influence signal anything other than a contribution (“the other continents arrive as contributions,” 7). And the second voice’s apparent throw-away, “he gives them reception for their sake . . .” (7), demonstrates that there is *already* something to offer; he is putting it to the first voice as he has put it to Tucker and Tyler. Perhaps no exploitation by the frame, however, is richer than metaphors, and Whitman’s Preface plays with resonances of youth, “embarrassments of infancy,” common in the articles and newspapers at mid-century for the country’s lack of age.⁸⁵ Identifying “the causes that have retarded the progress of literature in The United States,” *The Port Folio* sees that its “cause which will primarily suggest itself is, *the youth of the country*.”⁸⁶ The Preface makes these descriptions part of its grist. Youth becomes a heroic person, who, again, “leaves room ahead of himself” (12). The Preface, moreover, recasts youth and leisure: “Nothing is better than simplicity . . . nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness” (13). Richard Shryock calls such embedded narratives “actions”⁸⁷; rather than attempting to say something with pointless humor that but prepares the frame, the Preface attempts to do something.

Within the frames there is also doubling on important words. “Inexpressible,” for example, dramatizes a rhetorical play with point of view. The unreliable narrator suggests the English language (befriending the “grand American expression”) will “express the inexpressible” (25). The word “inexpressible,” a point of contact between the two voices, is also its moment of self-division. It comes from the first voice, which wishes to designate the future-bound and literal connotation of “yet-to-be expressed” poetry. Crucially—and this is rhetorically complex—the first voice’s literal connotation initiates a different, more liberal, connotation in the second voice. Neither voice uses it figuratively, and so the double play on literalness reveals the gap between the two. A desired national poetry is thus literally—and concomitantly—coined “inexpressible.” These fictions, incompatible, are generically crossed. In the Preface of 1876, for example, the second voice says, “Poetic style, when address’d to the soul, is less definite form, outline, sculpture, and becomes vista, music, half-tints, and even less than half-tints” (1013). The first voice reappears, responding silently to critics: “True, it may be architecture” (1013). Then it cedes its place again gradually to the second voice: “but again it may be the forest wildwood, or the best effect thereof, at twilight, the waving oaks and cedars in the

wind, and the *impalpable odor*" (1013; emphasis added). Trying to describe poetic style, both fictions end up with impalpability: for the second voice, the literal meaning, "inexpressible"; for the first voice, the literal inability to say, defined in exposed adjustments, the "may be," the "or," its tools for echoing "an utterance adjusted to, perhaps born of, Democracy and the Modern—in its very nature regardless of the old conventions, and, under the great laws, following only its own impulses" (1011). In Whitman's frame small equivalences, such as "perhaps" in "adjusted to, perhaps born of," indicate a transition from fact to fiction and back again, recast. The uncertainty of the first voice is a reflection of corroborating defensiveness and an integral part of the frame: "perhaps" echoes the critics' conundrum of what comes first, poet or language? Thus the problem and frame, first voice and second one, are turned inside out, making the uncertainty ("perhaps") small, syntactically negligible not negligent, but crucial. If frame texts can be said to be about "what they cannot name," the condition makes this literal and exactly acute.⁸⁸

Since there are no easy signals for these switches in voices, it can be difficult to recognize just "who" is speaking. Look at the he-is-not-here-yet first voice in this mimicry: "Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff *most need* poets and *will* doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (8; emphasis added). The second he-has-already-arrived voice bowls it over: "Of all mankind the great poet *is* the equable man" (8; emphasis added). Correction is all but impossible *because* it has already been granted; the second voice claims that the correction has been achieved and, thus, cannot come in the future ("he has passed . . ."). Giving the first voice credence, even for a moment, is to be gulled. But neither is the second voice certain. Point of view remains continuously less-than-certain: "The poems distilled from other poems will probably pass away" (26). And in March of 1891, Whitman's piece on "American National Literature: Is there any such thing—or can there ever be?" (1258) ends on an ambiguous question itself: "The whole matter has gone on, and exists today, probably as it should have been, and should be; as, for the present, it must be. To all which we conclude, and repeat the terrible query: American National Literature—is there distinctively any such thing, or can there ever be?" (1264).

Unsurprisingly, defensive posturing in the Preface exploits a form of the shaggy dog tale (which I will discuss later).⁸⁹ Because this is important for Whitman's Preface, I will map the area here in outline. Jan Brunvand explains that in no-point shaggy dogs, "a wholly unrelated and pointless punch line is told to a group containing some dupes who believe that they are hearing a genuine joke. When those in-the-know laugh, the suckers

wonder what's wrong with their sense of humor."⁹⁰ Afraid to be outsiders, listeners laugh. But they do not, cannot, understand a humorous punch line as fiction that in fact is not humorous. Either they are suckers, or they redirect their attention from what they (do not) know to how they go about knowing.

In the Preface what is being put up is not primarily whether there is or is not a poet, but what is inherently central in every shaggy dog story—again, *point of view*. What is often uttered, thus, is invalid, to be overturned. The American poet, according to the first voice, is inexpressible, not here yet, yet to come. But according to the second voice he is already present, he is in existence; again, “he has passed” (10). Mimicry makes frames of perceived facts. The mimic's words curl back, making fiction out of perceived “real” declarations. To say this another way: mimicry seems to frame what is there—no poet—and that point of view is necessary for this frame. There are voices—“Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined” (13)—that humorously point to a lurking shaggy dog that demands “a wittily unexpected and sudden ending, all the more unexpected in that the ‘lead-in’ and the ‘lead-up’ have to be deceptively leisurely and almost diffuse.”⁹¹

This joking demands listeners who, like the audiences of the shaggy dog stories, refuse meaning but share materials and a point of view that enable them to transform defensive stances into hurtling offense. They can accept, to use Ted Cohen's phrase, a “special invitation.”⁹² This “intimate community” begins from settlement (“... the movement of English-speaking emigrants to the New World,” argues Fender, is motivated in part by drawing from Virgil, “millennial prophecies of a Golden Age restored,” 63); onward past Puritan ideology of “a special people, an only people—none like thee in all the earth”⁹³; to the contested cognitive work of metaphor itself: “For this [cognitive] disclosure to occur effectively, metaphor must be articulated in a mode wherein we are invited to attend to *how* it achieves its effects.” He adds that “we are invited—by the tensional gap . . . —to traverse it in imaginative terms.”⁹⁴

Elastic, the frames are everywhere in the Prefaces. Here is a description of the verse form in the 1876 Preface: “Thus my form has strictly grown from my *purports and facts*, and is the analogy of them” (1013; emphasis added). The methods of writing, not only the writing, are an analogy of “purports and facts.” In Whitman's frame the most important two words in their implication for both the shaggy dog story (and its variants) and, here, the local context from which the strategy emerges are the words “I say” (1011). This seemingly innocent pair has a simple singular pronoun (which gains its charge from representing two voices) and a verb (which is

more than verbal due to the dramatic frames). Neither of these two words, then, should be taken merely at face value. They are an extension of the jokes-that-are-not-jokes. The frequently uttered disclaimers in the Preface, “in my opinion” or “True, . . .,” similarly, are anything but transparent; they are of course part of what makes uncertainty small, syntactically and literally negligible, and therefore crucial to making of *nonfiction*. Present tense verbs, such as “is” (“Here [in America] the theme *is* creative and has vista” [8; emphasis added]) collide with future ones, such as “shall” (“Their [Americans’] Presidents *shall* not be their common referee so much as their poets shall” [8, emphasis added]).

The frames heard in the Prefaces register those voices in the early republic that are demanding an original language, refuting degeneration theories of language adapted, for example, from the work by Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*,⁹⁵ and embracing what Christopher Looby calls the “sense of nation fabrication as an intentional act of linguistic creation.”⁹⁶ It was a demand for a so far inexpressible language in writing.⁹⁷ “This country has a literature notwithstanding all that has been said in this paper to the contrary,” Walter Channing says, setting up his rejoinder: “But it is not the least indebted for it to the labour of its colonies. I now refer to the oral literature of its aborigines.”⁹⁸ His statement argues for the oral: “Their words of description are either derived from incidents, and of which they are famed to convey most exact ideas, or are so formed as to convey their signification in their sounds . . . and are in themselves the very language for poetry, for they are made only for expression, and their objects are the very element for poetry” (313). He hyperbolically attributes that the Indian “reposed” in the oral origins of his language and, thereby, “in the knowledge of that which was peculiarly his own” (314). By contrast he equally exposes the magnitude and length to which he has gone in writing to reveal this oral language of the Indian “now as rich as the soil on which he was nurtured” (313). Needless to say for Channing’s view of Indians and their language, the Indians’ oral and more perfect or pure confluence of nature and art, unlike its less “peculiar” and perfect written counterpart of English in America, has, as he says, “never been submitted by its authors to the test of comparison” (314). Thus while the Indians are “most perfectly contented with their language,” they are resigned to contentment, according to Walter Channing, only by, “if it may be so called, their literary condition.”⁹⁹ This “literary condition,” rather than “literature,” cannot by his patronizing definition compete in writing with (his own act of inadequate) writing that is as yet unspeakable (in an English language), but therefore also ever more important in growing hegemony.¹⁰⁰ Edward Channing also wants to proceed with writing, where potential reputation lies. The act of

writing in the following quotation is yoked to oral "uttering" in its conception: "[L]et him [the writer]," he says,

turn to the rougher and more intrepid ages of his country, before men troubled themselves about elegance or plan, and wrote right on as they felt, even though they were uttering a thought for the first time . . . whether they were to be ranked among the classicks, or barbarians in poetry, whether theirs was to be called an Augustan era, or merely the plain old English days of Elizabeth.¹⁰¹

This discourse of inadequacy combined with declared impatience, deriving from an imported topos of the inexpressible, creates an unusual slowness and complexity of delivery. I have opened with a reading of Whitman's 1855 Preface to unravel not only the weave of the text, but also the warp it is woven on; the lines consisting of framing, the inexpressible, and oral humor must be reconstructed. Some threads are easier to follow than others. A dependence on early-nineteenth-century debates about language is clear enough even though its rhetorical modifications are often exceedingly complex. The rhetoric of the Prefaces can be traced, but their poetics—their formal dependence on certain literary forms derived from poetry—will require a wide-angle lens. This is just the beginning of thinking about what happens when a self-conscious and written search for a language, distancing itself in place so to speak, emerges from roots in the inexpressible, framing, and overwriting in expanded slow motion.