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Distancing English

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CHAPTER 2

THE INEXPRESSIBLE

“It [the English language] is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible” (25). Whitman’s statement could point to something almost inexpressible, but not quite. Or it could point to something possibly inexpressible, but not impossibly. The statement falls somewhere between a positive assertion (“the English language is inexpressible”) and a double negative (“the English language is not inexpressible”). It is hard to get a footing here. The rhetoric is hyperbolic and defensive. It harbors a perceived impediment of expression, English over English, that I looked at in the first chapter. The conversation over the doubled language in the nineteenth century eluded easy answers: is the English language so close to being inexpressible that it *is* basically inexpressible, or is the desired expression only *nearly* inexpressible in the English language, making room for hope in the expression of the nation after all in distancing English from English?

We are on shifting rhetorical terrain. Whitman’s statement begs the question of whether the inexpressible can be expressed. Literary tradition, though, is quite clear on this: the inexpressible cannot be expressed. If

the concern is God, or highest love, language often may not cross the gap between what can be expressed and what cannot. Chaucer's Parson can never succeed in expressing God, and Cordelia says, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent."¹ Even within the heritage of inexpressibility, Whitman's claim is revealing. It leaves open the possibility (positioned in "well-nigh") that what is inexpressible can and will be expressed in time. More than this, the statement actually carries with it the implication that, perhaps, the inexpressible has *already* been expressed because the Preface is an utterance in which the poet is offering up his own poems as an example of a perhaps achieved expression.

The Preface of 1855, as I have shown, realizes (to put it too simply) a "double" voicing in its contemporaries. Two paired voices in the Preface characterize this. On the one hand, the inexpressibility of English, as we have seen, can be bookended by anxieties of cultural inferiority and, on the other, by a (long history of) self-promotional rhetoric or praise that it takes to frame such fears as needless. To review quickly: the first voice in the Preface echoes that a literature cannot be expressed, while the second voice jumps ahead to say that it already has been expressed and in fact may already have passed the reader by. The inexpressibility of the first voice echoes the despairing discourse of Walter Channing, Fisher Ames, and others. The dare of the second voice to express what cannot be expressed has been hinted at in the very same texts. "True, we labour under disadvantages," Channing first writes. Then he changes directions. "But if our liberty deserve the praise which it receives, it is more than a balance for these. We believe that it is. We believe that it does open to us an indefinite intellectual progress."²

The Preface performs a number of adjustments to a longstanding literary convention, the topos of the inexpressible. To hear more clearly the expectations in the early part of the nineteenth century of (possibly) expressing the inexpressible language and literature, therefore, it is important to know the lineage of the topos. What happens in that period rests on earlier fundamental foundations and alterations of the topos. An ever increasing responsibility by the speaker to meet the expectations of the inexpressible—at the limit, *to distrust* its unreachable perfection altogether, or *to trust* the human responsibility to inhabit the challenge of words themselves—stubbornly finds a home historically in this topos of the inexpressible, a rhetoric traditionally bound with perceptions of perfection and inadequacy. In tracing the topos's development from the Middle Ages to an impasse of English in the nineteenth century, it may appear as if I am oversimplifying it or the topos; in the appearance of each, there are differences in makeup, appearance, timber, and gravity. Because my focus is

on the intersection of this topos with a perceived inexpressibility of language in the nineteenth century, I have not lingered over these differences (though I know they are important). This chapter helps to illuminate this complex and important topos that will enable writers to traverse a perceived impasse of language, an acutely perceived inexpressibility.

Whitman's Preface fully utilizes the inexpressible topos's dealing with what can and cannot be expressed, and so we must, first, see how the Preface came to squeeze time and opportunity from a topos that conventionally looks to timelessness and human inadequacy. This brief history of the topos will enable us to see the basis for this particular adaptation. In this short survey we will especially take note of how a topos traditionally concerned with having *too little*, or insufficient, language for expression comes to find itself potentially with way *too much* language—not knowing how to select and choose just the right expression for itself. It takes a little time to cross this distance. But it was abetted by a predominantly political turn toward discovering an overlap (or excess) of language; an expression in English already had a footing in a topos that had been heading in the very same direction: the remote possibility of expressing the inexpressible, given time and the proper selection of words.

Although much about the topos has been studied, for many in English and American literature the terrain is unfamiliar. It is not easy going since the topos of the ineffable and the topos of the inexpressible are so intertwined in practice that they are often used interchangeably. When the classical topos of the inexpressible intersects Christianity, the “ineffable” emerges, and its prevalence crests in the Middle Ages. The difficulty hovers in this Christian context not over the struggle of language sufficiently to praise leaders or rulers, as in the *Iliad*, for example, but to fitly praise God and represent divine love. This difficulty is articulated by St. Augustine: “not supposing we have found what we seek, but having found (as seekers do) the place in which to look. We have found, not the thing itself, but where it is to be sought.”³ The topos is later taken up by early Christian writers, because the sacred frequently manifested itself in the Bible, the Lives of the Saints, and devotional treatises. The topos of the ineffable expands *occupatio*, the rhetoric where a speaker says, “Words fail me” and goes on anyway.⁴ In Chaucer's parody, for example, the Squire claims to give up on describing the epitome of beauty in a king's daughter, saying, “It lyth nat in my tonge, n'yn my konnyng; I dar nat undertake so heigh a thyng.” Tacking defeat finally not to human insufficiency but his own insufficient position, he confesses: “Myn Englissh eek is insufficient.

/ It moste been a rethor excellent, / . . . I am noon swich, I moot speke as I kan.”⁵

In *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Ernst Robert Curtius properly collects the roots of such utterances under the inexpressibility *topoi*.⁶ *Topos* is Greek for place, and in classical rhetoric it is a conventionalized topic to which texts, and originally orations, continually refer. *Topoi* originate in what Curtius calls “helps toward composing orations” (70); in conventions “set forth in separate treatises,” they “penetrated into all literary genres” (70). Curtius locates beginnings of the inexpressibility *topoi* in panegyric, in which “the orator ‘finds no words’ which can fitly praise the person celebrated,” as well as more generally in what he names—the “emphasis upon inability to cope with the subject” (159).

Like many conventions, *topoi* have long existed as part of what Curtius sees as a vast literary toolbox, taking on different meanings at different moments in history. What might be called the high road and the low road in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* can, for example, reappear as the highland-lowland literary device seen in much of Hemingway’s fiction.⁷ Like a Romanesque church rebuilt by Gothic craftsmen, any rebuilt *topos* necessarily carries with it a foundation that can have different inflections in different times and places.

Topoi, as it is becoming apparent, are something more than just topics, such as Jacob’s ladder or the tree of knowledge. Each *topos* carries with it a technical *mélange* of styles and modes of representation peculiarly suited to it. In literature, two of the most common are the eulogy and the humility formulae, spilling over into literary genres and techniques. Eulogies came to be characterized by the overuse of poetic devices,⁸ and Curtius shows “how close the contact between poetry and the rhetoric of eulogy could be” (155). The second *topos*, humility, exploits authorship itself, particularly the rhetoric of self-abasement. Like the other *topoi* mentioned above, the ineffability comes with a heritage of stylistic and narrative associations. Just as the eulogy relies on poetry and the humility *topos* relies on devotional formulas,⁹ so did the ineffability *topos* have a literary mode for its representation—framing. This strategy deals with the gap between what is expressed and what cannot be represented. Framing, that is, goes hand in hand with the *topos* of the ineffable. Framing is especially useful, then, as we will see in chapter 3, for concerns with perceived and self-opposing constraints of inexpressibility, those of inadequacy and perfection. Frequently a concomitant of the inexpressible, a high style can often seem artificial and remote. “Rhetoric,” C. S. Lewis once observed when writing about the European tradition, “is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors.”¹⁰

The topos of the ineffable can seem historically remote, or even arcane. It has a great link, for example, to mathematics. Joining religion and mathematics, André Kukla claims that we are able to “know certain truths which it is beyond the power of language to express.” He continues, “Mathematical and many religious ineffabilists also agree” that an “attempt to express the ineffable must systematically embroil us in contradictory assertions.”¹¹ The ineffable topos can fundamentally assert “unrepresentability,” which Kukla says is “undoubtedly the prototype of ineffability” (135). Some of the more common nodes of intersection of the ineffable with religion and its characteristic self-contradiction include 1) the well-known writings of St. Augustine, named by Peter S. Hawkins as the “most influential interpreter of this rapture,” that is, of unmediated and unrepresentable contact with God, in which God’s language is paradoxically referred to as silence¹²; 2) the work of fifth-century philosopher and grammarian Bhartrihari, for whom the idea of a supreme reality Brahman and word (*shabda*) transcended spoken and written language¹³; and 3) Buddhist philosophy in which, as Ben-Ami Scharfstein explains, the “ability of words to capture (to ‘name’) the Tao in the sense of reality in itself” is attacked (*Ineffability*, 86). Each of these approaches names a major point of contact between religion and the ineffable. St. Augustine, for example, writes, “. . . God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable.”¹⁴

The ineffable in the Christian era originates in a warning which delimits the precincts of the sacred. The action of admonishing is indicative of this religious branch of the topos in which language, as Anne Howland Schotter points out, can “warn against its own inadequacy—if the signs would warn against being taken for the thing they signified.” This strategy of warning, common to the topos itself, conversely represents, as we have seen, a strategy of praise. If St. Augustine cannot use language to express God, he can nevertheless employ it to praise Him.¹⁵ Scharfstein puts it succinctly, “*Ineffable* is often the most effective superlative we can use.”¹⁶ Though in keeping with a “sermo humilis” with regard to perceived higher states of being, the topos nonetheless is among the most elaborate and formalized figures in writing. It requires a “verbal ingenuity and confidence,”¹⁷ a recognition both of limits and an “intimation of a transcendent” (9). Occasionally split by a reference to its secular past, the topos travels through Italy, France, and Spain (most famously perhaps in the writings of St. John of the Cross).

In different ways, medieval writers lean heavily on the topos. Dante Alighieri generates in *Paradiso* a large-scale drama of the ineffable in relation to God's Word; as does the famous *Pearl*-poet who, as Schotter argues, "makes the inadequacy of *language* in conveying the Divine an implicit theme as well." She writes, "[a]t the same time that he [the poet] exploits the most splendid resources of his medium, he includes some of its pedestrian characteristics as a warning against excessive trust in language," whether on a rhetorical or theological level.¹⁸ The theological implications and Augustinian model for "what cannot be said" continue to dominate the poem, as Schotter points out: "By using language which warns against itself, the poet is able . . . to suggest the Divine Word through the limited medium of his own words" while warning listeners against the inside dreamer's lack of humility.¹⁹ The topos also appears as a conventional trope of humility in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: "And ek for me preieth to God so dere / That I have myght to shewe, *in som manere*, / Swich peyne and wo as Loves folk endure, / In Troilus unsely aventure."²⁰

Yet, the drive in this failure for the poet to use, as Schotter suggests, his "most splendid resources" leans into human capacities to express wonder. The ineffable filters, therefore, through many genres, including love stories and quest romances. The expression of an inability to speak appears throughout the Middle Ages in secular descriptions of language's inadequacy for any *marvellous* subject to which "words could not do justice." . . . It even has a form specific to alliterative poetry in the formula '*it is to tor* [too difficult] *to telle*,' which the *Pearl*-poet himself uses in *Sir Gawain* to describe indescribable luxury" (28).

Thus, the topos's strategic quest for praise of the divine *and* for a listener's approval revives the idea of wonder in the Renaissance, notably in Shakespeare's plays. As Marjorie Garber points out, an already thin line between praise and wonder in the topos is exploited, by which near-transgression toward the unspeakable opens out, she argues, from praise (ineffability) into wonder (unspeakability or inexpressibility): "And it is here, in the realm of 'wonder,' that the inexpressibility topos in Shakespeare has its most powerful effect. Instead of eloquent silences at moments of great emotion, the audience is confronted by characters who try to express the inexpressible by acknowledging that they cannot do so." She emphasizes the adaptation of the topos to new ends, saying that the "fundamental use of this topos . . . is for aggrandizement of the subject, whether it be a person, a feeling, or an event."²¹ In Garber's view, such an emphasis calls attention to a "created artifact" and more specifically "a mode of expression." Turning to focus on the frame and the "aggrandizement of the subject" rather

than on the actual inadequacy is a large turn toward what Garber says “we [in the audience] can only imagine” (41).

In both Spenser’s and Milton’s use of the ineffable, there can also be seen a concern for the audience’s role. An important change of focus occurs from the unapproachable subject (such as God) to the speaker (what might be called the participant with the topos). It occurs side by side with an emerging shift in language from the ineffable (and its focus on the unreachable divine) to the inexpressible (and its still larger emphasis on the speaker). Maureen Quilligan describes the founding and primary problem of *Paradise Lost* in these terms: it is how to create a bridge in the tradition of the ineffable “between the sinful limits of the audience’s understanding and the unspeakable bliss of prelapsarian union.”²² She discovers Milton’s rejections of Spenser’s own use of the topos, a rejection, that is, of “self-conscious mediateness of Spenser’s sort of allegory,” in favor, she writes, of crafting a more direct and literal language (67). In Milton’s rendering of the ineffable, according to Quilligan, there are “signals to the reader” that can awaken the “option that Christ literally works within its [Milton’s] fiction” (78). It dovetails with Garber’s displacement of the ineffable’s characteristic demand for praise toward deference in the Shakespearean audience for wonder.

Both Quilligan and Garber note the diminishment in the religious emphasis on *warning* (due to human transgression) and the rise of *inadequacy* (and a discourse of reception by the speaker). This shift is also present in what Stanley Fish’s well-known interpretations of the ineffable amplify and make monumental: they appear in his introduction to what he calls “self-consuming artifacts.” He writes, “What is required is a mode of action that is simultaneously assertive and self-effacing, a difficult balance which Augustine achieves . . . by continually calling attention to the ultimate insufficiency of the very procedures he is discussing (and therefore to the insufficiency of his present effort).”²³ He adds that “Augustine, in effect, has made language defeat itself by making it point away from the temporal-spatial vision it naturally reflects” (42). Fish moves directly to discourse, or what he often calls a “mode of action” (40).

Of language such as this one cannot ask the question “what does it mean?” for in everyday terms it doesn’t mean anything (as a statement it is self-consuming); in fact in its refusal to “mean” in those terms lies its value. A more fruitful question would be “what does it do?”; and what it does is alert the reader to its inability (which is also his inability) to contain, deal with, capture, say anything about, its putative subject, Christ. The sentence is thus a ploy in the strategy of conversion, impressing upon the reader, or

hearer, the insufficiency of one way of seeing in the hope that he will come to replace it with something better. (42)

Fish is describing of a new stage of the inexpressible.²⁴ The prevailing pattern or strategy of a sermon, according to Fish's perceptive analyses of Donne's sermons (especially), is *didactic*: "to educate is to change, and in a sense, to convert; the end of education is not so much the orderly disposition of things, but the illumination and regeneration of minds" (20) by which "the reader is first invited to consider a problem in terms with which he is likely to be familiar (and therefore comfortable) and then forced by some unexpected turn in the argument to *reconsider* not the problem, but the terms" (32). All in all, the "sermon, preacher, and parishioner dissolve together into a self-effacing and saving union with the source of their several motions" (70).

In Fish's redirection, language itself becomes more central. Fish's apprehension of the inexpressible actually is in accord with its religious traditions of warning in the ineffable: the language "becomes a vehicle of humility, for its most spectacular effects are subversive of its largest claims" (70). But, centrally, the discourse also identifies a version of Nancy K. Miller's idea of recasting, or "*truth effect*" which creates a familiar pact that "stages a meeting with symmetrical desire in the other constituted by the readers."²⁵ The conventional act of warning in the Anglican sermon, thus, is fused with a discourse of participation and conversion. The sermon, as Fish concludes, "thrusts the forms of language before us so that we may better know their insufficiency, and our own."²⁶ A summary would sound like this: the substitution of something higher or better is indicated by the increasing irrelevance or disappearance of language, preacher, and parishioner into a *self-consuming artifact* (seen from the traditional side of warning in the ineffable topos), or, it may be said (in terms of Miller's "pact" or "affective event," 12) into *self-aggrandizing discourse*. A simpler summary would run this way: in the move from the ineffable to the inexpressible, there was a shift from authorial warning to the audience's (tremendous) capacity to react.

Unlike the Anglicans, therefore, who, as Fish writes, "*display language*"²⁷ to better map language's own insufficiency, Fish notes that the Puritans prided themselves on their capacity for *truth* through language. Their sermons make "linguistic forms serviceable by making them unobtrusive" in an actual attempt to "claim everything"; they do not disavow language's claims (75).

Inadequacy is being recast in new terms. Each attempt or instance of utterance becomes an impediment, therefore keeping inadequacy of

expression in the foreground. Each word in this emerging inexpressible is not hard won, that is to say, not won at all, as traditionally determined. Instead, it is hard *lost*—a near-hit, obtruding with each utterance as just missing, if still missing. To say this in another way: inadequacy is being fundamentally measured not in terms of the more traditional forbidden territory of the Word, but through an excess of expression in the wrong directions.

This line of argument, which may seem like nitpicking, is not. We are heading toward the terrain of Whitman's Preface from an emerging seriousness about the possibility of carrying what is perceived as inexpressible in language. That is not the case with the ineffable in medieval and early Renaissance texts. There it is couched in language that organizes humility around its inadequacy. Seeking assistance from the Muse, Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* invokes the inexpressible's humility; with the conventional show of deference, grounded in the shortcoming of his language, he implores Queen Elizabeth: "O goddesse heavenly bright, / Mirrour of grace and majestie divine, / . . . Shed thy faire beames into my *feeble eyne*, / And raise my thoughtes, *too humble and too vile*, / To thinke of that true glorious type of thine, / The argument of mine *afflicted stile*."²⁸ The insufficiency of words appears again in Una's "great grief," which "will not be tould, / And can more easily be thought" (7.41). George Herbert puts it succinctly in "The Flower": "We say amisse / This or that is: / Thy word is all, *if we could spell*" (1.19–21; emphasis added). In the traditional ineffable, self-defeat, which anchors itself to language, ultimately mocks the extraordinary and elaborate efforts of the human tongue to reach what forever exceeds its grasp, even if by the Renaissance, the ground is tilting toward questions of reception. Inadequacy is a measured failure, a direct contrast to the highest human verbal performance and its attempt at achievement. St. Augustine and Dante draw upon this map for their preparation of a truth that is outside human time and space. (To help point out the gap between human experience and a truth inaccessible to human reach, poets such as Dante, Chaucer, or Spenser conventionally used allegory and analogy.²⁹)

But most interestingly, in the theology of English Puritan sermons of the Renaissance, there exists, as Fish suggests, a remote possibility of actually carrying the truth in language: "the faculties are put in good working order and made answerable to the task of comprehending truth."³⁰ By the time the Puritans reached America, this remote possibility fell in line with the notion of "*unfulfillment*": "The future, though divinely assured, was

never quite there,” Sacvan Bercovitch explains of the American Puritans’ trust in a divine plan of progress made manifest not just in New England, but in the New World at large.³¹

This understanding of the inexpressible, it has to be emphasized, is canted differently from the absolute human inadequacy and depravity of the ineffable of Catholic and Anglican forebears. Bercovitch writes that “threats of doom, derived from Christian tradition, imply a distinction between the *two realms* [human truth and God’s permanent and universal Truth]; their [the Puritans’] language itself, expressing their special sense of mission, incorporates the threats within the broader framework of the absolute” (29; emphasis added).³² The “rhetorical synthesis of man’s time and God’s was first outlined by John Cotton and John Winthrop,” Bercovitch adds. “It was developed by their colleagues and heirs into a comprehensive definition of New England’s errand into the wilderness, a dream of a society in which ‘*the fact could be made one with the ideal.*’”³³ Thus, the “New Englanders,” he adds later, “acted as if they were damned while presuming they were saved” (51). Though the Puritan aspect of inadequacy is connected to damnation and related, therefore, both to Augustinian humility and to the topos of ineffability, it itself shades into (always) pending fulfillment, restoration, and potential success that were guaranteed not by the Puritans themselves but by their God (16).

Perry Miller explains that in this practical revision of the ineffable is a need to reach truth *through* language, “by deductions from the content of their conception of Him, whereas most of their predecessors, they believed, had arrogantly pretended to extract deductions from His inscrutable essence”³⁴ and inevitable human failure. Miller adds: “If the Puritans, for all their admonitions to impartial perceptions of the divine Being, nevertheless emphasized certain conceptions of Him at the expense of others, and even came close to identifying these conceptions with His essence, it was because they were impelled by the spirit which informed their articulated creed” (14).

The Puritans’ articulated creed participates in the colonies’ history and circulation of promotional writings of discovery, catalogues of unspeakable excellence (commercial) and abundance (raw materials), and, at the same time, a lost Golden Age.³⁵ The language retains a hope of merging the ineffable ideal with the factual world. It presents a perpetually remote possibility of expressing the inexpressible in language, to have, in Miller’s words, “discoverable truth as already discovered, set down in black and white” (20). I do not want to overstate. God, of course, theoretically remains an unknowable essence for the Puritans, as Miller puts it, “in common with Augustinians of every complexion, medieval or Protestant.” At the same

time, however, “they believed that for centuries philosophizing divines had *mistaken the limitations* of the mind for the limits of reality” (13; emphasis added). From the point of view of orthodox apologetics, Miller concludes that “the space between revelation and the inconceivable absolute” is “the one fissure in the impregnable walls of systematic theology” (21). In other words, they make implicit (not explicit) room for the absolute ineffable, in practice, to be less absolutely inexpressible. Inadequacy is measured, importantly, by too many “wrong” words, each and every one just barely out of place, time and time again: under different conditions or circumstances, the inexpressible might be otherwise.

As we have just seen, the history of the topos has evolved a branch which has made room for the possibility of time and expression: again, a “*space* between revelation and the inconceivable absolute” (italics added) is what Miller calls a fundamental fissure in the ineffability topos. This making of room for expression in the topos is a key development for a perceived impasse of language in the New World. In chapter 1 we have seen that impasse slowly evolving side by side with a rhetoric of high expectations and national hyperbole. We have heard these high expectations for a language emerging from an overlapping one, and the inadequacy therefore to find a literature or author. In 1819 Richard Henry Dana, Sr. writes with impatience both of missing authors and false starts toward them: “. . . we at once become exceeding angry—begin to talk in large and general terms of American genius and enterprise, forgetting that first-rate authors are not as easily made, as prime sailors and soldiers.”³⁶

Yet, with the historical *fissure* of the ineffable—the shift of the ineffable to a remote, that is, a *remotely possible*, inexpressibility—come high expectations to express what is perceived to be out of reach. In this emerging emphasis of the topos, therefore, human inadequacy, traditionally absolute, can be reattached in the topos to moment-to-moment potentially “avoidable” failures. We can now clearly identify a few of these strategies, appearing in the impasses that we have heard in chapter 1. These strategies, crucially, find *too much* of the (“wrong”) language, rather than, more traditionally, *too little* of the “perfect” one. For a perceived overlapping English, these strategies are central.

The philosopher André Kukla helps us to identify such strategies. Each strategy pertains to the emerging possibility of moment-to-moment inexpressibility, even if it still remains impossible. One of the purposes of his research is to identify a “new taxonomy” for the ineffable. As he explains, he applies a “*new taxonomy* of ineffabilities to the phenomenon of religious

mysticism” and then looks at the consequences “generated by the new taxonomy.”³⁷ This taxonomy introduces the temporal to the traditionally timeless ineffability topos. He puts it this way: “we could introduce a *temporally* indexed notion of any of the varieties of ineffability” (153; emphasis added).

Two of Kukla’s new categories or strategies should be looked at closely: they pertain to the (remote) possibility of introducing time, and an elimination of inappropriate or “excess” language, for expressing what cannot be expressed.³⁸ One category is called the “unselectable.” He explains that “despite the fact that a suitable sentence . . . comes to mind, the speaker always evaluates it as an inappropriate thing to say” (xii). In this case, there is an excess of the inappropriate language. He explains further: “We may, under certain circumstances, come to entertain the possibility of saying an *unselectable sentence*; but *we always decide against it in the end*. It always seems to be too contentious, or too troublesome, or too trivial a thing to say” (146; italics added). Here are two short examples of this strategy, as we can now hear them, in the context of an English language that has been perceived as carrying its excess of England’s English language and literature. Whitman classically formulates inexpressibility in what he calls “imaginative literature” (“A Backward Glance,” 662). First he claims inevitability: “The Nineteenth Century, now well towards its close . . . never can future years witness more excitement and din of action—never completer change of army front along the whole line, the whole civilized world. For all these new and evolutionary facts, meanings, purposes, new poetic messages, new forms, and expressions are inevitable” (“A Backward Glance,” 659–60). Yet Whitman does not “dare” to *select* from among these the “expressions” long sought in the nineteenth century. “Let me not dare, here or anywhere, for my own purposes, or any purposes, to attempt the definition of Poetry, nor answer the question what it is.”³⁹ Though, as he says, this decision is a general statement for “any purposes,” it is also in context of the calls for an original literature rhetorically suited to his “own purposes” and those who have been demanding the inevitably of such expressions. The gist, it turns out, is not a warning based on the timeless impossibility of naming “Poetry,” generally—but a calling to answer *in time* the very same question for themselves with other words, in what appears in an “illustration” still to be found selectable: the time now “had come,” he writes “. . . to illustrate all through the genesis and ensemble of to-day; and that such illustration and ensemble are the chief demands of America’s prospective imaginative literature” (661–62). The shift from a perfect expression of “Poetry” to a practice, declaration, and self-illustration of the same points to the “prospective” but yet to be found selected “imaginative literature,” whose *time*

is now here. Here we see the temporal, as Kukla suggests, injected into the traditional topos of the ineffable.

A second category is what Kukla calls the *unabducible*. In this case, no *suitable* expression for the desired inexpressible “ever comes to mind for consideration as a possible speech act” (xii). In this case, too many unsuitable expressions (of the English English overlap) crowd out the desired American expression. For example, in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s own Pine Hill in Orange County, the soil itself becomes a metaphor for potential inadequacy in language. Soil appears a conventional metaphor in Crèvecoeur’s letters, published in 1782: “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow.”⁴⁰ But in an already self-conscious context of a nonnative soil for the English language, the metaphor, takes another direction. In the tradition of the ineffable, it arrives as a stamp of inadequacy in terms of (failing) attempts to speak through a nonnative language, forever foreign to the soil. Yet, from the angle of the *unabducible*, no suitable language has been available *so far*.

Words uttered in the name of God or country—for example, Crèvecoeur’s “What then is the American, this new man?”—have been *from the start* drawn from a residual attachment to the “knowledge of the [former] language” (alongside an equally paltry and former attachment to “love of a few kindred as poor as himself,” 49). Making room for a language still out of reach, the question “What then is the American, this new man?” is framed as unabducible. The “new” and suitable language may spring moment to moment from the (same) inadequate soil of the “former language.” What must be spoken by the farmer that cannot be (easily) spoken is buried in the metaphor of ineffability: once the proper fruit is cultivated, there is a remote hope, now drawn from time as much as from stubborn soil, of expressibility: for words to portray the new nation, its laws, as Crèvecoeur says, “the new government he [the American] obeys, and the new rank he holds” (49).⁴¹

The dense language makes recapitulation useful: the ineffable with its emphasis on subservience to God or an extraordinary event both praises the unreachable object and recognizes the failure to achieve it. But this adapted inexpressible is (perpetually) in the making, continuously displacing its own potential with itself, daring itself into existence ahead of itself, then retroactively representing it as potentially already there in the overlap of words, just *not yet* perceived as fully suitable or selectable. The inexpressible is put into an overwritten form of improper selection, since writing out the problem of English over English leads to a hyper-self-conscious defensiveness and an on-the-offensive obtrusiveness. It also insists on a

temporal emphasis of the (yet-to-be-expressed) utterance. Crèvecoeur writes in the voice of the American farmer, “I wish I *were able* to trace all my ideas; if my ignorance prevents me from describing them properly, I hope I *shall be able* to delineate a few of the outlines, which *are* all I propose” (51; emphasis added) The ineffable has here been transformed: time (“were able,” “shall be able,” “are”) has replaced eternity, and impatience in time (“I wish I were able . . .”) has become a substitute for inadequacy. The result in the inexpressible is a frame outlining what is as good as done in a rhetoric of what is to come. Crèvecoeur’s plain, nearly unobtrusive self-contradiction dramatizes this: “The American is a new man” (56). Something of futurity has already passed, combined in a present tense linking verb of indescribable perfection.

In other quarters, we can hear more literally a promotion for finding England’s English words unsuitable as a way to champion American ones. Noah Webster writes in 1828, “but, in the United States, many . . . terms are no part of our present language,—and they cannot be, for the things which they express do not exist in this country. They can be known to us only as obsolete or as foreign words. . . . The necessity therefore of a Dictionary suited to the people of the United States is obvious.”⁴² In this instance, Noah Webster urges Americans to begin all the more to hear England’s English as precisely “unsuitable.” Rather than making the case defensively, Webster attacks the perceived inexpressibility, underscoring good reasons for the unsuitability of England’s English in the very same “overlapping” American English—and providing good reasons of course for his dictionary.

In the discourse of same-language inexpressibility, the inexpressibility of unsuitable sentences (“unabducibility”) or inappropriate ones (“unselectability”) resonates most strongly. The new taxonomy of Kukla helps to identify a shift toward what cannot be spoken (and its potential for correction), rather than what cannot be represented originally associated with the ineffable and its inevitable utter human inadequacy. For example, to frame what is still out of reach due to improper selection of one’s *own* perfectibility, in a larger frame of the same-language question, Benjamin Franklin in 1732 invokes the standard and religious ineffable and its concern with the unobtainable “perfection.” Changing the register of the topos to the inexpressible, he humorously compares man’s perfectible state to that of a chicken: capable within itself to find its own perfection perfectly suitable:

If they mean a Man is not capable of being so perfect here as he is capable of being in Heaven, that may be true likewise. But that a Man is not capable of being so perfect here, as he is capable of being here; is not Sense; it is as

if I should say, a Chicken in the State of a Chicken is not capable of being so perfect as a Chicken is capable of being in that state. In the above Sense if there may be a perfect Oyster, a perfect Horse, a perfect Ship, why not a perfect Man?⁴³

For Franklin, perfection of oneself should be considered at least *possible* in relation to oneself, and in particular one's own language and laws. Pamphleteer Matthew Wheelock's statement that "to expect perfection in human institutions is absurd" once provoked in Franklin a passionate defense of de facto perfectability in America: "Why did you yourselves not leave our Constitutions as you found them?"⁴⁴

This shift from what cannot be "represented" ever to what cannot be found "expressed" (or suitable or selectable *yet*) is a companion to the increasing visibility of the term "inexpressible." In the founding period, the newer view of the ineffable is plain in Joseph Addison's comment from 1711: "I gazed with inexpressible Pleasure on these happy Islands."⁴⁵ This emphasis, of course, has appeared even earlier, for example, in Milton's desire to transfer the burden of unspeakability from the object of attention, such as the Word, to its embodiment in the listener. It also marks a gradual turn away from the mystical or religious states of being associated with the topos, and it anticipates the ultimate secularization of the topos that will include, as well as emotive intensity, punning. Notice the play with plurality in Catherine Gore's *Sketches of English Character* (1852): "A pair of standard footmen seems to be the real pair of inexpressibles." Alluding to the emerging colloquial use of the plural for "breeches" or "trousers" documented earlier in 1790, the following stanza joins plurality to the inexpressible: "I've heard, that breeches, petticoats, and smock, / Give to thy modest mind a grievous shock, / And that thy brain (so lucky its device) / Christ'neth them inexpressibles, so nice."⁴⁶ The euphemism of "unmentionable" mixes with the rarified air of the Romantic "inexpressible" and the sublime.

The sublime anticipates both the pleasure, and later grief—the aesthetics and ethics of perhaps inarguable silence—that will inhabit the term.⁴⁷ Writing of the German and French philosophical despair, George Steiner notes that the "instrument"⁴⁸ of language leaves an inarguable silence where outrage or futility lies. He muses that the "first articulate word spoken will bring down the curtain" (52). New modes of international expression for the unspeakable horror, grief, and despair of the First and Second World Wars have been outlined in Steiner's "Silence and the Poet." Beginning with his repetition of Adorno's famous adage, "No poetry after Auschwitz" (53), he goes on to consider the inexpressible, namely here silence,

as the possible proper alternative to speech: “Precisely because it is the signature of his humanity, because it is that which makes of man a being of striving unrest, the word should have no natural life, no neutral sanctuary, in the places and season of bestiality. Silence *is* an alternative” (54). The inexpressible, in a direct attack on earlier presumptions of the ineffable, is then shot through postmodernist expressions of “nothingness,” whether in black humor, tragicomedy, or absurdism. Even in this common snapshot, M. H. Abrams’s encapsulated history reminds us of the inexpressible’s wide, modern spread into the absurd:

The current movement, however, emerged in France after the horrors of World War II (1939–45), as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature. . . . After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency, especially prominent in the *existential philosophy* of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an *alien universe*; to conceive the human world as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning; and to represent human life . . . as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an *existence which is both anguished and absurd*.⁴⁹

This links essential human meaninglessness with unspeakability, rather than with dreams of ineffability. It strangely echoes a felt inexpressibility of self-distancing English. Both this and the modern perspective have in common an inexpressibility framed by an unreachable “center,” a missing representation in *language itself* of anything but the same language itself. We must not risk confusing discourse with content; ideologies sitting on different sides of the fence have been organized by a discourse of meaninglessness and inexpressibility. Richard Poirier peripherally, however, notices the connection to the inexpressible. He puzzles how an “age-old skepticism about language should have become so pronounced”⁵⁰ in the nineteenth century, and, further, how language in that period is already, as he names it, postmodernist, standing “in the way of transparency” (135).

The topos of inexpressibility has always been ideal for engaging and challenging the very *terms* of what Poirier calls “transparency” (135), the moment in which language reaches its end, its object, its idealized state. Frost’s “The Oven Bird,” for instance, famously takes up the challenge in this song: “what to make of a diminished thing.”⁵¹ Frost’s oven bird is not a British nightingale but a common North American ground bird. Like Keats’s bird in “Ode to a Nightingale,” Frost’s has a question of immortality, but unlike the nightingale, this bird demands duration, time, from

the ineffable: “The bird would cease . . . / But that he knows in singing not to *sing*” (emphasis added). Without articulating the inexpressible, he frames “the question” literally, at the limit of unobtrusiveness, attempting to eliminate excess, “in all but words.” Thus, a bird does not “sing” in bird-song; in all but words, his song is framed as speech (this bird “says”) and it is furthered to a question that itself is framed—one that never is (or never needs to be) directly asked (120). Moreover, throughout it all, he is a “loud” bird. This comic and dead-serious frame of excess of the “wrong” words in inexpressibility is also modernly nothing but words.

In the end the topos never entirely loses the self-conscious rhetoric of *occupatio*, where a speaker says, “Words fail me” and goes on anyway. The topos has moved away from the unavailability of human language to meet divine and timeless perfection. Instead the inexpressible is refitted to an imminent realization of “an excess” of language itself, hard to adduce, select, and pinpoint, that needs precisely time. Beginning with the inadequacy of the human condition, Crèvecoeur’s framing, as we have seen, refits its inaccessible perfection of statement to a temporal and temporary impediment of language itself. His statements turn disadvantage to advantage and refit the topos of the inexpressible, exploiting words themselves. More precisely he crosses out the estrangement with another’s (own) language. At any moment (if not yet realized, moment to moment), the words may be reified. Henry Adams in 1918 catches the temporal refitting through the metaphor of a pencil or pen, striking out with this instrument word by word what is *not suitable* in an effort to leave in what may be:

Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, [Adams] turned at last to the sequence of force. . . . The form is never arbitrary, but is a sort of growth like crystallization . . . for often the pencil or pen runs into side-paths and shapelessness, loses its relations, stops or is bogged. Then it has to return on its trail, and recover, if it can, its line of force. The result of a year’s work depends more on what is struck out than on what is left in.⁵²

Resorting to a new construction of the inexpressible by seeing *too much language* rather than *too little* or inadequate words certainly seems a round-about way to achieve *saying*. Yet, it signals, as we will see, an even larger and more important understanding of framing, self-distancing, and refitting in relation to time. The topos of the inexpressible becomes a practical matter of words inextricably tied to human expression in a framework of time.