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CHAPTER 3

FRAMING

“It [the English language] is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible” (25): here, as we have seen in chapter 2, Whitman is drawing on the topos of the inexpressible, a convention of rhetoric that begs to say what cannot be said. The rhetoric of the inexpressible, again, traditionally depends upon an unbridgeable gap between inadequate human speech and its object of praise (one thinks immediately of God or beauty or a visionary state). To the tail end of other encomiums—perfection, wonder, promotion—Whitman, as we saw, adapts the topos of the inexpressible.

The adaptation in the Preface of 1855, drawn from contemporaries’ discourse, is particular and startling: the inexpressible does not center on a *human being* (who cannot express perfection) but with a *language*, English, perceived not to be able to attain its perfected American expression. By focusing the topos of the inexpressible on a perceived inadequacy of a language, rather than on the limitations of being human, Whitman’s Preface adds complexity to a sophisticated rhetoric.

His adaptation especially puts pressure on the frame of inexpressibility.¹ This chapter first looks at the history of frames of inexpressibility because

the roots of this rhetoric are crucial to the adapted and temporal frames in Whitman's Preface. A frame constitutes how the topos of the inexpressible is normally delivered: in other words, the topos of the inexpressible historically constitutes a frame. That frame is defined by two parts: first, an object of perfection, and, second, the inadequate human speech that inevitably misses the mark. Traditionally the binary frame is the means by which the division between the (human) expressible and the (out-of-reach) inexpressible is delivered. The structure of the topos is essentially binary; its literary infrastructure, the two-part frame.

The first part of the frame of the topos of the inexpressible is usually taken to be precisely that which cannot be expressed, something larger than life, again whether God, beauty, or the sublime. The second part of the frame is drawn from the humility of being human; by definition, their language is unable to express unspeakable greatness or praise. The binary topos can be drawn out into narrative. This classic and narrative embodiment of the topos, rooted in dramatic tragedy, focuses typically on two characters (such as John Marcher and May Bartram in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle"; Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"). When the topos lends its infrastructure to fiction, the first part of the frame can be realized in a heroic character, the one who embodies a larger-than-life realm, such as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. The second part of the frame, the inadequacy of human speech, is revealed in its choral characters, such as the servant Nelly Dean, who laments what she cannot bear to witness or express: "something," dreaded, as she says, from which she can "foresee a fearful catastrophe."² Together these characters establish what lies outside the range of human limitations and expressibility, what Stephen Booth goes as far as to call the human experience of "indefiniton."³

Far and away the most fundamental code of this inexpressible frame is this two-part structure. Whether tale or narrative, dream or love vision, this frame is essentially binary. In very early periods, the two parts take place in a poem. The frame poem, such as the medieval "Alisoun," may be organized as poem of "warning" and survival, related to the proverbial wheel of fortune poems. In such a frame, the wheel of fortune takes the "heroic" role of the unspeakable (sometimes seemingly arbitrary) power, situated in an inscrutable divine plan of God. In the second part of "Alisoun," the speaker offers his utterance of humility as a warning of the transitory nature of human existence and utterance. Davidoff notes a less well-known instance of the frame by the poet Henry Bradshaw: "With the grace of god / the tyme for to vse // Some small treatyse / to wryte breuely //

To the comyn vulgares / theyr mynde to satsfy.”⁴ The divine part emerges in “the grace of god”; the humility, in “Some small treatyse.” The writing by those human beings who are humble signifies a “vulgar” inadequacy to speak the larger and spiritual truths, as it also signals a moment of survival and penance. The Old English “Seafarer,” for example, is a frame of self-warning on earth: “I can narrate a true story about myself, / speak of the journey . . .,” it begins, and later concludes, “Glory is brought low. / The earth’s nobility grows old and withers.”⁵ Some medieval frame poems, acknowledging especially the inexpressible, have in common a choral attitude that allows the survival of those who recognize limitations and inadequacy, while acknowledging anonymity, suffering, or grief as the cost of such limitations and human generations. This is represented especially in the medieval spectrum, as in Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Pearl*, or the fourteenth-century poem “The Quatrefoil of Love.”

Many of Chaucer’s poetic framers, such as the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*, are choral figures of self-declared inadequacy and loss, characters who cannot bear to tell the tale but who go on to tell it. Representing the nameless crowd, they remain alive in anonymity and lament (inadequately) the death of the great and singled-out hero. In such divisions of the inexpressible frame, the binary is rooted to the early Greek chorus. David Lenson explains the choral root of that division:

Tragedy from its origins possesses a language divided against itself, a fusion of choric, collective utterance and the more uniform, individual meters of the epic tradition. The first actor, a development from choric verse said to have taken place in the sixth century in the plays of Thespis, apparently did not use the same language as did the chorus from which he arose.⁶

From this break with the chorus, Lenson suggests, comes the division and idea of heroic progress marked by the individual: “Should one live briefly as a completely defined individual? Or should one only endure in the timeless anonymity in which life, love, and death are passed as burdens from generation to generation—but in which even such burdens are a cause for exhilaration?” (8). In Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* the choral narrator sings of the singled-out Troilus, “As he that was withouten any peere / Save Ector, in his tyme, as I kan heere.”⁷ But of course the attempt to sing of unutterable greatness shows his own tongue but human and choral. The human vanity of expression appears here, as the narrator prays to God for greater adequacy: “And for ther is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge, / So prey I God that non myswrite the, / Ne the mysymetre for defaute of tonge” (lines 1793–96). The convention of human

inexpressibility and human vanity, inclusive of all forms of human expression (including in Chaucer's period a "diversite in Englissh"), is coined in Chaucer's concluding lines: "Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte, / And of youre herte up casteth the visage / To thilke God that after his ymage / Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire / This world, that passeth soone as floures faire" (lines 1837–41).

In the Middle Ages, the exemplum is a related form of this binary frame that participates in its own self-regard and education of values. Scanlon observes that even "the exemplum was not static, but active and dynamic."⁸ He offers the exemplum as "a narrative enactment of cultural authority" (34) in which ideology and history connect. In the sermon exemplum especially, in which the education of values is at a peak, frames can divide into two: choral and heroic, the surviving and the dead or canonized, the anonymous and the named, the common and the enigmatic, the framing and the framed—all models of "before" and "after." For example in *Liber exemplorum ad usum praedicatorum*, a thirteenth-century Franciscan collection, the bishop (as the focus of what Scanlon calls "communal desire") specifically "remains nameless" (63), while the institution of the Church, emblematic in Mary, offers divine intervention and resurrection. Thus, for didactic purposes of vision and warning, the choral part is defined primarily by what it is *not*: miraculous, dead, silent, singular. The choral framer represents a communal world that can be represented; its antithesis, a world of perfection and singularity beyond the adequacy of human language. In *Pilgrim's Progress* the earthly world of Christian continues to be set against a heavenly world of eternity. A before-and-after structure continues to typify these binary frames.

Hovering over these early frames, then, is what cannot be represented in language.⁹ In *On Christian Doctrine*, for example, St. Augustine refers to the fallen word and the ineffable: "Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable?"¹⁰ It becomes commonplace in such instances of the inexpressibility topos that language falls short. Possibilities for what constitutes inadequacy in language, however, continue to find paths. The topos of the inexpressible in which divine (and hence impossible) language cannot be matched by human effort lives on, for example, in the inadequacy of language to express isolation. With increasing modernity, the inadequacy of words often emphasizes the indescribability and isolation of physical pain. Elaine Scarry puts a finger on this unnameable when she explains in "The Inexpressibility of Physical Pain" that "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be

denied and that which cannot be confirmed.”¹¹ This isolation and entrapment of the choral figure is central to frames that put in counterpoint an imagined and unreachable perfected state, epitomized in Randall Jarrell’s “The Woman at the Washington Zoo”: “The world goes by my cage and never sees me . . . You see what I am: change me, change me!”¹² Margaret Atwood’s “Siren Song,” for example, also experiences choral entrapment of inexpressibility. Her female narrator complains, “I don’t enjoy singing / this trio, fatal and valuable.”¹³ She balks especially at its human, choral, and in this case male-dominated repetition: “. . . Alas / it is a boring song / but it works every time.” Moment to moment, the song is isolating, fully inadequate to her own self-representation across the line of narration: “. . . will you get me / out of this bird suit?”

Such pain, irony, and indescribability are famously apparent in the work of World War I poets, for instance, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edmund Blunden. For them, silence is not eloquent¹⁴; it is silence and suffering. Blunden, for example, writes of his forefathers who are dead, “There is silence, there survives / Not a moment of your lives.”¹⁵ Human and choral fallibility around the inexpressible, as a pattern of survival and silence, also live on in work like *Waiting for Godot*. A sense of humor laced with the persistent choral pattern stakes out what is communal and human in the tradition of the inexpressible: “the passing beyond humanity may not be set forth in words.”¹⁶ Words in the following passage exist as a physical and human condition of existence, themselves the second part of the inexpressibility frame. They constitute an act of waiting, while the first part of frame has been laid out, what always lies just around the corner, in this case Godot. The words’ continuous patter stakes out what literally never can be witnessed, Godot, since here Godot does not exist but as the words themselves that express the wait for him.

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. (He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.) Inspiring prospects. (He turns to Vladimir.) Let’s go.

VLADIMIR: We can’t.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: (Despairingly.) Ah! (Pause.) You’re sure it was here?

VLADIMIR: What?

ESTRAGON: That we were to wait.

...

VLADIMIR: He didn’t say for sure he’d come.

ESTRAGON: And if he doesn’t come?

VLADIMIR: We’ll come back to-morrow.

ESTRAGON: And then the day after to-morrow.

VLADIMIR: Possibly.

ESTRAGON: And so on.¹⁷

A continuum exists, then, between medieval and modern frames of the inexpressible.¹⁸ An unbridgeable gap between words and the representation of something that is not possible to represent adequately in words persists especially in poetry and in the topos of the inexpressible; and it does so generally in crises of isolation, physical pain, or acts of mass cruelty. The modern or secular forms of the inexpressible have rhetorical foundations in the religious emphasis on the inadequacy of language to speak a perfection that only God knows, itself a line that runs, for instance, from Thomas Hoccleve to Edmund Spenser to Henry Vaughan. In all of these frames coming from the topos of the inexpressible, to reiterate, there remains a division between the urge to speak and what cannot be sufficiently met with words.

These frames relentlessly resist, or they enclose without ever naming, certain experiences of words. In poems or prose, such frames can begin with a perception of perfection or achievement, and they focus on human loss or inadequacy. They find roots in paradox, contradiction, and uncertainty of order, often refusing to draw a clear line between editing and authoring;¹⁹ whether imaged through a development in the English language (Chaucer's increasingly complex tales of warning and authority in his dream visions); or seen through Renaissance and early modern practices of gathering and framing (Tottle's *Miscellany* and *The Boke of Margery Kempe*); or traced through their formal modernist development (Frost's "Oven Bird" and Eliot's "Prufrock"). Unabating of self-division, they are based on a core of perceived human limitation to represent a perceived perfection. They highlight the line that delimits language to express adequately or at all.

So, once more, the frame is defined by two different parts: first, an object of perfection, and, second, the inadequate human speech that inevitably misses the mark. The object of perfection defines a heroic character; the inadequate human speech, a choral character. The topos of inexpressibility is particularly suitable, therefore, to the mediation of an anxiety regarding the practical status of a language's own efficacy, as we have seen debated at length regarding the English language in America. Richard Shryock explains that an essential role of a frame therefore "is to mediate."²⁰ He continues that this is "an unusual tool in that it can bring about change not only to the receiver but also to the sender" (13). Therefore, the English language may be considered in the nineteenth-century frames

that we have seen as *both* a state of inadequacy to reach the inexpressible (outside the reach of any individual speaking an already English English language, giving credence to choral affirmations of failure) and—to use recent jargon—“agency” for achieving the very same perceived inexpressibility in itself, American English.

Consider, then, in this precise situation, the possibility of an overlap, in which the choral character and the heroic character are put together as one. Theoretically, then, the character expressing what cannot be expressed is *one and the same* character embodying what cannot be expressed: this hypothetical character, an amalgam of both hinges of the inexpressible, is, I think, difficult to picture. But in the context of Whitman’s contemporaries, this overlapping character is not a *human* character. It is a *figure*—a literal figure of speech. This figure, made of two figures of rhetoric (inadequate English and desired American English), is held together in the English language itself. In other words, for Whitman and his contemporaries who hear a problem with an overlapping language, the English language may be said to characterize *both* parts of the frame of the inexpressible topos at once: the inadequate expression of the past *and* the desired expression of the future.

To put it bluntly, the same words are local and foreign at the same time. They are both inadequate and (almost) adequate. Here, attempting to say-what-cannot-be-said is no longer based on a *division* between the human and the larger-than-life. Instead it is based on a language’s *overlap* with itself, in which inadequacy and perfection are held in one and the same grip of the English language. Perfection is perceived in this compressed frame as lying not across an impenetrable line of eternity but *inside* its own expression of inadequacy. Impatience therefore comes to the surface.²¹ Here, Washington Irving reveals such restlessness, inside his claimed patience, by attempting to push back a demand to express what is in effect already latent in the same English language:

We wait with hope, but we wait with patience. Of all writers a great poet is the rarest. Britain, with all her patronage of literature, with her standing army of authors, has, through a series of ages, produced but a very, very few who deserve the name. Can it, then, be a matter of surprise, or should it be of humiliation, that, in our country, where the literary ranks are so scanty, the incitements so small, and the advantages so inconsiderable, we should not yet have produced a master in the art? Let us rest satisfied—as far as the intellect of the nation has been exercised, we have furnished our full proportion of ordinary poets, and some that have even risen above mediocrity, but a *really great poet is the production of a century.*²²

Such literary discourse framing the unreachable “perfect” poet is at heart not a literary matter, but a political one. Writers want (both in terms of lack and desire) an economical (fast and efficient) way to get a culture that they fear does not meet their rising economic success. This quest for rapid perfection unwittingly generates frames of unreachability. The classics can define an unreachable literature, yet another form of expression both perfected and out of reach: “The Greek and Roman languages,” Theophilus Parsons writes, “are far more perfect, better contrived vehicles for thought and feeling than any modern tongue. No writer can, therefore, now equal the classic authors in mere style. . . .” “On the other hand,” he continues, “an excessive and indiscriminate admiration of these last [the old English writers] might make him careless, diffuse, and declamatory.”²³ Finally, he says, “the fact is, that while some of our countrymen are vain enough, they scarce know of what . . . they are not apt to be proud in the right place” (33). After hitting this note of “unselectability” (to use André Kukla’s term again²⁴), he adds *time* in his demand for literature, a literature that is inextricably linked to a “spirit of freedom” that has *already* happened: “Much yet remains to be said upon the subject, for which this is not the place or occasion. We would however remark, that if there be any truth, which reason and experience concur to teach, it is, that genius and liberty go hand and hand; and it is equally true, that we live under institutions whose very essence is freedom, and which must cease to exist when they are no longer animated by the *spirit of freedom* which *called them into being*” (33; emphasis added).

Here, a same-language postcolonial condition has led to a complex impasse. How can this overlapping condition of the inexpressible in the English language find a way out? The answer has to do with a collapse into the English language itself: once the heroic and choral parts are in *one* place, one language, English, they belong to *time frames* in which the (heroic) inexpressible American English and the (choral) expressible English English exist in time and can be recast exactly one from the other. Compressed together, the two Englishes are no longer divided by a line that separates the human from the eternal and unreachable. In Whitman’s Preface, as we have seen, the desired American English, in an echo of the statement above, is *already found* within the inadequate English one. Yet it must first be distanced from itself—separated into two—but just as quickly reintroduced as one all over again: only it appears a new English, already achieved. Each part of the frame in this adapted topos of the inexpressible is characterized, as we have been seeing, not by *human characters* of inadequacy and perfection but by *time frames* (that comprise the English English that is not yet and the American English that is yet to be). Finally,

these time frames, carved from the topos of the inexpressible, must be put back together as *already one*. They must be seen as one, in particular the American English, in a (newly perceived) advantageous way, rather than *already one* in a (perceived) disadvantageous way, already English English.

This, then, is why Whitman explicitly inserts time into a timeless topos. Whitman's Preface not only adapts the topos but transforms it. He makes the story of an overlapping English a story of the inexpressible, yes, but then again the inexpressibility topos always comes with frames in its rhetoric. So Whitman's Preface also makes a story of *time frames* from the inexpressible, rather than a frame story of characters. Further, by including time in a topos that normally deems it irrelevant to effort, Whitman's Preface revisits inevitable failure in the traditional topos as potentially inevitable achievement of the English language at *every moment* in human time.

Participating in a suspended discourse of a dare of self-same language, Whitman's rhetoric, as I have shown in chapter 1, distances itself from itself to recast it. The conversion of disadvantage to advantage by featuring time frames in which to let it happen (in a topos that normally lies beyond the reach of time) gives new dimension to the self-limiting English language, one to be recast, self-translated, back into an English that had already taken shape: "The English language," Whitman asserts, "befriends the grand American expression . . . it is brawny *enough* and limber and full *enough*" (25; emphasis added). Drawing on a rhetoric from a literary form for dealing with the problem of hard-to-express subjects, the convention of the topos finds a different footing in the Preface. It translates a traditionally timeless otherworldly topos into a practical world of possibilities in language. In a same-language context, this inadequacy suggests a failure of words from (translations of the same) words, rather than a totality of human failing in relation to the eternal. Whitman's Preface tersely attempts to reverse the tide and perceptions of inexpressibility in English words: "The English language befriends the grand American expression."²⁵

In this way, the inexpressible veers from its characteristic division of death and life, or "then" and "now." Its division is obfuscated, again, by the usual division between what can and cannot be expressed being rooted in *one* simultaneous instrument of expression, English. This adaptation of the inexpressible causes temporal somersaults: it situates the inexpressible in a past achievement turned backwards from a future that exists in the present. In 1820 Theophilus Parsons voices the now familiar call for a literature, "In this country, it should be the business and the object of literary men, not to reform and purify, but to create a national literature. We have *never yet had one*, and it is *time* the *want* should be supplied."²⁶ Whitman's

Preface will respond to such impatience, supplying both time and need. In a long and literal act of pretense, verbs fuse the impatience of a missing literature with a future as good as achieved:

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . . . is not so impatient *as has been supposed* that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements *has passed* into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who *approaches* . . . and that he *shall be* fittest for his days.²⁷

This package of redirected time frames will be repeated countless times. It forges a promise for the heir that cannot be named, but has already passed, and predates its own existence. Lodged in the “corpse,” the past-up-to-present just short of a desired “literature” is itself descendant of the future, born to the heir of a national idiom yet to come. This sequence of verbs presumes a past that has not yet been. Equivalently that same past presumes a future that has already come. Simultaneous is the realization (both in time and imagination) of it in the present as having already been forged. There is only the framing, and a residual present. The middle ground of becoming, and with it the possibility of never becoming or never being expressed just right—is gone.²⁸

The immediate cultural anxiety about language is not addressed, but redressed. It is not overcome but bypassed casually and unhurriedly by a bystander: “Now that he [the greatest poet] has passed that way see after him!” (10). The frame around the already achieved inexpressible, referred to in a past tense that forges the future, refits the more traditional frame of the topos originally bound to human inadequacy; it suggests inadequacy of any single individual who by chance may have missed the boat *in time* to participate in the expression. Whitman’s frames attempt to revisit disadvantage as already advantageous, and advantage as already disadvantageous. The frame presents a before as if it were an after, or an after as if it were a before, or both. Manfred Jahn makes this point, pointing to the simultaneous revisitation of both data and frame: “Frames and textual data enter a mutual dependence relationship corresponding to what is traditionally known as the hermeneutic circle; more recently, it has also been termed the ‘interactive model’ of the reading process (Harker 1989,

471). The adequacy of a frame is continuously put to the test by incoming data, and the analysis of the data depends to a considerable extent on the current frame. The frame tells us what the data is, and the data tells us whether we can continue using the frame.”²⁹ This same simultaneity occurs in Whitman’s concluding statement in his first Preface, “The signs are effectual. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is true. The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (26).

These frames are both simultaneous and intensely tendentious.³⁰ The simultaneous elision of what can be expressed with what this language cannot express takes place in the same literal and written space that is occupied by itself, the English brought over from England. While writers are self-consciously overwriting in professed statements of English over English, something else is happening. They are, in effect, overdetermining an outcome: they are pointing to an alternative to failure. This brings up a problem: how can the two perceived Englishes wrapped up in one (the one choral and inadequate, and the other perfect and complete) ever appear to succeed? The traditional topos, consisting of one part praise and one part inadequacy, inevitably leans toward failure or human limitation. In Whitman’s Preface, this topos steals time back from the heroic and eternal branch of its history: joined with the choral branch of its frame, as one, inside the same English language, the heroic branch joins its human counterpart in time. Time replaces the eternal. And then the human potential for expressibility forces itself back into time, rather than being stuck as forever inexpressible outside eternal time. In the traditional topos perfect expression is out of time. It can never be achieved because inside human time there can be no success. But the moment the topos is placed in time by compressing the frame, perfectibility becomes possible because time is on its side. It is at least now possible on the scale of time, whenever it happens. Whitman and his contemporaries never make any exact predictions about when an American literature will emerge: they simply play out the assumption that in the fullness of time it will come, or has happened.

In both the Preface and the discourse preceding it, one of the values most identified with the coming or perhaps yet-to-be-realized literary perfection is originality. This arises straight from the question of an overlapping language. An overlapping English in particular puts pressure on the lack of an “original” English or an identifiably original language and literature from within its own expression. A writer for *The Democratic Review* in 1847 remarks that “when the colonies finally asserted their independence, it was only against the political power of the mother-country. They retained her language, her letters, and the fame of her great writers,

as their birth-right as Englishmen, or the descendants of Englishmen.”³¹ He claims, “We are to make the metals, torn from the virgin soil of a new country, flow into these old moulds, and harden into these antique forms. We must take these shapes, or not be at all” (267). Painfully articulate, the essayist in *The New American Review* of 1812 focuses on perceived deficiencies of originality:

We repeat, then, that we wish our native poets would give a more national character to their writings. In order to effect this, they have only to write more naturally, to write from their own feelings and impressions, from the influence of what they see around them, and not from any pre-conceived notions of what poetry ought to be, caught by reading many books, and imitating many models. This is peculiarly true in descriptions of natural scenery. In these, let us have no more sky-larks and nightingales.³²

Channing has covered many of these perceived ventriloquisms in his influential “Essay on American Language and Literature,” first published in 1815. “There is something peculiarly opposed to literary originality,” Channing writes, “in the colonial existence which was unfortunately so long the condition of America.” He says, “The language in which we speak and write is the vernacular tongue of a nation which thinks it corrupted on every other lip but its own.”³³ To Channing, America lacks a stage in “the development of the mind itself.”³⁴ And what he finds missing has to do with the lack of an original language. Denying Algonquin or Iroquois, he points imperially to the language of the settlers—unique to their “new” land, (especially) their future.³⁵ “It is hardly to be hoped,” he writes pessimistically, “that we shall ever make our language conform to our situation, our intellectual vigour and originality.”³⁶ In contrast to the vast American landscape, the English language can appear cramped: “An original literature implies a race either not derivative from another since its refinement had reached the point of literary cultivation; or one which, if secondary, has, in new seats, under a new body of influences, formed for itself a fresh and complete identity of its own,” writes E. W. Johnson from *The American Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art, and Science*. He continues:

Now, we are not the first of these; nor, though tending to it, have we yet become the second. Until our language—which has, we suspect, passed through all the structural changes of which it is capable—shall have taken a new genius and other forms, growing into quite a different dialect, our

future Letters must be the same, at least in their vehicle, the instrument of speech they are to use.³⁷

Writers hear the history of England vibrating inside their language and resist it, feeling, as Ernest Hemingway observes a century later, “like exiled English colonials.”³⁸

Despite claiming in his *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789) that the American language would someday become a language in its own right, Noah Webster expresses the inevitable contamination, a perceived originality lying in wait amid the impediments³⁹: “As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be *our* standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline.”⁴⁰ The insufficiency of originality is often ascribed to the inheriting of a literature already formed. “They began with too much civilization,” complains one reviewer in 1850.⁴¹ In *The Knickerbocker Magazine*, the argument is put in this way: “we speak the language of a literature already formed.”⁴² In 1847, N. Porter, Jr. has made clear, “We might as well talk or dream of the American language. England and America must continue to employ the same speech.”⁴³ Sometimes the insufficiency of originality is seen in an inability to recognize it in the first place. Walter Channing has put this question directly: “The candidates for literary distinction among us, or those that may be, are therefore destined to a high distinction,” and asks, “But let us inquire, who are to award it?” (35). Still searching, he concludes with another inquiry: “whether our prospects are more promising, than our retrospections are melancholy” (35). Nor can we hear the rhetoric of insufficiency of Channing or George Tucker or Samuel Miller short of its hyper-self-consciousness.⁴⁴ In 1822, Tucker asks if the inadequacy is “owing to the *inferiority of our natural genius*, as some have alleged, or to causes that are temporary and accidental?”⁴⁵ His impatient oversimplification already suggests that what is being said is not what is being said. His emphasis on the temporal (“causes that are temporary”) suggests a confidence, moreover, in an expression of originality, or what he calls here “genius.” But like the out-of-reachness in the inexpressible topos, nothing so far being expressed is felt to match this originality.

Poetry is pivotal to these discussions of originality because it is taken to be the epitome of original expression. Whether circling language or literature, the self-same English language is witnessed as impeding poetic development. This concern is persistent. It leans self-consciously into the

“high” art of poetry for a self-battering: “You can hear in Scott, the rattle of her armor, and see in Ramsay, the gentle waving of her plaids,” Washington Irving observes, “But *we* have none of these. We are not rocked unconsciously into poets.”⁴⁶ In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s view, the connection between a missing perfectibility, language, and poetry is made explicit: “It is from this intimate connexion of poetry with the manners, customs, and characters of nations, that one of its highest uses is drawn. The impressions produced by poetry upon national character at any period, are again re-produced, and give a more pronounced and individual character to the poetry of a subsequent period. . . . In this view, poetry assumes new importance with all who search for historic truth.”⁴⁷ Even questions of economic dependence⁴⁸ often are foreshortened in one breath with concerns of language, epitomized in the idea of poetry: “we shall never be national in poetry, till we break the spell; and we shall probably never break the spell [of colonialism], till our national character is more distinct from theirs” (386).

The word “originality” oscillates tellingly within this debate over literary achievement and poetry. The perceived hand-me-down language puts pressure on the very word, and it shows up in different shapes. The adjective “original” initially appears in documents of self-diagnosis, relating one country of origin to another. It is synonymous with other adjectives, such as “distinctive,” as in this sentence by Walter Channing: “Our descriptions, of course, which must, if we ever have a poetry, be made in the language of another country, can never be distinctive.” More frequently it becomes a noun—abstract, self-evident, equivalent to “natural genius.” “The importance of a national language to the rise and progress of the literature of a country,” according to Channing, “can be argued from all we know of every nation which has pretended to originality.”⁴⁹ Channing’s use of the word “originality” has a particular inflection; it is an invention or, as Channing’s declaration clearly implies, a pretense. Here it can be heard in the light of speech acts analyzed by Shoshana Felman in her work on J. L. Austin. Channing’s statement does not in practice attempt to trace or describe the origins of an American character; language tries to “accomplish an *act* through the very process of . . . enunciation.”⁵⁰ Originality is (more than) half act, half reception. Derrida notes this in his often quoted analysis about the declaration of the Declaration of Independence: “[o]ne cannot decide . . . whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance.”⁵¹ Furthermore, he continues, “Is it that the good people have already freed themselves in fact and are only stating the fact of this emancipation in [*par*] the Declaration? Or is it rather that they free themselves at the instant of and by [*par*] the signature of this Declaration? . . .

This obscurity, this undecidability between, let's say, a performative structure and a constative structure, is *required* in order to produce the sought-after effect.⁵² Declarations such as Channing's reinvent "originality"—the word is never the same each time it is uttered. Ferguson also picks up this performative note: early important public texts of the Revolution, he says, "are composed to be seen and believed in without necessarily being read or mastered . . . they seek substantiating form at every turn" (9). He adds, "These abstractions have very practical implications for both the literal word on the page and the space around it" (13). He explains, "One reduces the public text into an article of faith or icon."⁵³

"Originality" has often been tied to something like a place, an idea, or a characteristic (as in Pascal's definition of intellect as originality from *Pensées* ("[t]he greater intellect one has, the more originality one finds in men"⁵⁴). But when "originality" concerns the perception of an absence in the context of a coinciding language there is a paradox: a demand that writing make itself out of itself. In *An Examination*, 1807, Joseph Dennie sets the apologetic tone: "There is no light, in which our country can be contemplated with less satisfaction to genuine patriotism than in her literary relations."⁵⁵ In the worlds of trade and practical science, successes are profusely noted by many. Samuel Miller, for instance, writes, "In the Mechanic Arts, so far as respects the ingenuity of individuals, and the important service rendered by numerous inventions and improvements, America yields to no nation under heaven."⁵⁶ Charles Brockden Brown's defensiveness on this subject stands out:

No one is so absurd as to suppose that the natives of America are unfitted, by any radical defect of understanding, for vieing [*sic*] with the artizans of Europe, in all those useful and elegant fabrics which are daily purchased by us. Similar and suitable circumstances would show Americans equally qualified to excel in arts and literature, as the natives of the other continent. But a people much engaged in the labours of agriculture, in a country rude and untouched by the hand of refinement, cannot, with any tolerable facility or success, carry on, at the same time, the operations of imagination, and indulge in the speculations of Raphael, Newton, or Pope.⁵⁷

By 1845 resounding counterobjections have built up, but frequently based on instantaneous spottings of the desired unreachable originality, here called "genius": "We are no friends of precise prophecy," says the writer in the *The American Review*: "We cannot say of genius, it will be here or there, but the spirit of God breathes it, and lo! a Homer, a Shakespeare."⁵⁸ Melville goes so far as to see the future animating the present

itself. “The Future is endowed with such a life,” he writes, “that it lives to us even in anticipation.”⁵⁹

These attempts to ascertain the future are new directions in the history of the inexpressible. The focus here becomes temporal, a bid for language (just) in time, rather than the more common verbal array of paradox by which the inexpressible allows for speech only in an initial attempt. (I will follow this in chapter 5.) The problem of inexpressibility is exacerbated in certain ways, that is, when a resolution is specifically sought *not* in silence. To Fisher Ames, for example, those fetters, predominantly based in language, unfold a declared strategy of achievement, producing a rhetoric of “genius” straight out from the tags of “stupidity”: “Nobody will pretend that 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 work of original genius?”⁶⁰

Indeed a variety of strange schemes were proposed to establish the elusive originality, the promise of which is built even into Ames’s rhetoric of deficiency. One is considering alternatives to England’s bequeathed English. In 1828 a motion submitted in the Pennsylvania State Legislature to make German coequal with English fails by one vote.⁶¹ There are curricular plans to quash all English influences of language (“If the borrowers and imitators are only encouraged,” notes Edward Channing metaphorically, “the swarm will go on thickening”⁶²). English influences to be suppressed include classroom education, forms of speech and grammar, and manners.⁶³ Schools begin to remove Latin and Greek from the curriculum⁶⁴ and abolish copying English texts in handwriting exercises. “The best authors,” Theophilus Parsons claims,

they whose effect upon the mind would be to give it strength and elevation, may be and should be *studied*, with assiduity; but no writer, however excellent, however perfect in his own style, or however good that style may be, should be *imitated*; for imitation always tends to destroy originality and independence of mind, and cannot substitute in their place any thing half so valuable.⁶⁵

Some schemes were explicitly political and economic. Reducing imported British books and altered taxation laws are the practical suggestions for encouraging people to read American work: “. . . our opinions and feelings are controlled by foreigners, ignorant of our condition and necessities, and hostile to our government and institutions. And it will continue to be the case until, by an honest and judicious system of RECIPROCAL COPYRIGHT, such protection is given to the native author as will enable our

best writers to devote more attention to letters, which, not less than wealth, add to a nation's happiness and greatness; and should receive as much of the fostering care of government as is extended to the agriculturist or manufacturer."⁶⁶ Herman Melville notably complains of imported influence, "You must believe in Shakspeare's unapproachability or quit the country"; then, he expounds, "But what sort of a belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature as well as into Life?"⁶⁷ And in the same period a "climate" already ripe for literature, compared to that of the English landscape, frequently takes on literal and figurative casts around a difficult-to-define but certain end:

Every foot of soil has its proper quality; the grape on two sides of the same fence has new flavors; and so every acre on the globe, every family of men, every point of climate, has its distinguishing virtues. Certainly, then, this country does not lie here in the sun causeless; and though it may be not be easy to define its influence, men already feel its emancipating quality. . . .⁶⁸

The preoccupation with originality can often become quite extreme. Coming out of the work of the eighteenth-century taxonomists, some barely resist comparing English to American bodies as a way to see if the shape of hands or brain can promote or impede cultural success. As George Tucker writes:

Now, if we suppose, with some philosophers, that the operations of the mind are but the workings of matter in its most subtle form, it would not be irrational to infer, that where, on a comparison of different subjects, the grosser parts of the material man appeared to be the same; or if different, superior, there would be the same relative equality or superiority, in those finer parts which constitute the mind. Judging by this rule, we must believe that our intellects are at least as flexible, as alert, and as susceptible of vigorous and continued action, as those of Europeans.⁶⁹

He then self-servingly asks "our haughty adversaries for some further proof that nature, who has been so bountiful to us in the formation of our bodies should have acted a niggardly part in the structure of our minds."⁷⁰ Proposed solutions to the problem are perceived as inordinately difficult. In 1809 Ames, borrowing from an old trope, says America will never succeed at it: "—giants are rare; and it is forbidden by her [nature's] laws that there should be races of them."⁷¹ Paradoxically just out of reach, but inside its own settler language, is a desired "original" language. To use a metaphor,

it is a ventriloquism that hopes to distance the puppeteer from its “dummy” language, but recast the dummy as its own original.⁷²

It would be useful, I think, to briefly sum up our journey in this chapter. The topos of the inexpressible rests on a binary frame, in line with the conventional contrast between the heroic and the choral. With the introduction of time into the topos it adapts in dealing with the perceived problem of English inside English. The binary shape transmogrifies: distancing a more original inexpressible English from inside the same inadequate English depends on spinning a conceit of adequacy, even superiority, from within inferiority.⁷³ In the remainder of this chapter I want to outline how this spin, as aggressive as it is apprehensive, works. The strategy of recasting, which dares itself to be disproved, takes many shapes in the nineteenth century. A few important ones are doing end-runs around inadequacy, renaming what is inadequate as adequate, and inviting in the reader to “co-author” a text.⁷⁴

In his end-run around inadequacy, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow captures how the perceived dead end of originality can be recast. First it is recognized:

To an American there is something endearing in the very sounds—Our Native Writers. Like the music of our native tongue when heard in a foreign land, they have power to kindle up within him the tender memory of his home and fireside;—and more than this, they foretell that whatever is noble and attractive in our national character will one day be associated with the sweet magic of Poetry. Is then our land to be indeed *the land of song?* . . . Yes!—and palms are to be won by our native writers!⁷⁵

It turns out that “the land of song” is already there, as the missing “song” is turned back into its own writing of its presence. Longfellow continues, “Already has a voice been lifted up in this land.” Then he explicitly raises the disadvantage: “[w]e cannot yet throw off”⁷⁶ America’s allegiance to Britain; then he evades, as the native “tongue” (116) is translated in the turn from disadvantage to advantage. He ends with what we have seen as the present tense typical of the second voice in Whitman’s Preface, the voice of the already-achieved American literature: “[w]e *are* thus *thrown upon ourselves*” (117; emphasis added).

Rather than being merely stuck in the present conditions, the recast, desired author, like the inexpressible itself, remains alive. The possible appearance of an original becomes, at any moment, a matter of saying so. What has been a perceived inertia in American language and authorship is turned by the frame of the inexpressible into a flicker of movement by

which promise is packed into a past achievement and then “recalled,” if not named. Samuel Miller, for example, sees a want of leisure as “by no means friendly to great acquisitions in literature. . . .”⁷⁷ Whitman’s Preface alights on it and recasts leisure to advantage. Attacking the inability to produce books based on the absence of leisure (or a leisure class), his Preface famously assaults its implicit denigration: the Preface will magnify a feared absence and recast it as imminent (conducive to the production of literature), and therefore all but immanent.

In this end-run, the acute awareness of the overlap in English pushes recasting to extreme self-consciousness concerning language itself. This inexpressible for this self-same language is not other-than-language, but words themselves. Let us take a step backwards. Usually, as George Steiner points out, origins of the topos traditionally look to God, or statements of light, music, or silence, not words themselves, for fruition. “It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man’s word is eloquent of God. That is the joyously defeated recognition expressed in the poems of St. John of the Cross and of the mystic tradition.”⁷⁸ Yet, unfolding the topos in which language *itself* is the desired object of expression shifts inadequacy from the human being to inadequate time or reception or selection. A desired and failed representation of God or the divine, therefore, is replaced by super self-consciousness. Words cannot express—and yet are the only eligible means to express—what lies precisely with the same (English) words.

Frequently not just recasting, but tongue-in-cheek recasting (a subset of recasting), therefore, appears and falls just short of irony. It produces self-reflexive written layers of “conversation” of English with English, and sometimes a conversation of a character with the notion of character.⁷⁹ Tongue-in-cheek, Brown ruminates, for example with a character of his own creation of character, named “The Rhapsodist”: “though he [The Rhapsodist] not unfrequently derives half the materials of his thoughts from an intimate acquaintance with the world,” the Rhapsodist nonetheless “is an enemy to conversation.” Conversation, however, can be successful, though he speaks to himself; Brown continues, “He loves to converse with beings of his own creation. . . .”⁸⁰ The Rhapsodist will rhapsodize, in effect, about the reader as such too.⁸¹ The Rhapsodist claims to the ineffable “[t]ruth,” but relinquishes his authorial position to its oral counterpart, conversation: “Truth demands this sacrifice from me.”⁸² The stated aversion to written authorship is an aversion to authorial statement (possibly inadequate) in the inexpressible topos. Any aversion to an authorial position is recast from the Rhapsodist’s (potentially inadequate) words to those

same words' reception—that is, if received favorably. Not modernly ironic, this aversion to authorial and perfect “truth” is fastened to structures that resist attack, and invite revision, and especially approbation. Here both the risk of putting out an authorial “truth” and, of course, much more pointedly, the risk of missing it are recast, tongue-in-cheek, but seriously, in terms of successful invitation and reception, as the Rhapsodist makes clear, rather than in terms of successful delivery. We can hear this tongue-in-cheek recasting again in the narrator of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Wake-field,” which suggests the following: “there will be a pervading spirit and a moral, even should we fail to find them. . . .”⁸³

A second strategy in recasting involves renaming the inadequate as adequate. I have offered many examples between defensive anxieties of expression and offensive desires of perfection. Perhaps, though, it is useful to have two brief additional ones. In 1836, Edgar Allan Poe articulates, first, inferiority and, next, a patient confidence. What he calls an “excess of *our subserviency* was blameable,” but he also designates a conservative impatience toward “misapplied *patriotism*”: “We *are becoming* boisterous and arrogant in the pride of a too speedily assumed literary freedom . . . and thus often find ourselves involved in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American.”⁸⁴ By focusing on deference to oneself (which is merely stupid) rather than subservience to others (which is “blameable”), Poe shifts total inadequacy to a (more nearly) adequate state, one potentially capable of correction. He does so by changing tenses, leaning from past tense into a present that with correction predicates a self-correcting and more favorable future. Charles Brockden Brown also turns to verb tenses to re-present an impasse in the present time frame and recast an option of advantage for a favorable future time frame. In doing so, he will rename as “heavenly” what is already named a “deficiency.” The redefinition forges at least two *time frames* (of failure and success), mutually impossible for coexistence, from a single overlap of inexpressible authorship in the English language at present. Brown writes, “Satisfied that the present circumstances of the writer if disclosed, would render his most glaring deficiencies excusable, I am content to recommend myself as a candidate for *future approbation* only.”⁸⁵ This self-effacing “I” transforms instantly into an authorial “we” in this invitation to recast “glaring deficiencies” as “heavenly” in the future: “Whenever this heavenly spark is discovered, tho’ surrounded by the wettest rubbish, and smothered in the depth of rudeness, and obscurity, it is our duty to recall it into being, to place it in a more favourable situation . . .” (466). The inexpressible future is recalled, the present placed, and the “heavenly spark” put back into a perpetual “favourable situation.”

A third strategy of recasting entails an explicit invitation to the reader.⁸⁶ This direct address can be explicit and jarring. Brown's Rhapsodist comes right out and invites the American reader to join this "conversation," that is, to join the literature in English of his "own creation." "I have unwarily admitted in my bosom, a belief that literary fame is a prize *not altogether* unattainable, and that I am, even now, entitled to share *with you* the honour of publication."⁸⁷ With such invitations, listeners in this economical frame not only "share" the "honour of publication," but are invited to co-create a pose of authorship. The risk of inexpressibility, exacerbated by an English language overlap, then can easily slide into the practical "resolution" of an advantageous overlap of the author and reader. The responsibility of inexpressibility for the author shifts to success of reception by the reader.

Such a strategy has long been seen as common. In this period, which expresses what Stephen Railton calls a "rhetorical stance and strategy" (*Authorship and Audience*, 20), language is preoccupied with itself and audience. He instances *The Scarlet Letter* as a "rhetorical project" that blurs the line between readers and authors, leaving them with a determination of origin, a "project of their own."⁸⁸ The Rhapsodist engages this strategy of displacement. Engaging the inexpressible "truth" of the topos, the Rhapsodist at first relinquishes perfection of solitary authorship for the more fluid ongoing conversation in speech with the reader: "In short," he says, "he will write as he speaks, and converse with his reader not as an author, but as a man."⁸⁹ Here the reader is put on an equal and privileged footing with the writer, suggesting that there must be what Ted Cohen calls a "shared awareness" among a "close community."⁹⁰ The problem of a dual language thus is suspended. Membership in this de facto community between author and audience puts them on equal footing. The risk, in other words, is recast in terms of successful invitation and reception (by author to audience) rather than in terms of successful delivery (in what may be perceived as a compromised language).

Each of these three strategies casts the delivery of the (inexpressible) English itself, already imbibed in the same language, English, as nearly beside the point. Responsibility is shifted from proper humility (in deference to an other-than-human-language realm) to evasive action, renaming, and inviting the reader in. Whitman's Preface illustrates how all three strategies can be used at once with devastating effectiveness. In his 1855 Preface, an echo first agrees with Channing and others, announcing that there is not yet any native American poet ("the United States with veins full of poetical stuff *most need poets*," 8; emphasis added). However, he goes around them with sweeping claims that those poems are as good as achieved

(“The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem”).⁹¹ The anxiety of Channing and other writers, even in this small but indicative example, is not so much addressed as reconditioned through defensiveness being turned into an offensive: Whitman’s prose then places the poet’s arrival within a frame of self-congratulatory and already achieved recovery, renaming what was inadequate as adequate, here the “psalm of the republic”: “Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista” (8). The emphasis then shifts from the source to an enactment of the problem by the audience,⁹² projecting an assumed unanimity where none had been before, yielding, to borrow a term from Stanley Fish, a “self-identifying community”⁹³: “the kind of community that is open only to those who are already members of it,” those who can recognize one of their own members coming through: “Here comes one among the well beloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science”—(where “decision and science” and practicality are often construed as an impediment to the American “psalm”)—“and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms” (8). As Fish explains, “That community can no more be described or ‘caught’ than can the minds of those who populate it” (37); or, as he says, an act of writing that “can never, be specified” can “generate the community; generate it not by creating its members (who are already what they are), but by providing a relay or network by means of which they can make contact with and identify one another” (40). Fish artfully identifies a discourse that is committed to “not being about anything” and instead, precisely, “puts pressure on those who read it to demonstrate, in the very act of reading, that they are *already in*” (40; emphasis added).

By attaching itself to time—that is, something so far not achieved in time frames, rather than impossible to achieve in human time—the longed-for inexpressibility of an “original” language, seized from inside itself, anticipates more modern discussions. The text becomes inexpressible in a literal way: the text is the very site of forces resulting from the point at which the object of the inexpressible is language itself and not something “beyond” language. In this way, the performance of the problem overtakes the problem itself. There is of course no real answer to an imagined problem of an “original American” language, and the problem in the first instance is a coordinate pinned down by the topos of the inexpressible. The strategy of recasting, or renaming, or invitation is a set of options opened, not closed, by self-distancing and self-observation. Thus, the discursive focus on what Benedict Anderson names the imagined community, specifically “an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time” (63)⁹⁴ engages inexpressibility

(a topos known, again, for its concern with perfectibility). This kind of engagement with the topos of the ineffable, encouraged by a self-identifying community of settlers, a demand for perfectibility, and a perceived self-same language, produces framing that contributes to anticipating and predating patterns of discourse also associated even more self-consciously and more modernly with “not being about anything,” anything, that is, teleological. Not surprisingly poets are among those most interested in this topos explicitly, and specifically in the inexpressible “thing itself” (a good example is Wallace Stevens’s “Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself”). The form of engagement, however, bears tell-tale signs of early lineage with the discourse of framing derived from a perceived inexpressible and same-language frame. As we have also seen, they are constructed around time as they adapt a topos of inexpressibility that is grounded in a conceit of what can never be expressed. They exploit rhetorical confusion, indeterminacy, and vagueness suggested by concerns with a path of built-in inexpressibility of a received language.

W. B. Yeats famously makes the distinction: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.”⁹⁵ In a same-language English, these frames from the inexpressible make the quarrel with “others” as “ourselves,” a self-conscious matter of rhetoric and poetry as one, if at all. My concern here is not simply to suggest the existence of a pattern in relation to a revived topos, but to examine its links to a politics and poetics of inclusion and exclusion. In this chapter, I have tried to delineate these frames. In the next chapter I will link them to patterns of dead serious humor associated with dead-ends and exclusions, transmogrified by the inexpressible.