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Distancing English

Richards, Page

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CHAPTER 4

T RANSLATING ENGLISH INTO ENGLISH AND “DAMNED SERIOUS *HUMOUR*”

The postcolonial defensiveness of self-imitation, as chapters 2 and 3 have shown, developed through the discourse of the inexpressible. It points away from the ineffable and the eternal toward temporal inexpressibility (even if not explicitly articulated) for those settlers and descendants who sought refuge from a language or literature that was “inherited” from England. An inexpressibility that demands words to be recast from the (same) words sets up new footing for identifying the dead and alive in character and language. The uncomfortable stance of the misfit who is an insider rather than an outsider is clear in the following complaint from *The American Review* in 1845: “To quote from Holy Writ, ‘*We, measuring ourselves by ourselves, and comparing ourselves among ourselves, are not wise.*’”¹

In the search for an “original” language and literature from inside one and the same language, English, an adapted topos of the inexpressible comes on the back of the promotional writings (outlined in chapter 1), the traditional topos of the inexpressible (followed in chapter 2), and framing practices (covered in chapter 3). In each instance a language is measured. Uncertainly “waiting for our literature,”² conservatively patient James

Russell Lowell recognizes—and attacks—a literal call for a new language: “It was even seriously proposed to have a new language. Why not, since we could afford it? Beside, the existing ones were all too small to contain our literature whenever we should get it. One enthusiast suggests the ancient Hebrew, another a firenew [*sic*] tongue of his own invention” (203). Calls for the language frequently cite inappropriateness. One of the most common complaints against its accuracy of fit, unsurprisingly, is American mannerlessness or “rudeness.” As *The Port Folio* reviewer writes in 1807:

[W]hen we come critically to analyze it [public speaking in the United States], and to try it, by a standard severe and accurate, we shall see its diction turgid and redundant, without the delicate embellishment of a correct taste, or the polish of an exquisite finish. With as much force, these strictures apply to our written compositions. Though bearing sometimes proofs of genius, rich and luxuriant, they are clothed, for the most part, with a drapery of uncouth deformity and wild licentiousness.³

“No matter for rudeness,” Edward Channing nine years later weighs in: “It is enough that all is our own, and just such as we were made to have and relish. A country then must be the former and finisher of its own genius. It has, or should have, nothing to do with strangers.”⁴ One of the many impediments in the path of expressibility and literature, a longstanding perception of rudeness, is here acknowledged (“No matter . . .”), refitted as sufficient and “our own,” and then achieved (“to have and relish”). The declaration shakes off a designation of rudeness from a detrimental past (death) to recast it for the future (and life). That temporal pivot turns on the phrase “just such,” an inexpressibility that is at once both absent and present. Putting a stake in a nonexistent presence of the new consensus that denigrates rudeness, it conversely embraces it.

These speakers, though among the most privileged, effectively characterize themselves as “outsiders”; that is, they feel that their qualities (such as rudeness) and their language (not native to the country) are not essentially matched to expectations of themselves. They defensively see or create themselves into misfits. Offensively—on the offensive, and embracing traits such as rudeness—they transform the pejoratives back into positives. In this self-changeover, by which the “hick” outsider is first shaped from an insider’s position of power and fear, that same self-created outsider becomes a proud purveyor, a self-translated insider. “A country,” as Edward Channing observes, “has formed and finished its ‘own genius’” (207). This framing acknowledges certain English views on American rudeness, corroborating William Cobbett’s observations, for instance,

of “Trenton, which I should have liked better, if I had not seen so many young fellows lounging about the streets, and leaning against door-posts, with quids of tobacco in their mouths, or segars stuck between their lips, and with dirty hands and faces,” or Americans heading west, “born with an axe in one hand, and a gun in the other.”⁵ Rudeness, in Cobbett’s portrait, is inappropriate for expressibility. Yet it is the tag imposed by those who are not “our own,” the English, and at the very same time feared by those who are “our own.” What transpires—the translation of a self-disparaging insider *back into* an affirmative insider with a reinscription of the same word—is important. The new insider will create or, better, hear new enjambments in outdated critiques.

Although the first wave of self-confidence after the war of 1812, as Benjamin T. Spencer points out, has “to an appreciable degree spent itself” (125), continuing “*structures of expectations*,” as the linguist Deborah Tannen might call them,⁶ still echo throughout the period: “In selecting the most prominent of the literary and political magazines of England as our professed model,” observes a writer in the 1829 *American Monthly Magazine*, “we trust we shall not be understood as expecting to equal it. In the present state of American literature, we do not think this is possible.”⁷ In the next issue, the same conservative vision of entitlement, fingered by putative artistic inadequacy (offered by analogy with the Goddess of Crafts and Wisdom), is self-consciously dramatized through analogies, including one with the Goddess: “The consequence is, we have taken leave of our political parent, as is the case of most wilful children, better educated than endowed. Our British inheritance is that of an English younger brother—proud, but poor—well taught, but ill treated—blood enough, with none of the heraldry—pretensions in abundance, but little of the patrimony.”⁸ In the creative self-translations, the movement begins with the defensive insider (“poor”) pushing himself out (“an English younger brother”); then pushing offensively back onto an (improved footing on the same poor) insider, “proud”: in these dramas, youthfulness translates into pride, and pretensions are shorn of pretentiousness (translated back into “blood”). All these translations, here beginning literally with dashes, are early and visible frames growing large. This exaggerated written discourse translates one’s own story, itself “inexpressible” since it retains the wrong selection of language and perspective, back onto itself. But this time, it acts anew and, in particular, orally and spontaneously.

Delineating written frames that intersect oral patterns of discourse, Robin Tolmach Lakoff sees the division of “planned, nonspontaneous written discourse on the one hand, and spontaneous, direct oral commu-

nication on the other.” “[W]e must understand,” she explains, however, “. . . that some of the characteristics we have ascribed to ‘oral’ discourse, for example, are not necessarily characteristic of the oral medium per se, but rather their choice has more to do with . . . the usefulness of an appearance of spontaneity, rather than to the use of the vocal channel itself” (241).

Examples of attempts to hearken to *actual* oral, and especially poetic, roots are not uncommon. For nationalist rhetoric W. B. Yeats draws on Celtic folklore. A call from *The Knickerbocker Magazine* in 1838 wistfully links nationalism, literature, and poetry to intimations of the oral:

We have the sublimities of nature, and by seizing on these, our poets might be immortal. We have noble rivers; eternal forests; the most stupendous mountains; and seasons full of glorious associations. The fall of the leaf, the dreary winter forests, the ocean prairies, and the picturesque Indian landscapes of the west, furnish materials totally unknown to England, capable of founding a distinct school, and yet how rarely are they sung!¹⁰

But from the start, efforts are perceived as compromised. As the writer above bemoans, “We repeat it, therefore, that there is a dearth of bold, natural genius in our poetry. We have no lord of the epic or the drama” (387), both of which are oral in origin. And *The North American Review* in 1832 offers an explanation for the compromised beginnings: “The origin of poetry loses itself in the shades of a remote and fabulous age, of which we have only vague and uncertain traditions.”¹¹ Some point to a recovery of oral history of the Indians, especially their emblematic landscape. The Indians provide in G. M. Wharton’s patronizing words, “one grand theme peculiar to the country,” in effect, a solution comprised of the Indians’ “mystery”: “There is a mystery around these unfortunate sons of the forest, which adds not a little of the sublime to our thoughts about them.”¹² So the writer from the *The Knickerbocker Magazine* a few years earlier has said, “Perhaps our only materials are in the dreamy traditions of the red men.” He adds, “but they can never win our sympathies, as our own fathers might have done.”¹³ In an act of appropriation, Spencer notes, it is the “possibility of an American epic based on the deeds of the white conquerors” that just happens to be “urged with equal zeal.”¹⁴ The desire for heroic epics reflects a demand for song and, quite literally, voice to meet the “lofty” expectations. Ralph Waldo Emerson rhetorically echoes the territorial climate of lament (to establish disagreement with such readings): “There is no speech heard but that of auctioneers, newsboys, and the

caucus. Where is the great breath of the New World, the voice of aboriginal nations opening new eras with hymns of lofty cheer? . . . We hearken in vain for any profound voice speaking to the American heart.”¹⁵

For spontaneous discourse, complex written statements of the inexpressible turn instead to the received English language, including dead metaphors, for spontaneous discourse. Tannen helps explain oral spontaneity’s links with the written form: “In speaking, what’s said is said and can’t be unsaid. In view of this, speakers often make use of the device of taking back something said, knowing full well that its effect has occurred; the message has been heard.”¹⁶ Through framing, written discourse accommodates this give and take. Here again is Channing’s passage on rudeness: “No matter for rudeness. . . . It is enough that all is *our own* and *just such as we were made to have and relish*. A country then must be the former and finisher of its own genius. It *has, or should have*, nothing to do with strangers” (207; emphasis added). The butt of an attack, “rudeness” is revised into an asset of character: “should have” has qualified “has.” Framed by a complex written discourse, the explicit addition of the inexpressible *just such* (rudeness/perfection) insists on a future tense of completion, rather than the past tense of anticipation (“just such as we were made to have”). In effect, the addition of the hurried “has” to “should have” is a signal of oral discourse that retains what is crossed out (rudeness). And recasting itself in accordance to an anticipated constraint of reception, the discourse fulfills the listeners’ consensus and “requirement” (here the demand to repitch “rudeness” from the inside out)—these are all moves typical of oral discourse. Consider, “It [a nation] has, or should have, nothing to do with strangers.” By the time rudeness is finally relished—transported from a dead description of American manners to a place holder for speaking the American inexpressible “just such”—rudeness returns as “just such,” literally itself (and specifically *not* what “strangers” translate it into). The sentence exhibits what John Berryman will much later call in his own work “damned serious *humour*.”¹⁷

Berryman’s crucial phrase, not often underscored, nods in important historical ways to a history of self-translation, and the linking of the literal with the inexpressible in precisely a “damned serious *humour*.” Translation studies often separate the word uttered from the same word received. This history of a shuddering between the original and the “translation” is long. Giving highest honors to “imitation,” compared with “metaphrase” and “paraphrase,” John Dryden famously writes in 1680, “The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints

from the *original*, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases."¹⁸ Dryden implicitly acknowledges the potential for a "new" text coming from any "imitation" of an original—"if now [the translator] has not lost that name." Later, Walter Benjamin extends that idea into what he called an "afterlife": "For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change."¹⁹ For Donald Carne-Ross, however, the notion of an original text takes one step back: it is *already* a translation from the preverbal to the verbal. This brief sketch of translation begins with an original's unique existence, advances to a more modern understanding of kinship with the "original" (inside the living totality of a "pure language"), and then proceeds to a lateral "transposition" of the original from the nonverbal to the verbal, in Carne-Ross's words, "essentially an instrument of criticism."²⁰

The notion of "imitation" used by Edward Channing and others to denote perpetual "borrowing"²¹ is fearfully too close for comfort as kin to England's "originals" since they are uttered in one and the same breath. Imitation is also in no way (yet) a transposition, as in Carne-Ross's interpretation, from a nonverbal inexpressible original (if much desired). Instead in the self-translation of English into English, the word "imitation" cited by Channing and others is founded in fears of mimicry, directly juxtaposed with the perception of nothing but a stubbornly perceived unoriginality. The idea of translation too often turns into a literal enterprise in relation to an utterance that imitates *itself*; that is, it makes dead metaphors of itself immediately upon utterance. Literal meaning, as Gabór Bezeczkzy explains, can make a word a matter of both "fact" and rebirth: "It is impossible to tell a lie in this language because words cannot be used outside their proper fields of application. . . . This also prevents speakers from mistakes and 'planned mistakes' or 'calculated errors' as metaphors are sometimes considered."²² The idea that literal language does not pertain outside its "proper fields of application" is essentially what happens: it rectifies English "errors" of metaphor in the American landscape. America, Edward Channing writes, "will have but feeble claims to excellence and distinction, when it stoops to put on foreign ornament and manner, and to adopt from other nations, images, allusions, and a metaphorical language, which are perfectly unmeaning and sickly, out of their own birth-place."²³

This preoccupation with birthplace and the first subject has often led writers to Anne Bradstreet, often named "America's first poet." John Berryman directly addresses her in "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet." A deep engagement with this premise of an "original" is played out in language that frets over originality. Written one hundred and forty years

after Channing's above comment, "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" reinstates the literal through radical translations of dead metaphors and syntax. Such translations attempt to forge a lineage of firsts: first poets; first utterances (language newly literal); first insiders of an American English. Recognizing a colonial and conservative impulse, Berryman astutely says, "[a]n American historian somewhere observes that all colonial settlements are intensely conservative, *except* in the initial break-off point."²⁴ His own grammar resets grammar, here grounding himself in a "patient woman,"²⁵ alive three hundred years earlier, ready for rebirth. In his address to this first poet, the smallest "it," for example, also patiently undergoes translation toward its own first—from a body buried in a relative clause to a body of sound as first uttered or, at least, heard anew, literal and therefore strange: "Out of maize & air / your body's made, and moves. I summon, see, / from the centuries it" (133). In enunciation, the word "it" changes its tune from a displaced pronoun to one made alive and new. Its separation from the routine and relative clause traces it back, and forwards, to its own body of sound: toward its own self-protection as a potential expressible and independent word. As a syntactically and disproportionately loud pronoun, "it" traditionally stands for something else, a noun, another "body." Translated physically from its position in the sentence, "it," however, is first indeterminate, literally no more or less than a place holder, withdrawn from its figurative function. At first perception, "it" seems to serve the noun "body," but that precisely suggests an absurd attachment, a tie to time and place that the word "body" defines, and specifically what its dislocation here rejects. It is *it*, a sound initially made funny by keeping back its function: it rejects its body, here literally so, its noun "body." In this overlap, it is serious in not warning against speech, but in protecting speech itself.²⁶

This is, as Berryman said, "damned serious *humour*." It is also dead serious humor. It playfully revives "it" as a body of sound, remade literal, after having been left for dead, now ripe for writing as recovery under the umbrella of new discovery of firsts. It reveals a written discourse that acts oral by leaving in full effect what has been orally crossed out ("it" attached to a dead body literally). It leaves, instead, a living past of anxiety about writing in relation to self-translation. Pascal Covici, Jr. notes that "[a]lthough most significant American authors do not generally receive the title of humorist—more and more of them, however, write humor—a great many of their works force readers into the same sudden shifts of perspective that humor brings about." The "revelations brought about by much American literature occur in large part because that literature functions in many of the ways that humor does," he adds, "even when it

is essentially very unfunny indeed."²⁷ Berryman's displaced "it" deliberately discomforts the supposed insiders of the language, those who frame themselves in terms of mimicry. Self-consciously extracting language from misguided reception or imperfect, simplistic ventriloquism, it signals the change in audience from defensive listeners to parodic interpreters.

"Much of their [British] personality and wit is lost upon us in this country," notes a writer from the *American Monthly Magazine* in 1830, "and even that which we understand, is too exaggerated for our simplicity to enjoy fully."²⁸ But on an offensive tack, that "simplicity," unable to accommodate British "wit" (or even the desired American tongue), shades into the literal. Thus through the literal the supposed inadequate expression of insiders of their own language becomes a rail by which words themselves, rather than silences in the traditional topos of the ineffable, are regenerated. For example, Berryman writes, "Versing, I shroud among the dynasties; / quaternion on quaternion, tireless I phrase / anything past, dead, far, / sacred, for a barbarous place."²⁹ The "I" here is buried, shrouded, inhabiting two bodies at once. Both outsider and insider, "I" produces acts of simultaneous translation and conversion—and acts of speech itself ("Versing," "phrase")—around a dead body, the historical "I." Earlier, Berryman's use of "most" qualifies written narration with oral interjection: "we were, most, used up" (134). Caught between modifying "we" and "used," "most" lies neither way; it is buried alive between its conventionally "heard" functions, reviving now simply as utterance, from a *character* created inside out from another and earlier (Bradstreet's) narration. Dying as a teller of tales, the narrator lives instead through speech. Instead of achieving what is often referred to as a spontaneous participation of listeners in oral performance, the written text draws out humorously and to no end, a written frame of erroneous perspectives, a parody of storytelling.

In his prefatory "Note" to *The Dream Songs*, Berryman initiates such displacement of the errors in expressibility, which lead nowhere but back to the beginning: "Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character Henry, still less to the author, but to the title of the work."³⁰ This self-conscious and ultimately aggressive regression playfully defrays and dares authorship and its responsibility. This sense of humor joins more seriously in a national dare entered by Herman Melville in 1850:

Let us boldly condemn all imitation, though it comes to us graceful and fragrant as the morning; and foster all originality, though at first it be crabbed and ugly as our own pine knots. And if any of our authors fail, or seem to fail, then, in the words of my Carolina cousin, let us clap him on

the shoulder, and back him against all Europe for his second round. The truth is, that in one point of view, this matter of a national literature has come to such a pass with us, that in some sense we must turn *bullies*, else the day is lost, or superiority so far beyond us, that we can hardly say it will ever be ours.³¹

Berryman's poem "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" directly addresses this inheritance of anxiety and action of bullying. His strategies in the poem defamiliarize by making insiders' conventions of English both strange—and then again—literal. The narrator in "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" addresses his own ancestor: "When the mouth dies, who misses you?"³² By mouthing and defamiliarizing, Berryman's narrator reinitiates himself as an outsider—like storytellers, speakers, narrators who exhort to themselves *as* narrators to "Talk to me" (140)—in a master plan of ultimate insider-ness (with Bradstreet, the "original" author) and inevitable relation.

Look, for instance, at the odd, unfunny humor in Berryman's "Can be hope a cloak?" (142). The very subject—"hope"—does not immediately present itself, making space for an inaudible pronoun. The beginning of a sentence is replaced with a middle. The ear attempts initially to revive and replenish "can be" with an appropriate pronoun or noun. Stripped at first of its subject, the verb "can be" acts positively, by sounding like an active verb, with "hope" as the object of its action: "[c]an be [might have] hope." "Can be" declares ultimately, by grammatical deformation, what the syntactical question attempts to remove: "hope" as literal. For a passing moment the phrase "[c]an be hope" replaces the rhetorical question that figuratively turns hope into a cloak: "Can hope be a cloak?" The question mark signals figurative language, a metaphor ("cloak"). As figurative, "hope" is laughed at, but the word "hope" is made unfamiliar and is not laughed at—not at all. The action of deformed grammar and colliding syntax, therefore, joins "hope" and "cloak" more closely into one sound, latched by a long "o." The utterance mocks metaphor-making at the same time that it reinvents the sound of the word, "hope" (and also "cloak"). By placing "hope" self-consciously near the act of making (in "hope a cloak," a transformative "is" heard before "a"), the metaphor "hope is a cloak" is turned into self-conscious action. It shows the maker making literal and funny what should be a metaphor, revealing what it is meant to conceal.

As local performance within itself, this action is funny. But in terms of the longer view of the poem, it is also not funny. In truth, there is no pronoun or person speaking the subject's part. "Hope" is formally the subject. Yet in the long view of the poem's frame, the speaker created by the utterance is actually dead. "Can be hope a cloak" is attributable to a

dead speaker, the female poet Bradstreet. The line declares itself self-consciously, thus, as a moment *of* narration, an instance *of* voice (regardless of initial statement). In the longer view, it frankly declares itself against the odds of the insiders' common grammar and syntax. The line is alive, but to or for whom? Once the pronoun or noun has been initially "stripped" to loosen the speaker's identity, laughing at the utterance is laughing only at the character who has been made to say it. In particular such a stripping allows the character potentially to include the listener. The sentence, therefore, refuses to represent anyone in particular; but it articulates *everyone*.

Similarly opening a common case for everyone, James Russell Lowell, again, in 1849, allows no one, so to speak, into the possibility of exclusion (in part countering specious arguments of America's being left out of renowned literary recognition):

After the United States had achieved their independence, it was forthwith decided that they could not properly be a nation without a literature of their own. As if we had been without one! As if Shakespeare, sprung from the race and the class which colonized New England, had not also been ours! . . . But this ownership in common was not enough for us, and, as partition was out of the question, we must have a drama and epos of our own. It must be national, too.³³

He continues, "Mere nationality is no more nor less than so much provincialism, and will be found but a treacherous antiseptic for any poem. It is because they are men and women, that we are interested in the characters of Homer. . . . Literature survives, not because of its nationality, but in spite of it" (202). Whether or not it is its "destiny to produce a *great* literature, as, indeed, our genius seems to find its kindest development in practicalizing simpler and more perfect forms of social organization" (209; emphasis added: "great," not "national"), Lowell positions America's "social organization" at the top of the ladder, however, precisely in favor of its potential for a "national" literature; any expression of nationality is as automatically universal as any other nation's, if not perhaps more so, because of its politics: "our literature . . . should be national to the extent of being as free from outworn conventionalities, and as thoroughly impregnated with humane and manly sentiment, as is the idea on which our political fabric rests" (209). The least representative may be the most representative: "Here we arrive at the truth which is wrapped up and concealed in the demand for nationality in literature. It is neither more nor less than this, that authors should use their own eyes and ears, and not those of other people" (210). It is a bid against imitation and, in particular,

“costume”: “the consequence,” Lowell writes,” is a painful vagueness and unreality” (210). So in Berryman’s demand for “Can be hope a cloak?,” the least representative “it” is also the most eligible after all for the “most” syntax, if the listeners are using their own eyes and ears; that is, invited by an insider awareness of grammar, all are just as quickly rebuffed by alien syntax—a wake-up, worse, to slipping grotesquely into consent to an alien costume (or language) of *convention*, fitted to the wrong ears and eyes: in Lowell’s vivid simile, “It is like putting Roman drapery upon a statue of Washington, the absurdity of which does not strike us so forcibly because we are accustomed to it, but which we *should recognize at once* were the same treatment applied to Franklin” (210; emphasis added). That recognition “at once” (in Berryman’s alien syntax) makes “hope” bounce back and survive *literally* as the subject.

Funny from the point of view of form, this survival of “it” is both trivial and serious. It is structurally amusing, dead-serious in its literalness of refounding the word through sound. “Hope,” a word refitted by a narrator, makes a rebel of the reader who orates with one’s own mouth. Many lines in “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet” read as these examples do. Prepositions or transitive objects often move into subject locations (“But whisper / I am not utterly,” 40.3–4), making adverbs function as substantives. Verbs are frequently replaced or displaced by understudies of verbs, adverbs, and adverbial phrases (“Silky my breasts not his, mine, mine, to withhold / or tender, tender,” 38.2–3). Thus, named verbs have less action than the other parts of speech enacting the verbs’ roles. Missing subjects are doubled to make pronouns appear, underscoring their proportionate absence. Run-on sentences are often resolved on an indeterminacy (“—I cannot feel myself God waits,” 35.1), just as mid-sentence beginnings draw attention to the artifice of origins (“Bone of moaning: sung Where he has gone / a thousand summers by truth-hallowed souls; be still. Agh, he is gone!” 44.1–3). As Joseph Mancini, Jr. argues, Berryman’s reader “accurately and simultaneously hears and speaks the poem”³⁴ or, to put it another way, Berryman, after orally impregnating a written text, talks about hearing poems “with your eyes.”³⁵ By separating the prepositional phrases from their adverbial functions, by compressing time sequences into one, and by putting adjectives after nouns, the narrative breaks apart speaking from receiving, context from text, utterance from origins. The pattern isolates single words, “it,” “me,” “you,” “unchained,” making them peculiar, funny, literal, non-meaningful, unword-like, moments of spontaneous action and sound. To hear such words is to *say* them again to oneself—to keep the inexpressible alive as *merely* literal.

Such designed utterance that exploits the insider/outsider rhetoric that is a staple in the oral tradition makes grammar careen in new paths. When insider-outsiders momentarily stop being self-conscious about their own language, they become dislocated insiders, attuned to figurative language that is previously unnoticed. In each case, a separation of pronoun from action (whether by interruption, dislocation, or mixed grammar parts) removes the verb function, distributing its attributes among the surviving parts of speech, compelling them to be alive or, at least, to center momentarily. The passing privilege of verb action is forced, invented by translating inadequate pronouns to empowered "I's," and, finally, to inexpressibility as past, not present, tense. Doing this impels a need for a continuous stream of presumed outsiders, or misfit-insiders. These outsiders include, again, narrators of the inexpressible, who, one by one, openly re-presented inert language as alive, strange, alien to the ear, if not to the mouth. Look at these seven far-from-simple words in one sentence from Berryman's second stanza: "I summon, see, / From the centuries it" (133). In this direct address, "you," the subject of "see," is for a moment hidden. "I," therefore, is not the subject, as it appears, but part of the object. Thus narrating "I"—outsider "I"—is created from the inside out when "I summon" is framed by the narrating "[You] see . . ." The whole sentence is framed by a narrator who openly covers "see" in parallel next to "it" so that the buried "you" is reinvigorated as an insider to its own sentence. The narrator also subverts both narration (the fact of the frame) and "you" for a moment to make the words "see" and "it" disproportionately literal, odd, full of life, foreign to the ear, unmediated. "I" seems to be doing everything, summoning and seeing, but "I," as it turns out, is not the subject. Buried "you" literally is. Thus, as points of the sentence's momentum, "see" and "it" have exaggerated literalness and undue importance, each hanging upon the other in translation. In "see / From the centuries it," "you" does the seeing. "You" is made an outsider to be refashioned as never anything but an eye, *the* "I"—a "new" insider.

That temporal shift of presumed inadequacy to retrospective success, framing the inexpressible and always beyond past tense, is key to identifying the juncture between oral discourse and written frames that allow the appearance of acting oral. To say this differently: if a written text such as this is heard acting in the oral tradition, it does just what it continuously *proposes* to do, continuously adjusting itself to constraints. It performs itself or, as Henry B. Wonham heavily-handedly regards one form of exaggerated and oral discourse, "The meaning of a tall tale, in this oral scenario, is indistinguishable from the event of performance; significance is the product of

a transactive process that occurs in the rhetorical space between narrative presentation and response.”³⁶ Teller and listener are either indistinguishable or, put the other way, at any moment eligible as both, accomplished at both, never inhabiting the moment of the “rhetorical space” of what cannot be expressed. When that “rhetorical space” takes place in writing, it frames the future as the retroactive past: the past is itself a descendant of the future, born of the “heir” yet to come. In 1840, Evert Duyckinck makes this backwards case, and desire, clear, pointing to written authorship (a calling “sacred and apart”³⁷) as the epitome of such reasoning: “While other occupations are laid aside and forgotten when they have attained their immediate purpose, the Author’s employment is fresh and constant; it unites both means and end in itself; it is the race and the prize. . . . It is something to anticipate . . . the backward glances of the next generation” (20). In the tall tale, as Wonham again notes, language makes that glance itself its prize: it “feign[s] agreement” from readers “where none exists”³⁸ until the reader stops laughing *at* and begins to laugh *with* the same idiosyncrasies.

Like expression demanded in a dare from the inexpressibility topos, the tall tale is fundamentally a dare structure built on initial lament, framing feared inadequacy, skipping over any actual change in favor of conversion, or recasting something vague and large but agreed upon. What Wonham calls an “invitation for collusive agreement” (23) in the tall tale is a transformed rebirth, like the inexpressible topos, of the earlier modes of religious conversion. Designed to recast self-confidence from physical dangers of disappearance, or potential nonexistence, tall tales especially forge a coming together of tellers and listeners. An agreement to agree supersedes *either* multiple meanings *or* any expressible, single rendering of experience. Typical shaggy dog stories resemble these folk narratives that “invite interpretive commitment from listeners who lack either cultural experience or experience of the genre, or both.”³⁹ But there is a large difference between the tall tales and shaggy dogs. A shaggy dog story is, as Roger L. Welsch points out, “a parody of a joke.”⁴⁰ It is not as funny as the tall tale. The idea is to draw it out as long as one can, adding as many irrelevant details as possible before coming to the punch line that fizzles. Part of the joke of a shaggy dog story, thus, is that actually there is no joke, that is, no funny punch line. At the same time the whole experience of the shaggy dog story itself is not laughter at the absence of a joke, but something more than its encapsulated important fizzle. Its story is often barely a story at all and—like its core “meaning”—proves difficult to corner. The “insider” and “outsider” positions, therefore, are structurally blurred. Here is a prime example reported by Jan Harold Brunvand: “Two characters, animals or

humans, are in a dangerous situation. Often they are floating on a piece of ice which threatens to split up; sometimes in a canoe or on a high perch. One looks at the other and says 'Typewriter.' (Or, 'Radio,' 'Trees,' or other meaningless comment.)"⁴¹ This story ends with the teller laughing; yet the seemingly confident laughing (at very little) creates a crisis of understanding in the story's audience. Did the listeners get it or didn't they? Did they miss something obvious? Does the teller know more, or perhaps less, than they do?

Yet, one kind of shaggy dog, the no-point shaggy dog, takes this further. It seriously and actively invites listeners to constitute speakers, and offers everyone the potential to be an insider on a fizzle line. Here is a classic, again noted by Brunvand: "A man asks in a drug store for a pint of chocolate ice cream. 'We have no chocolate, but I can give you an aspirin.' 'How did you know I had a wooden leg.' 'I could tell by the rubber band around your head'" (68). And here is another that, as Brunvand observes, would be delivered "in a long drawn-out style with minute details, repetitions and elaborations" (44) between each of the following sentences: "A man keeps a barracuda (or sharks) in his swimming pool and no one knows why. Finally he agrees to tell his reason, but in going out to the pool to explain, he falls in and the barracuda eats him" (67). Since the dividing line between insiders and outsiders, though residually *there*, is blurred, not laughing becomes a nonalternative. That is, even though it seems that the framework of such shaggy dogs might create insiders and outsiders (those who get "it" and those who do not), in this and no-point shaggy dogs generally, almost everyone ends up being included one way or the other since, in effect, there is nothing to get. It is an embodiment of "the exact opposite of what a joke . . . 'ought to be."⁴²

The apparent absence of the shaggy dog *to mean* something can often impel its audience *to do* something to justify the listening to it. Writing on shaggy dog, the folklorist Brunvand notes, "here we move one more step away from the verbal joke and towards the practical."⁴³ He identifies the subtype, the no-point shaggy dog.⁴⁴ Brunvand explains the subtype more fully: "A completely nonsensical story with a wholly unrelated and pointless punch line is told to a group containing some dupes who believe that they are hearing a genuine joke. When those in-the-know laugh, the suckers wonder what's wrong with their sense of humor; whether they laugh or frown at the punch line, they are funny to behold" (44). In this subtype, the narrative or story is less central than the pressure on the audience who, to paraphrase Brunvand, can defensively collude in the act of nonmeaning and can go on the offensive instead: "[I]n practice listeners tend to fall in with the trick which they know is coming," Brunvand writes, "and to

relish the pointless verbosity of shaggy dog stories just as much as they do the pointed gag lines of straight jokes" (44). Overcompensating for an absent pointed narrative, an audience becomes a partner of the teller. A listener is driven both by the self-conscious fear of noninclusion (either by not getting it at all or by pretending the little is more than it is) and by the thrill of immediate self-congratulatory recovery.

As Eric Partridge notes, generally the more "inconsequence,"⁴⁵ the better. Those who do not get it may even pretend or, as Brunvand just noted, fall in with what they suspect is coming. While many tall tales, for instance, run the risk of alienating an audience by their regionalism, even there the murky nondescript "pointless" (44) shaggy dog especially can generate consensus among everyone. The laughter of listeners often produces only an *illusion* that there are outsiders or listeners being excluded from the joke. Partridge tells of the shaggy story's adaptability, recounting the arrival of a "very brilliant dog," which belongs to a stranger at "a 'local' in one of the London suburbs"; he observes, "so far as that goes, it might equally well have been a Paris or a New York suburb" (60). The shaggy dog also adapts itself to a relatively young population; it easily accommodates a shift in power from listeners to participants or "leaders," at least co-narrators, without an emphasis on knowledge or the past. The lines between those who laugh and those who find it silly and those who get indignant grow thin, as the swell of tellers rise.⁴⁶

Crucial linkages of misfit insiders, between shaggy dog dead-serious humor and same-language inexpressibility, run in the early nineteenth century (and later). Invitation to self-inclusions, indeterminacy and refittings, collusions between the author and audience grow out of these oral overlays on written texts. The shaggy dog, not to mention the inexpressible, inhabits Charles Brockden Brown's defensive, self-conscious, and periodic interpretation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "The character of a rhapsodist may not be well understood; I shall attempt to describe it with that caution and decency becoming one who is painting his own character."⁴⁷ The directive to tell in one's own insider-misfit voice orally reminds us of the folk tales. It allows us to understand Wonham's words about oral tall tales, "a concept of truth as what 'works,'"⁴⁸ but more particularly the "truth" is what already worked, past tense. In discussions on literature, authors such as Walter Channing or Theophilus Parsons often seem longwinded, but they are efficient from oral perspectives centered around inexpressibility. A written form that both self-consciously describes failures and claims immediate gain can join a felt need for immediate action. The English language, Whitman writes in 1855, "is brawny enough and limber and full *enough*" (25; emphasis added). With regard to the looming impediment of

language in the country, Whitman reverses liminal inadequacy ("enough") to declare victory (almost: "shall well nigh"), as we have seen: "It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible" (25).

The very same frames of inadequacy (the inexpressible, renewed literal language, the no-point shaggy dog) offer options where there has been impasse. Often both are expressed simultaneously. "I dislike inconsistency less than . . . the fear of giving oneself away," says André Gide, expressing a modern "fear" of "giving oneself away" to the wrong audience, the wrong words, even the idea of consistency. Gide continues, "I think too that here, as always, we are deceived by words, for language imposes on us more logic than often exists in life; and that the most precious part of ourselves is that which remains unformulated."⁴⁹ Here desirable narrative inconsistency is linked both to the inexpressible and to an earlier resistance to selecting badly something that is as yet formulated (just out of reach in a more immediate context), thereby equally resisting any acts of identification (always premature or falsely contextualized). In "Desultory Thoughts on Criticism," Washington Irving explains:

Seriously speaking, however, it is questionable whether our national literature is sufficiently advanced, to bear this excess of criticism; and whether it would not thrive better, if allowed to spring up, for some time longer, in the freshness and vigor of native vegetation. When the worthy Judge Coulter, of Virginia, opened court for the first time in one of the upper counties, he was for enforcing all the rules and regulations that had grown into use in the old, long-settled counties. "This is all very well," said a shrewd old farmer; "but let me tell you, Judge Coulter, you set your coulter too deep for a new soil."⁵⁰

Associated with perpetual freshness and nonformulation,⁵¹ modern self-conscious writing is often grounded historically in the topos of inexpressibility.

The inexpressibility Irving talks about runs in a line, as we have seen in chapter 2, for example, from St. Augustine to Chaucer to Milton to Eliot (though their concern is the failure of the human effort to match divine or perfected experience). This topos, again, generally begins with the inadequacy of words to express something transcending words. Ann Chalmers Watts notes that in "its pure form inexpressibility centers on language, not the speaker: the point is not that the speaker fails, though the speaker does, but that any tongue fails." She adds that "it acknowledges a struggle between word and not-word."⁵² In the modern era, it makes a general break to nothing but people, that is, words, discourse, and discontinuity

(all is a matter of distances). Referring to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Theodor W. Adorno, for example, densely explains one of the more recent endpoints: "Thought becomes both a means to produce meaning in the work, a meaning which cannot be rendered directly in tangible form, and a means to express the absence of meaning."⁵³

When unreliability of narration occurs in modern texts (for example, *The Waste Land*), the boundary between audience and speaker, "you" and "I," diminishes in a characteristic of oral humor: "'Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?' / But // O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—It's so elegant / So intelligent / 'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'"⁵⁴ An explicit example of this topos in the early modern period, Nathaniel Hawthorne's highly wrought "Wakefield," makes the author and listener interdependent: "If the reader choose, let him do his own meditation; or if he prefer to ramble with me through the twenty years of Wakefield's vagary, I bid him welcome."⁵⁵ "Wakefield" frames and twists the kind of rhetoric that was described in *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review* in 1847: "Every material organization exists to a moral end, which makes the reason of its existence."⁵⁶ In Hawthorne's story, the narrator, self-consciously throwing meaning to the wind, invites the reader's participation in the writer's own efforts toward the determination of what is perversely expressed—"done up neatly, and condensed into the final sentence"⁵⁷—while remaining ultimately inexpressible, unreadable, cooperatively underdetermined. Usually the procedure is less explicit. In a much later instance, Raymond Carver, for example, begins his story "Cathedral": "This blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-laws.' Arrangements were made."⁵⁸ The opening word "This" is exemplary. The tone is conversational; a reference has been made to a statement presumably already articulated. But "this" also presumes an intimacy with the audience that predates any possible kind of narrative divulgence. It establishes an initial collusion with the audience that can never be satisfied because, as a demonstrative adjective inside a repeating subject (one that doubles self-referentially as the pronoun "he") it has no prior referent, depending on the detail of its elaboration. The diction of funereal culmination—"Arrangements were made"—literally buries the joke. In both "Wakefield" and "Cathedral," highly self-conscious writing turns, in a word, from narrative to rhetoric, from statement to humor, and (in terms of performance) from telling to receiving.

Like shaggy dogs of oral participation, this writing concerned with an inconsequential core and an audience's crisis, adapts to both fear and self-assertion. In summary, written texts that surround a self-consciously

"inadequate" core with rhetoric make the audience a participant by acting oral. These written texts exploit regionalism, commonly and integrally linked with oral rendering, by denaturalizing it. "The individuality of the artist and his understanding of local norms and lore become factors in understanding performance," notes Augustine Okereke of oral performance. "The creativity, achievement, and realized element in narration interpret the behaviours of the locality in which the story originates."⁵⁹ The topical allusions in oral tales allow a regional audience to feel included. Wonham, who catalogued other trappings of oral tall tales and shaggy dogs, notes the frequency of "weather conditions, the habits of animals, or the hardships of life that are peculiar to a given region."⁶⁰ Regional experience is a determinant in what Wonham also calls "communal repudiation of alien points of view" (28). "Wakefield" and "Cathedral" are tentatively tied to regions, London, Connecticut, Seattle, for example. But summoning geography and oral traditions, both modern and extremely self-conscious texts repudiate self-identified outsiders, and identify place, much like their predecessors, as a means now to *denaturalize*, universalize, and potentially *renaturalize* character. Wakefield is framed "as it were, the Outcast of the Universe" (71), and the narrator's eyes in "Cathedral" are open only to an inner common landscape of a universal, still inexpressible, home: "My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything" (228).

In the oral strategies disadvantage is transformed into a passing fiction of advantage. Before the disadvantage is sent packing, it resumes what it never was, enabling its audience to collude in assenting to a self-declared nonfiction. Whitman's Preface dramatizes this sequence toward the end: "The poems distilled from other poems will *probably* pass away" (26; emphasis added)—if the listener participates in original ones and makes it so. The opening declaration of the Preface of 1855 itself, "America does not repel the past . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house" (5), declares the deed as good as done. Of course, it is here addressing the commonly expressed fear articulated in *The Port Folio* in 1807 that "[w]hatever benefit, moreover, we may, originally, have derived from our intimate connexion with Europe, it seems probable that it was ultimately injurious. The facility with which it procured us foreign literature, and particularly that of the parent state, so well adapted to our taste and our wants, may be supposed to have repressed the exercise of our own genius."⁶¹ In a long framing footnote inside the 1876 Preface to the two-volume Centennial Edition of *Leaves of Grass* and "Two Rivulets," the Preface's discourse in another carryover from the oral traditions turns disadvantage to advantage, and values in particular what never

“was” by convincing readers that it is now so, and has enough left to turn modern “utterance” out of the ineffable “clue”: “Thus, for *enclosing clue* of all . . . ‘Leaves of Grass’ entire is not to be construed as an intellectual or scholastic effort or poem mainly, but more as a radical *utterance* . . . adjusted to, perhaps born of, Democracy and the Modern—in its very nature regardless of the old conventions, and under the great laws, following only its own impulses” (1011; emphasis added). The spoken ineffable is not immune to parody, as Henry James shows in “The Figure in the Carpet”: “Drayton Deane’s want of voice, want of form” is not insurmountable, just more literally unpracticed; “He simply hadn’t the art to use what he knew; he literally was incompetent. . . .”⁶² Therefore, James’s narrator finally says as a dead serious joke on the ineffable, “I told him in a *word* just what I’ve written here” (400; emphasis added).

If framing fictions of the Middle Ages, as Judith M. Davidoff notes, have “an interesting capacity to transform an essentially non-narrative core into narrative,”⁶³ so the linked tradition of the inexpressible and the no-point shaggy dog has an “interesting capacity” to transform an essentially narrative core of circular meaninglessness into participatory nonfiction: the discourse of inadequacy is turned into a dead-serious action. Beginning in religion and politics, the inexpressible, premised in language’s inadequacy, becomes common and popular through humor and dead seriousness. The ground beneath it changes: no longer is inadequacy commonly measured in terms of attempted flourish and failure. Its journey finds instead participation in the misfit-insider to the self-conscious outsider and then back: to participation through self-translation. Although this transformation is flanked with a fear of imitation on the one side and of ventriloquism on the other, neither fits easily. This adaptation of the inexpressible is a search to find a beginning from inside the perceived dead end (where no achievement is possible with the language). Thus it turns back time in orally acting collusions, while making language a physical matter of *written* characters (capable of being exported) and *future* character (capable of being imported) on the page.

In oddities such as “Wakefield” or “Bartleby,” readers find a thick shaggy dog—a story that ought to be told if only it can be, and thin characters. Despite the appearance of super self-conscious writing, “Bartleby” yields, on the flip side of the coin, wide results of written texts acting oral. My aim is not to engage in a close reading of every aspect of “Bartleby,” but to include another context and direction in particular on the story’s structures. Todd F. Davis points to an important change of emphasis when he writes, “I agree with Liane Norman’s contention that the story ‘insists on the reader’s implication in a puzzling, disturbing, and even accusing

experience,' that the reader is both participant and judge. Yet this kind of participation and the judgments that inevitably follow, seem to tell readers more about their own individual struggles than the struggles of the lawyer in 'Bartleby.'⁶⁴ The dead serious rebound of this collaborative audience points in part to a parody of a joke recognizable in shaggy dog stories. What inhibits the telling of "Bartleby" is a central fear about having a story to tell in the first place, a fear delivered by the lawyer's stated insecurities about even beginning what he has to say: "While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done."⁶⁵ Davis still attempts, however, to prop up the lawyer through more standard characterization: "If we are to understand Bartleby or Nippers or Turkey or Ginger Nut or even the lawyer himself, we may do so only through the words of the lawyer."⁶⁶ This desire to "understand" presumes that the lawyer, in relatively traditional narrative terms, can "learn" or "see" or change. But that is not necessarily so. Although claiming that Bartleby has little to offer for identification, the lawyer himself hardly does much better; Bartleby presents an enigma restrained exactly by what the lawyer names as "safe" (14), where readers look to explore narrative change in character. The lawyer's own safety ("All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man," 14) gives, of course, an improper and conservative context to Bartleby's literal utterances of refusals to *copy* or *mimic*. It sets up a demand for the translation of Bartleby's English back to another English, as it already is, even if unrecognized and effectively inexpressible in the contexts that the lawyer provides. To expect Bartleby or the lawyer to change insists on certain traditions or stakes of narrative: but no change of character is necessarily demanded of the lawyer from the perspective of a tale that acts oral, for he offers a foil that frames the story's move toward the oral. That suggests a joke and, again, a serious one. A joke structure, in particular the no-point shaggy dog structure, undergirds the tale. This opening is a set-up, and it is similar to a no-point shaggy dog that exemplifies nothing *but* a frame for what is already there (Bartleby, say)—there is no "meaning"—if not *yet* called its "proper" name. Therefore, as in oral delivery, important time frames of instantaneousness are at stake in the reader's participation.

In the lawyer's mouth Bartleby is a dead metaphor, or what is called a "safe" metaphor,⁶⁷ and appropriately his history ends up in the dead letter office. Again while narrative interpretations of "Bartleby" commonly depend on change (in the lawyer's awakening, or absence of it, for instance, at the end of the tale), the seriousness of the no-point shaggy dog and its dead metaphors defy time and pursue "presentness"—what Michael Fried calls a "continuous and entire *presentness*" or the "perpetual creation of

itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness.”⁶⁸ Similar to the inexpressible, metaphor in Aristotle’s designation is improper naming, which suggests current inadequacy, or lack.⁶⁹ Karsten Harries says, “refusal of metaphor is inseparably connected with the project of pride, the dream of an unmediated vision, a vision that is not marred by lack, that does not refer to something beyond itself that would fulfill it.”⁷⁰ Like the inexpressible, it also resists paraphrase, as Bartleby himself resists the lawyer’s paraphrase of himself. Under this rubric, metaphor pursues presentness and is inimical to paraphrase or mimicry, and again, like the inexpressible, it stimulates perpetual “corrective action” that cannot be achieved since, as an “erroneous statement,” it immediately conflicts with expectations.⁷¹

Dead metaphors, though, are special, closer to certain kinds of jokes, where listeners encounter, as Ted Cohen explains, “first the realization that it *is* a joke.”⁷² Referring to Cicero, Doreen Innes explains that dead metaphors, as part of customary speech, can seem a proper term, short of the usual notion for a metaphor in movement to “different” place (11). These metaphors, in addition, thus need translation *back* to a point of what Cohen calls again a “special invitation” in which the speaker and receiver “actively engage one another in coping with a piece of language.” The piece, he continues, must be penetrated “in order to grasp the import, for that import is not exactly *in* the remark itself.” He points out that both the speaker and receiver engender a “cooperative act of comprehension” (9) since there is “no real point in forcing the connections” (10); dead metaphors, all the more, have long-lost threads of original movement or alienation. Such metaphors, Cohen says tellingly, cultivate intimacy “*all at once*” (11; emphasis added).

If metaphor may be “improper naming,” perpetually inexpressible in its pursuit of presentness, a dead metaphor does something different in relation to the inexpressible: it puts the inexpressible—what is not exactly *in* the remark itself—into a time frame that is as yet unfinished. A dead metaphor does not improperly name, but it *frames* “improper naming” for the purpose of re-alienation and ultimately complicity in the recognition. It defies time. It dares time to deliver, not a noted change in character, for instance, but to use Cohen’s word, the “intimacy” that legitimizes a character of response already on hand, but so far perceived as lacking. There need not be change, just instantaneousness; “all at once” is how Cohen puts it, a collective self-recognition can offer intimacy “without any exegesis.” “Jokes of this kind,” he adds importantly, “are the ones most clearly undermined by any need for instruction in the background material” (11). Thus Bartleby’s background material, from this direction, is *by definition* immaterial, irrelevant. What is not immaterial is daring time to frame instantly

what Cohen calls "intimacy," along with Bartleby's inexpressibility; that is, what already exists in a moment of initiation, if unencumbered by changing character or exegesis.

Daring time, "Bartleby" aims at fusing two jokes. The first is the lawyer's obvious attempts to impose a frame of character in his world; its inconsequence is also part of the second joke, his forcing what Partridge calls "a *non sequitur*, not of faulty logic, but of attitude and response"⁷³ that is not connected (nor, in Welsch's words, "all that funny"⁷⁴). The structure of "Bartleby" dares the reader as listener to pick the *less offensive* of the two such jokes: Bartleby is immaterial or Bartleby is unoriginal. The lawyer's reasonable response to Bartleby's being immaterial, however, is mocked by his melodramatic recognition at the end that he may have seen too late "some strange magic" (44), a magic and "grass-seed" (44) surrounding Bartleby that he himself did not "select." Among other things, that is a joke. There is not enough there, of course, to make such a selection; Bartleby's actual "magic" is absent to anyone, since Bartleby stands in as an inexpressible; his is also, therefore, a stand-in for complicity, and the lawyer engages only in the *kind* of complicity that points to Bartleby's death, not the kind of complicity that brings him through participation to life. This second joke concerning complicity around the inexpressible or "unmeaningful" suggests a weird and parodic echo of the desire for "originality of character": the appeal of the story can be leveled to the dreaded "absence" of character and writing. That is, in contrast to merely the mundane and quotidian presence of the lawyer, Bartleby is a dead metaphor (transferred from the Dead Letter Office). But in relation to the inexpressible, he is even one tier above that: he is *at least* an absent character. In the rubric of inexpressibility, immateriality trumps unoriginality. His absence means that a character *could be* present at that moment, or later, if recognized. This is exactly a dramatization of the inexpressible as it appears in "Bartleby." Just as "rude" was a derogatory comment for Edward Channing in 1816 and becomes transformed into a virtue, so Bartleby's absence is really a new possibility of an inexpressed figure who could not only materialize, but for the first time do so originally. It is no longer a dead metaphor; it offers the possibility of generation; as Innes explains, a "dead metaphor remains latent metaphor and may be revived" (27).

Such a sequence of response is akin to what happens in the shaggy dog. Unlike the laughter in the written tale (tied to the characters), this laughter in "Bartleby" is relevant to what happens in the shaggy dog. To be joined to the teller, the audience who does not get the joke responds as if it does. In this context, Bartleby is like the aspirin in Brunvand's shaggy dog. The fusion of jokes is present because of the exploitation of dead metaphor, the

hovering shaggy dog outline, the translation of language, and the inexpressible.

To see this even more fully, it is necessary to purposefully meander a bit. In “The Negative Structures of American Literature,” Terence Martin finds the rhetorical achievement of “absence”⁷⁵ a mixed bag. An “enduring signature” of American literature, “the promise of an original world,” he argues, is an active “negative impulse” in fiction (22). His classic “overblown” and “serious” example is taken from Sylvester Judd’s *Margaret: A Tale of the Real and the Ideal* from 1845. It includes this scene, firing up New England from the ashes of old England: “We have no monarchical supremacy, no hereditary prerogatives, no patent nobility, no Kings” (1). From this rhetoric of negation and clarification emerges promise, as Martin write, though it also “suggests the potential terror of absence” (22). He names both “The Beast in the Jungle” and “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as “stories that court terror and enigma by making the confrontation of nothing a subject in itself” (19).⁷⁶ Of course this points as well to what Philip Fisher calls a “loose-fitting, minimal identity” or “thinness of character,”⁷⁷ relevant to “Bartleby.”⁷⁸ The more Bartleby himself is described, the more he disappears as an overwritten character, and the more he reappears as the shaggy dog’s fizzle. His famous line, “I would prefer not to,”⁷⁹ as in oral tall tales, massages “the same spot as long as . . . listeners can stand it.” J. Russell Reaver continues that it “indulges in this vertical vertigo of story structure,” in which the story stretches “upward from its base in a remarkable event, on top of which equally extraordinary events are piled.”⁸⁰ Only here the “remarkable” events are not remarkable, and the “spot” of Bartleby is just that, a point of no origin. So the parody on the tall tale, stretched to shaggy dog limits, makes a double-edged absence serve as its fizzle. A frame in a tall tale conventionally “prepare[s] the audience for the transition to a fantastic world” (374), Reaver points out, suggesting that it is “where the imaginary hypotheses are respected” (373). The no-point shaggy dog structure of “Bartleby” respects the parody, wherein Bartleby’s “lack of origin” is both parodied and “respected.”

Although Bartleby is designed to remain shadowy, the narrative and written self-consciousness do not rescue the story. They practically, or more precisely in oral practice, sink it. Once more, we listen, “While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life,” the narrator says, “of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done.”⁸¹ The lawyer writes the story, of course, but “Bartleby” is full of exactly these qualifying statements that, in the story’s frame, give the details of the story depth or, at least, breadth. Speaking of the tall tale, Ariane Dewey writes, “the fight [in it] was so desperate, to take it seriously was to surrender.”⁸² Yet writing a spontaneity

of time (that never was) does take a fight for retrieving what the oral more traditionally offers over time, what Okereke calls indisputable "communicative competence." He cautions: "Folklore texts are, in most cases, tedious to read."⁸³ As these frames might seem to sound like (rhetorically) oral texts, their transcriptions are frequently tiresome to read. But this is not the case when they are heard out loud, oral. These frames highlight rhetorical practices that are more auditory in practice. Focused on persuasion and dissent, they have their origins in talking.

"Bartleby" is a very slippery construction. The tale, among its many rolls and roles, is not *about* a character, but *about* character. This distinction is important. A response to anxiety and self-distancing, for one, "Bartleby" concerns among other things articulation of a received English language. Although it has common figurative techniques of fiction, they are but red herrings from this perspective, a perspective that Partridge identifies as one of the many "cosy human" touches that shaggy dogs set into motion.⁸⁴ Bartleby's character or "being" can be seen in an entirely different register.⁸⁵ This, precisely, is where the desire for intimacy, a spontaneity, an adaptation to constraints—all linked to characteristics of the oral, and voice in particular—come in. Considered especially in light of what Elizabeth Tonkin calls the "oral narrative's character of time unfinished,"⁸⁶ Bartleby's "character" comes out. Since "time is one of the essential things [oral] stories are about" (3), so is order as it relates in "the promise of an original world" to an "all at once" history and demand of intimacy without exegesis in "Bartleby." Sorting out "history-as-lived" and "history-as-recorded" is difficult. As Tonkin says, "It is easy to slip from one meaning [of history] to another" (2). The fact of a few written scraps as Bartleby's background seems a hindrance to the story (just as Bartleby himself is characterized by the narrator as a hindrance in his office). Heard differently it is the point of an oral strategy that puts pressure on ordering "what comes first." A typical shaggy dog, according to Partridge, needs to have an ending or *dénouement*, again, of inconsequence: "a gaily illogical psychological inconsequence."⁸⁷ Order and the instantaneous initiation of it is all there is, if it is there at all.

This combination of Bartleby's measly written origins along with the joke practices on dead metaphors (making that intimacy and order of origins all there is) puts extraordinary pressure on readers to locate beginnings and endings, or, as Wonham vividly describes it, a "collaborative game" in assimilating a yarn spinner from an audience (23). This fundamental desire to make a speaker from a hearer is antithetical to how such disorientation is sometimes read. For example, on the continuum with modernism's famous loss of the temporal, postmodernism is often described

as “bottomless fragmentation” and the “collapse of time horizons and the preoccupation with instantaneity.”⁸⁸ While these identifications of time only point to the rhetorical complexity of effects, they do not tell us much about what happens in “Bartleby” (59).⁸⁹ In acting oral, commensurate with joke structures and the lost point of dead metaphors, all the “story” wants (and that is a wry but damned serious “all”) is for the readers, first as listeners and then as yarn spinners, to *order* the elusive “first” from the measly written *origins* of Bartleby to the inevitability of *originality* and written character. In 1809 Ames took a stab at order, resorting to presence in the present (notwithstanding genius, originality, national literature, or language): “Our honors have not faded—they have not been won. Genius no doubt exists in our country. . . .”⁹⁰ Bartleby, then, does not, for example, substantially refigure Jesus denied by Peter, though Jesus as a figure of the inexpressible frames and transposes perceptions of time: “. . . though now ye see *him* not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, *even* the salvation of *your* souls.”⁹¹ Bartleby does not essentially represent an idea of imaginative purity wasted by pragmatism. He is, to add a metaphor, essentially nonrepresentative. This helps to encircle why “Bartleby” has stated trouble in its beginning and ending.⁹² The narrator’s movement—from the first word in the story (“I,” 13) to the last word (“humanity,” 45)—takes place as a sequence importantly by having the first word “I” literally precede the last word “humanity.” In practice such a sequence gives birth in narrative to a “before” and an “after.” But it is not so in “Bartleby.” Voice and a desired original “character,” epitomized in Bartleby who likes “to be stationary” (138), remain inaudible; and without translation there is no defining point of origin. Translation—the slide or movement in time of one language (and character) from underneath the other—is thus initiated, attempting to forego exegesis. Literally there is no irony to this written frame that acts oral. Irony suggests perception of a gap or distance, but “Bartleby” includes the act of founding, distancing, a characteristic gap, separation of character from (a perceived nonoriginal) character.

From the perspective of the inexpressible and dead metaphor, “Bartleby,” then, has little that resembles a conventional narrative’s beginning, middle, or end. It never loses sight of its thematic, desired “originality”: Bartleby’s famous refusal to copy in “I’d prefer not to.” But in order to be heard, originality in a very specific sense has itself to be reinitiated. In many ways, finally, the order in “Bartleby” is not a story of perceived originality, but of translated “originals” in speakers. Stripped to its bones, it is a tall order. Like a tall tale (which generally is funny) and a shaggy dog (which is not), this kind of story, in effect, demands to lack consequence.

Replicating the dilemma of an identical or doubled English, either every speaker is perceived as original, or no speaker is perceived as original. Or, as matter of proof, all (another matter) are. This is akin to the special advertisement for the missing dog that helped to define the early shaggy dog tale—a story that also should always be told in one's own words. This condition is exacerbated when the language spoken and heard is perceived to be identical with another's, and painfully so since the "other" English is the "original." In "Bartleby," characters translate the expressible backwards and forwards into the (as yet) inexpressible; they show the force of dead metaphor; they dramatize the vitality of the literal; and they frame the tale so results can be named, without knowing, a *fait accompli*.

I am not done with "Bartleby." The eponymous hero is a subject who frames the possibility of a "selectable" character. Poised for narrative the reader finds a vanishing point of character, initiation without origin; Bartleby is more literal than the usual "character," and the story of his mark on the world, all but absent, builds self-dramatizing humor. Unlike modes that depend upon preventing "the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self,"⁹³ as Paul de Man puts it, this kind of inexpressible, pulling back from narrative, creates a double that destroys narrative. Bartleby epitomizes, then, John Miles Foley's evocation of an oral tradition: a "lack of textual tidiness" (4), often "unnerving" to trace (4), a process rather than a product (23), a series of enactments (22), "[a]lways different and yet always the same . . . *implied and instanced*" (23; emphasis in original), and therefore canonically impossible to recover: "We cannot file it, title it, edit and translate it as we would a papyrus manuscript. . . ."⁹⁴ Bartleby's apparent lack of province appears up front, especially if eyed, or *abducted* by the lawyer (André Kukla's term): "I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man." "Bartleby," the lawyer continues, "was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small."⁹⁵ The story "Bartleby" suggests a frame moving very quickly to give itself the textual vestiges of an oral culture by *acting out* some oral patterns, but the oral qualities only *embody* character traits. Bartleby is not a clever hero, not a decision maker, not a problem solver. This element of performance in the text does more than simulate oral delivery: oral strategies are brought to written texts. The frame of the story, as we have seen, features a man who, not coincidentally, lacks identifiable origins. It pinpoints, as will be shown, a culture of order by dramatizing, instead, a sequence *for* being able to order.

In this frame story the narrative maps "character," while holding back its character; it maps a desire to equate character with origins, originality,

point zero, rebirth itself. This can be seen sharply if we glance at Pip in *Great Expectations*, narrated by middle-aged, sad and wiser, Pip. Pip is born in first-person narrative between two identifiable, and inevitably hostile, cross-purposed identities: “My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.”⁹⁶ (Actually there are more than two names.) With his two p’s Pip is obviously funny but thick with irony of birth, the price of human and social emergence. Bartleby has two b’s and only an air of confidence; he is unlike Pip, a character who negotiates his name. Spreading out possibility for himself, Bartleby is more a placeholder for teleology and ideas of origin and plurality than a character like Pip trying to understand tombstones and his own origins. Therefore, though young Pip’s uncertainties, even including revenge, can be laughed at and withstand it, paradoxically Bartleby’s lack of sureness cannot be; his literal and self-conscious thinness, held together by the mechanics of oral underpinnings, prevents it. And that is due to the written frame that distinguishes “Bartleby” from an oral shaggy dog story. Indeed, the written frame defies the oral laughter in the name of character that it initially engages.

It is difficult to characterize the tale’s shape, and that includes its title character: “Bartleby is not a character in *the manner of the usual, imaginative, fictional construction*,” Elizabeth Hardwick writes. “He is indeed only words, wonderful words, and very few of them.”⁹⁷ Sometimes the tale is understood as a corporate parable, negotiating its Wall Street trappings or questions of the Dead Letter Office in Washington. From a certain perspective, there is keen interest in the lawyer’s story, if not more than in Bartleby’s, in part because the story is told from the lawyer’s point of view; yet the lawyer’s character also cedes narrative integrity to the dare of a joke structure, as “Bartleby” paradoxically attempts to generate a more literal and plural “character” than a narrative character. Specifically, the frame presumes an accomplishment that has yet to be resolved, character in a missing “canon” of figures for which, potentially, there is *merely* a missing narrative. In “Bartleby,” the designated narrator-*writer* proposes a biography of one of the “singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been *written* . . .” (13; emphasis added). Bartleby himself is literally thin in body and recognizability:

I was quite sure he never visited any refectory or eating house; while his pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men; that he never went any where in particular that

I could learn; never went out for a walk, unless indeed that was the case at present; that he had declined telling who he was, or whence he came, or whether he had any relatives in the world. (28)

The narrator reiterates that his sources for this particular biography are likewise thin: Again, "I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man" (13). Usually the subject precedes the biography; here biography attempts to elicit the subject or character or both simultaneously. Attempts to draw out Bartleby, the man, pin "unabducibility" (the inability, in Kukla's words, to express something because "no suitable sentence for it ever comes to mind for consideration as a possible speech act"⁹⁸) at best to the lawyer's inadequate characterizations; attempts to elicit Bartleby the self-conscious subject of biography identify inadequacy in, more literally, the character of the lawyer, fading in its way from written narrative to joke structure: ". . . my first grand point," the lawyer admits (according to the late John Jacob Astor) is "prudence; my next, method" (14), especially when that method is immediately underscored by "babble" and "doggerel," a "creative process," Northrop Frye notably explains, "left unfinished through lack of skill";⁹⁹ the lawyer persists to pronounce "a name [John Jacob Astor] which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion."¹⁰⁰ While this babble has what Frye names a "prose initiative" in position and greed, it pointedly "tries to make itself associative by an act of will, and it reveals the same difficulties that great poetry has overcome at a subconscious level."¹⁰¹ Bartleby of this thin and inexpressible singular biography, in contrast to the lawyer's gigantic acts of will, literally stands in for this "great literature" or character, already having overcome such difficulties of babble. The narrator's doggerel and self-disqualifications are framed by certain joke structures. Characteristic of long jokes that build on babble and non sequitur of response (not of logic),¹⁰² they denote an absence of a dénouement, destroy pompousness of reception as well as delivery, and make room for the presence of "unexpectedness"¹⁰³ itself. The narrator's self-consciousness makes already too clear a lack of qualifications for writing in particular *nonfiction* (a "biography") of this man and province. As a frame, the story shifts this utterance back into (a different) nonfiction: that is, it turns an "expressed inability to express" into the very fiction, or joke, of the lawyer's own narrative character—not the lawyer *as* a character, even ironically. It dares, therefore, a new, "cleaner" nonfiction from inside its own action of plurality. It demands putting into order exactly what is not there, replacing the inconsequential and "minute details, repetitions, and elaborations."¹⁰⁴

“Cathedral,” again, is an example of just this kind of frame that really works entirely neither as a story nor as irony, but equally as something akin to the shaggy dog story in which the story presents and underscores a non sequitur. In a more conventional frame, you might judge which character—one or the other or both or neither—can see. But in “Cathedral” neither character can be judged separately from the joke strategy. One needs to hear Carver’s story and, through its frame, the playfulness and deadly seriousness—again, the parody of the joke. “However absurd it may be,” as Partridge says, “a ‘shaggy dog’ must never be silly.”¹⁰⁵ This kind of story can be considered not so much a written story as a particular kind of performance. In this frame, like many older ones, the speaker is reluctant, or refuses to make a claim at all. The opening to “Cathedral” may not appear to generate a frame from that “loss” of character. It is worth pausing before it. The doubling between the blind man and the speaking “I” does something in addition to setting up redemptive symbolism.¹⁰⁶ It resequences the story as having at least one voice more than the speaking character’s voice for narration. Once more, here is the opening: “This blind man, an old friend of my wife’s, he was on his way to spend the night.”¹⁰⁷ The narrator, like a tall-tale spinner, “projects multiple verbal meanings at once by addressing at least two audiences,” Wonham notes, “and his utterance is calculated to mean something different to each.”¹⁰⁸ The “he” is a placeholder, a grammatically unnecessary unit. Its grammatical inaccuracy points to a double start, a natural frame. The sentence is technically compromised, suggesting an oral gesture of composition from inside a written one. It “demands,” as Partridge says about the shaggy dog story, “an apt and imperceptible mingling of narrative and dialogue.”¹⁰⁹ The second lead, “he,” with its redundancy, identifies the speaking “I” as (only) one narrator, opening up the “I” as the “he” that the “he” is simultaneously recording as an “I”/eye. The humor of narration is blatant in the need to make clear which man/narrator is spending the night with the wife: who is on his way to spend the night? Closer now to the parody of a joke, the shaggy dog (sometimes called a “groaner”) is like the narrators themselves who are “laughing their heads off.”¹¹⁰ If we are not sure of the actors, we are equally not sure what is narrated. Partridge explains, “the ‘lead-in’ and the ‘lead up’ have had to be deceptively leisurely and almost diffuse.”¹¹¹ This kind of frame leads in from a single hoop, with an oral nod to the audience, “by which the audience, the performer, and the performance world are united in the event, while retaining their distinct identities”¹¹²; the performance identifies two disqualified narrators: the speaking “I” with clear written defects and the blind man with obvious physical ones.

Considered as a performance, these elements of the shaggy dog make sense as a sequence of discursive framing. Further, these disqualifications are meant to be literal, in which exaggeration "begins to act literally" and makes an incongruous picture.¹¹³ The story's symbolism, despite attempts to overread it, paradoxically flattens. Even though "Cathedral" lacks the differentiation attributable, say, to frames such as "The Ant and the Grasshopper" by Somerset Maugham or "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James, it is still characterized by framing that is particularly conjoined to the topos of the inexpressible. It is put into motion by the "character" that Channing might have described as "absent," now humorously and literally so, splitting that absent character minimally into two false starts, that is itself the initiation. This story puts into immediate effect two simultaneous openings, at least two narrators, each undermining, not corroborating, the authority of the other. The story rejects conventional narrator and subject; it does not accept the commonly used gap of irony within a conventional frame (there is not, "Perhaps I could have saved him, with only a word, two words, out of my mouth. Perhaps I could have saved us all. But I never spoke them," as in Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*¹¹⁴). The discourse impatiently and effectively (defined by outcome) creates stages of narrative, as frames, by which to challenge unqualified success from qualified statements. From an opening and acknowledged defeat, these frames turn out written declarations, which bear an uncanny resemblance to frames themselves. Both defensively refuse meaning in favor of action. Both are dependent conditions of writing, not speaking, for acting in oral ways, while acting out the gap. In statement they explicitly refuse change, but rhetorically predicate changelessness on syntactically complex acts of perceptual change. Both rely upon non-oral origins for temporal complexities of revisited verbs built from seemingly progressive and simple statements.

My comments on "Bartleby" and "Cathedral" and "Wakefield" and "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" and shaggy dogs and no-point shaggy dogs and tall tales should fold back to encircle a temper and rhetoric I have tried to map. I do not want to blur important differences in works or in genres and subcategories or time. "Bartleby" has a different voice and energy from "Cathedral." No one would confuse Berryman's cadences and crossovers for Hawthorne's formal labyrinths. Yet in each of them, frames (again what Tannen names "*structures of expectations*" (24; emphasis in original) or the "footing" (26) between speaker and hearer (26), dramatize the problem of distancing English from English. In this rhetoric, the reemergence of the topos of the inexpressible utilizes other local traditions,

such as shaggy dog and no-point shaggy dog humor to turn passive listeners into active participants. For written frames of rhetorical and historical complexity, strategies of orality help to allow them to make sense. Bonnie D. Irwin notes that the “frame tale depicts these [oral] storytelling events in all their variety and in the process carries many of the keys to oral performance onto the printed page.”¹¹⁵ The oral approach to this kind of framing discourse can retrieve the humor and desire for inclusion of each single listener from the rhetorical and temporal complexity of a topos often linked, in traditions of the divine, to the atemporal. As John Miles Foley explains, oral approaches to “*the degree to which the text promotes—and its readership continues—a tradition of reception,*” and, again, “[t]o the extent that an audience is able to co-create the work by enriching its textual integers and bridging its gaps of indeterminacy according to the rules of the idiom.”¹¹⁶ This framing discourse uses overstated and, in particular, overwritten disadvantage (such as the now familiar perceived language doubled with England’s) straight to performed, oral strategies of advantage.

A small poem from *The Dial* in 1841, called “The Future is better Than the Past,” captures both the temporal complexity and simple impatience framing the present moment and perceived missing “voices”¹¹⁷ of the landscape. Framed and opened instead by where it is not, “*Not* where long-passed ages sleep” (1.1; emphasis added), the “real Eden” (1.16) is still “afar” (1.33), yet in persistent unity, with the inexpressible present, ultimately untouched and untouchable by either toil, hope, or time: “It is coming, it shall come, / To the patient and the striving. . . . Stir nor toil nor hope shall mar / Its immortal unity” (lines 17–18; 35–36).¹¹⁸