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## Distancing English

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## CHAPTER 5

# THE INEXPRESSIBLE AND THE THING ITSELF

A discourse of inadequacy, delivered through frames built around the inexpressible, combines written and oral discourse. It has the former's organization and complexity, the latter's economy. It has, moreover, discursive links to modern preoccupations with the center that cannot hold, the elusive "Thing Itself." Wallace Stevens famously calls it that and self-consciously frames it as a set-up: "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." Robert Pogue Harrison puts the self-conscious, modern desire this way: "The craving for the thing itself, for reality in its first idea, is impossible to satisfy except in a self-consuming anticipation of that which has already happened yet which has not yet happened." He adds, "The beginning 'of that which is always beginning, over and over,' to quote from Stevens's poem 'St. Armorer's Church from Outside' (*CP*, 530), never really begins, for the moment it begins it has already fallen away from the beginning."<sup>1</sup> There are familiar chords: the inexpressible "first idea," or birth, or demarcation of origin that modernism relegates as "itself a myth" (671) playing out in recognizable and longstanding frames of inexpressibility, redundancy of language in relation to strains of

teleology, ideas of “originality,” and, in particular, time sequences relegated to failed “latecomers.” For instance, when Harrison writes regarding Stevens’s poem, “It means that from the moment we became historical we have been latecomers, and that nature in its first idea always comes too early for us” (671), we hear a modern dictum that for earlier self-designated “latecomers” is experienced and laid out, as we have heard, literally and defensively. *The Port Folio* (1807) puts it grandly tongue-in-cheek: “If the ancients have got the start of us in point of time, it must be granted that we moderns have far exceeded them in almost every other respect.”<sup>2</sup> And forty-three years later the reviewer from *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* explicitly labels the American shortcomings: “After the Americans had established their political nationality beyond cavil, and taken a positive rank among the powers of the civilized world, they still remained subject to reproach . . . in the worlds of Art, Science, Literature.”<sup>3</sup> The politics of seeming to appear late to the English language, late to literature, late to genius (in each instance, not “first”) puts pressure on the same topos of inexpressibility to present what “comes too early” as inevitably yet to come. Looking at written frames that act oral, built on an atypical discourse of the ineffable, is just the beginning of thinking about what happens when a self-conscious self-promotion emerges from commercial, religious, and choral roots of the inexpressible.<sup>4</sup>

Multiple starts toward the “thing itself” (toward an imagined literature, for example) can be defensively organized after political independence around a perceived inexpressibility. Attempts to express an inexpressible English inside English are nudged, in Kukla’s philosophical language, into a temporal world of unabducibility and unselectability by the topos of the inexpressible, and the discursive results frequently predate the historical indeterminacy and reformulated inadequacies commonly found in modernist expressions of the latecomer, as in the following from Ezra Pound: “For three years, out of key with his time, / He strove to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain ‘the sublime’ / In the old sense. Wrong from the start—// No, hardly, but seeing he had been born in a half savage country, out of date.”<sup>5</sup> While just what cannot be expressed changes ideologically, there is common ground in a preoccupation with an absent “center.”<sup>6</sup> Earlier, the center is linked to what is specifically and potentially “dead” in the same-English language, fingering a perceived inferiority. This American self-promotion is transmogrified into a temporal matter, certain if elusive: “America has a great and noble task *before her* in literature,” notes the *American Review* in 1845, “and we firmly believe the power and capacity to do it. The beginnings are faint and scattered, but the elements *are here*.”<sup>7</sup> From the same journal four months later we hear,

“surely we ought to be wiser than to plume ourselves yet upon our literary position. We need have no doubts of our destiny in this respect.”<sup>8</sup>

Such self-conscious concern with progress rears its head early and often. It is acknowledged, and defended, in *The Democratic Review* in 1847:

A writer in the last Oct. number of the North American Review, says, that “an intense national self-consciousness, though the shallow may name it patriotism, is the worst foe to the true and generous unfolding of national genius.” Against the opinion of this learned Theban, we set the high authorities we have already cited; we set the fact, that Greece, Rome and England, the nations which have possessed the most intense self-consciousness, whose writers have been most penetrated by the sense of nationality, and with whose people patriotism has risen almost into a religious sentiment,—have excelled all the other states of the world in their literature, no less than in their physical prowess.<sup>9</sup>

Defensiveness about failures to identify *the* (translated to the *as yet*) inexpressible idiom is a forerunner of the modern era’s self-consciousness and plurality, what William James calls the “interrupted and discontinuous” nature of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> In the rise of international modernism with its profound ethos of self-consciousness it is important not to miss the important historical continuity of discourse on the topos of the inexpressible. Modern frames often embody an earlier self-consciousness that would appear in an equally elusive “thing itself” (if named more particularly, such as “National Poetic Literature”). In the earlier period this elusive demand is perceived more literally than the modern “first” instance or a dreaded (too) late one; nineteenth-century complaints concerning authorship and genius illuminate a perceived hole in “our native country, whose genius, hitherto, has not been that of [literary] invention”<sup>11</sup> Discourse of the inexpressible finds acts of language that frame as already achieved what is manqué, both lacking and dearly missed or lost.

Often the ideological and philosophic principles of writers, such as those loosely grouped around the Bergsonian nexus of flux, perception, and duration, are said to epitomize modernity without recognizing in particular longstanding historical and rhetorical practices. Discussing a threshold for humanism in modernist thought, Michael Levenson writes, “subjectivity will become the foundation and support for a range of threatened institutions.”<sup>12</sup> Art critic Michael Fried alights on immediacy: “Authenticity” in the modern period pertains, if it exists at all, to “continuous and entire presentness . . . that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness.”<sup>13</sup> Joseph Frank writes, for instance, that in T. S. Eliot’s “The

Waste Land,” “syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood, these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously,” all in all an example of “the internal conflict between the time-logic of language and the space-logic implicit in the modern conception of the nature of poetry.”<sup>14</sup> Such descriptions in tune with modernism, however, are not formally in touch with the heritage of the inexpressible topos and frames, with which they are often elided, and in particular the attempts to frame and stabilize instantaneously—and with impatience—the inexpressible, without naming in particular, the desired “result”: again, “Now he has passed that way see after him!” (10).<sup>15</sup> Whitman says of the coming and already past, missing and passing and simultaneously present poet.

Framing evolves across literary and same-language anxieties, making texts modern in practice; by the same token, in modern texts that same set of framing strategies around the “thing itself” point to a fundamentally historical lineage. In an era of radically absent centers, therefore, it is easy to miss a common history of poetics, proposed around same-language questions not in terms of (commonly expressed and modern) “loss,” but instead (nothing but) gain. Its footing remains pragmatic, adapted from a topos that by definition traditionally excludes human beings, since language remains continuously inadequate. The earlier frames emerging from this topos are often self-consciously bent on naming not just an authority but a root author (if moment-to-moment falling short). More modern and international works, such as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” bend against any such centralized and authoritative gestures (instead tracking all failed attempts to recover them): “And I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase / . . . / Then how should I begin / To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? / And how should I presume?”<sup>16</sup> However, a conflict in consciousness (in David Spurr’s words), of an embattled sensibility, between what he now calls intellect and imagination,<sup>17</sup> points to an earlier discourse. Prufrock’s defensiveness (“In short, I was afraid”) combines with a counterpart on the offensive by a change both of perspective and pronoun; “It is impossible to say just what I mean! . . . / If *one* . . . should say: / ‘That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all.’”<sup>18</sup> This familiar pairing refits inadequacy and inexpressibility to yet-to-be expressed superiority. When Denis Donoghue notes that Eliot does not want any “particular emotion” to “exceed the situation that provoked it,”<sup>19</sup> he is talking about modern objective correlatives. But the longstanding politics of renaming, which

turns offensive-out-of-defensive, is evident in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's tongue-in-cheek introduction of his satire *Modern Chivalry* in 1815:

I shall consider language only, not in the least regarding the matter of the work; but as musicians, when they are about to give the most excellent melody, pay no attention to the words that are set to music, but take the most unmeaning phrases, such as sol, fa, la; so here, culing [*sic*] out the choicest flowers of diction, I shall pay no regard to the idea.<sup>20</sup>

Particulars can sink a speaker, opening the door to criticism; conversely, nonparticularity or what Brackenridge called “unmeaning” phrases, if vague, keep the frame of the door wide open and invite compromised insiders to become inventive outsiders. Listen again to Brown in *The Rhapsodist*: “It is a very whimsical situation when a person is about to enter into company, and is at a loss what character or name to assume it in.”<sup>21</sup> What separates this Rhapsodist from Prufrock is a twist on self-consciousness, a replacement of frames to a degree more literally bound with those of inevitably late “arrivals” ideologically to any modern scene. At the same time, a felt loss of an original, expressible, authoritative language and literature generates, past its inception, a discourse of framing (and renaming) that picks up more modern circlings of absent authorities, self-division, fissures, and loss. Speaking of the poems of Eliot and Ezra Pound, for example, Robert Crawford writes, “Their poetry registers longing, and a jagged sense of pain.”<sup>22</sup>

Tellingly, Charles Isenberg describes the frame narrative as a text that is exactly about, again, what it “cannot name,”<sup>23</sup> pointing to the ineffable. In discursive framing, with its emphasis on precision, no response is ever perceived as adequate; it is not surprising, thus, that a ubiquitous cultural fear and parody accompany a stretched self-confidence: in 1845 it is proclaimed, “America has a great a noble task before her in literature, and we firmly believe the power and capacity to do it.”<sup>24</sup> These frames, further, do what Isenberg says they do. Defensive and rooted in performance, they emphasize the “reader’s activity” (16), multiplying possibilities or candidates by refusing to name. Whitman in 1888 describes the as-yet unnameable “poet”: “One needs only a little penetration to see, at more or less removes, the material facts of their country and radius, with the coloring of the moods of humanity at the time, and its gloomy or hopeful prospects, behind all poets and each poet, and forming their birthmarks.”<sup>25</sup> In this frame, potential failure is deflected, leaving room for the unnamable birthmark: “In estimating first-class song, a sufficient Nationality, or, on the

other hand, what may be call'd the negative and lack of it (as in Goethe's case, it sometimes seems to me) is often, if not always, the first element" (661).

Framing the inexpressible, here an unnameable "poet" or "first-class song" defined by what Whitman calls the "negative and lack of it" (661) can buy time. It can allow time for changes in perception about *how* to reconstitute what is perceived as not there from what may already be there. This discourse of the inexpressible, here Whitman's rhetoric of a national "birthmark," anticipates a modern call to name the missing authors in a still imperfectly mapped America. On this imperfect map, framing the inexpressible persists as useful: for Judith Fetterley, for example, this frame of *never naming* persists: "I seek thus to join the effort to identify the naming of the field of 'American' literature as itself a site of contestation."<sup>26</sup> Earlier, "America"'s expressibility had a different job: for instance, in Whitman's hands it is designed to *hold back* the naming of any single author for fear of getting it wrong. Yet, in Fetterley's modern version of the frame, the inexpressible site of "America" may be said instead to *generate* authors: it educates and makes room for the inclusion of more authors, built on an anxiety of leaving them out: "I seek nothing less than the creation of a citizenry committed to the values of *inclusion*, empathy, diversity, and community, and the cultural change which would follow upon the creation of such a citizenry" (21; emphasis added).

Thus, the persistent frame of the inexpressible holds hope for both periods: an anxiety of *not saying* (bent earlier on a fear of *letting in* the "wrong" author) lends itself in a modern vision to an anxiety still of *not saying*, but now it frames the possibility of *leaving out* the so-far unrecognized authors. In both instances, holding open the frame more widely still to a desire for naming exactly *which* author or authors demand recognition also persists. For example, this comment from *The Port Folio* in 1807, in its fear of naming the wrong author, might well be a reversed echo from the modern challenge to name the right one: "Genius is a common inheritance."<sup>27</sup> Here is already the recognizable language and action of framing around the inexpressible, reeducating speakers and "citizenry" to uncover values and authors that are already passing right in front of them.

In both versions of reeducation, these frames bracket "missing" authors. The frames evolve from early promotional and colonial rhetoric (constructing *the* missing and ideal "American" author in the English language) to recent empowering social cause (missing the actual plurality of authors in an "American" construct). In each case, the frame effectively draws out more time from cul-de-sacs of "conventional" wisdom. In each case there is an impasse of contemporary "conventional" wisdom, one that fingers an

absence or denial of an author or authors, or at least a yet-to-be-expressed recognition of them. In particular, both frames exhibit an acute sensitivity to judgments of inadequacy, and an equally sensitive hope in yet-to-come recognition of the “author” not yet fully expressed. These frames overlap in a poetics of the inexpressible and framing, unfolding perceived high expectations and restricted acts of inclusion.

The demand for inclusion of the “denied” author for William Dunlap, for example, is based on the English inheritance and language. In 1798 he writes, “any deviation from what [the audiences] remember to be fact, appears to them as a fault in the poet; they are disappointed, their expectations are not fulfilled, and the writer is more or less condemned.”<sup>28</sup> Dunlap himself points to a fear of “typing” that gets the “poet” wrong in any given instance; this fear of the wrong capture of the American author leads to making time to “express” what is condemned as inexpressible. Dunlap, as with Brown, restricts condemnation, allowing expectation for “national” character, and time for the making of a “character” and poet. Samuel Miller’s following statement epitomizes the widening of the time frame to include American authors:

Such are some of the causes which have hitherto impeded the progress of American Literature. Their influence, however, is gradually declining, and the literary prospects of our country are brightening every day. . . . and when the time shall arrive that we can give to our votaries of literature the same leisure, and the same stimulants to exertion with which they are favoured in Europe, it may be confidently predicted, that letters will flourish as much in America as in any part of the world; and that we shall be able to make some return to our trans-atlantic brethren, for the rich stores of useful knowledge which they have been pouring upon us for nearly two centuries.<sup>29</sup>

This statement self-consciously takes note of the insufficiency of American authors. Yet, its outline of an exclusion of them, built on the topos of the inexpressible, paradoxically will admit even the “lowest” to be included as possibilities: “In Europe, we meet kings, nobles, priests, peasants,” says William Ellery Channing in *The Christian Examiner* in 1830. “How much rarer is it to meet men. . . . The institutions of the old world all tend to throw obscurity over what we most need to know.”<sup>30</sup> Exclusion of “what we most need to know” can, therefore, link itself to fears of a potentially incorrect “selection” or identification of the poet (for instance, in kings or nobles) in the search for what the editor of the *The American Review* in 1845 proceeds to call “a rock or two”: “But surely we ought to be wiser than to



plume ourselves yet upon our literary position. We need have no doubts of our destiny . . . and as to poetry and poets, notwithstanding many delicate effusions, who does not know, that a National Poetic Literature was never yet built on fugitive pieces. A rock or two is generally found necessary for a corner stone."<sup>31</sup>

Like many others in the period, Dunlap develops these rhetorical patterns of framing, for example, that serve at once as an authorial "give" (allowing leeway and room for the poet) and critical "take" (protecting the so-to-speak "character" or author that has yet to be heard). Declaring his work a "free poetical picture," Dunlap in his introduction to *Major André* proceeds, "The subject necessarily involves political questions; but the Author presumes that he owes *no apology* to any one for having shown himself an American."<sup>32</sup> These frames from Dunlap are specifically concerned with renaming or refiguring, from inside expectation to the contrary, the "poet" himself as already recognizable, if recognized.

In other words, this rhetoric of the inexpressible frames a margin, a "marginalized" author who has taken up the challenge, been missed; a new challenge is opened to refigure what has been overlooked. Melville also challenges in 1850 not to miss this figure: "The great mistake seems to be, that even with those Americans who look forward to the coming of a great literary genius among us, they somehow fancy he will come in the costume of Queen Elizabeth's day. . . ." <sup>33</sup> Again, the Preface picks up and frames the missing celebrated author: "The presence of the greatest poet conquers . . . there is not left any vestige of despair . . ." (10).

Charles Isenberg reminds us frames "do not so much demonstrate a truth as narrativize a desire."<sup>34</sup> This reminder points to a familiar paradigm of inexpressibility. As we have seen, the paradigm entails a long, complex history of the inexpressible deriving values from an act of "naming" or renaming: as Gertrude Stein's super-self-conscious *The Making of Americans* makes inexpressible phrases nearly meaningless by framing them with inadequacy spread over time that can fold back inadequacy into exactly "what I mean," without naming it: "I mean, I mean and that is not what I mean, I mean that not any one is saying what they are meaning, I mean that I am feeling something, I mean that I mean something and I mean that not any one is thinking, is feeling, is saying, is certain of that thing . . . I mean, I mean, I know what I mean";<sup>35</sup> or the earlier Frost, whose oven bird knows "not to sing";<sup>36</sup> or with Stevens, where the terms of framing are never as simple as "influence," just as "voice" remains doubtlessly insufficient for Whitman.

Stevens's poems, for example, can be said to typify what earmarks modern and self-conscious poetics. What goes on in them, Joseph Riddel

explains in an earlier view, has “everything to do with defining man . . . in his consciousness of the paradox of consciousness.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Michael Heller observes that “it may well be that he [Stevens] inaugurates (to use Derrida’s term) a mode of writing which already sees the fictive nature of the philosophical, which takes this fiction for granted, which loves the jouissance of rubbing one philosophical idea against another, is unrelentingly skeptical of philosophy’s urge toward certainties.”<sup>38</sup> Helen Vendler sees this, but also one of the paradigms for the topos of the inexpressible, in her discussion of Stevens’s “prevalent voice of hesitation and qualification”: “even the title of ‘Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself’ embodies one of Stevens’ typical formulas, ‘not X but Y,’ which appears in a frequency far beyond the normal throughout Stevens’ work, and seems to be another case of the left hand subtracting what the right hand gives.”<sup>39</sup> Vendler rightly sees Stevens’s lack of assertion. It is apparent in the following examples:

It was not the shadow of cloud and cold,  
 But a sense of the distance of the sun—  
 The shadow of a sense of his own,

A knowledge that the actual day  
 Was so much less. Only the wind  
 Seemed large and loud and high and strong.  
 (from “Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It”<sup>40</sup>)

Opusculum paedagogum.  
 The pears are not viols,  
 Nudes or bottles. . . .

They are yellow forms  
 Composed of curves  
 Bulging toward the base.  
 They are touched red.  
 (from “Study of Two Pears”<sup>41</sup>)

Attempts to define Stevens’s famous “Thing Itself” are alive with skepticism, what Jacqueline Brogan calls “assertions, modulated with their own contradiction.”<sup>42</sup> Analogues are engaged and avoided, therefore, not for their ultimate insufficiency (this is a common observation)—in this history of eking out the expressible through temporal engagement with the inexpressible, such analogues frame and remove their own absurdity.

None of the following trio, for example, can be presumed to exist from the get-go: the “Thing Itself” (from Stevens’s poem), an indigenous language of “genius” (articulated in the nineteenth century), and the modern and postmodern analogue (in relation to “truth”). To quote Paul A. Bové, such informed skepticism celebrates “the increasing impossibility of defending ‘truth’ in any metaphysical way.”<sup>43</sup> Many openings in Stevens’s poems suggest, but more crucially and simultaneously frame, an analogic world—frame it as already a lost cause, as in the nineteenth-century identification of the desired and “unique” language, which is as good as inexpressible at any given moment in time. The framer is earmarked as antimimetic or, to a degree, purposeless, unable to narrate.

Critics often link this indeterminacy to the moderns who, as Clive Bloom says, are “determined by the defining struggle with structure.”<sup>44</sup> Alan Filreis is on the mark to note the importance of pronouns in Stevens’s defensiveness. In Stevens’s poems, pronouns await in self-deprecating hope the arrival of a hero, a language, and mock-pronouns: “If the poetry of X was music, / So that it came to *him* of its own, / Without understanding . . .” begins “The Creations of Sound” (310; emphasis added). In “The Idea of Order at Key West”: “*She* sang beyond the genius of the sea. / The water never formed to mind or voice . . .” (128; emphasis added). She—the figureless woman—is defenseless, thus defensive. Filreis, again, writes of the “meditative *I*, quietly confessing to an eerily unimportant American life.”<sup>45</sup> But he does not connect Stevens’s defensiveness to earlier and unquiet discursive framing, as in Brown or Whitman. Making inexpressibility important, Stevens’s dramatic “he” or “she” is fall-out from the perceiving, framing “*I*.”<sup>46</sup> Such pronouns, moreover, have their rhetorical roots in frame structures and longstanding defensiveness.

For example, in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” (512), an “unexplained completion,” which comprises a “unique and solitary home,” contradicts “How he had recomposed the pines” to get there. The poem does not primarily reiterate ironic awareness (central to modernism). It is historically more artless than that. The obsession with uniqueness and language jokingly dares the frame to yield consensus. Whether as a modern (or a colonial) or a metaphor, “he” is denied an intersection of language and uniqueness. Here is the entire poem:

There it was, word for word,  
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,  
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed  
A place to go to in his own direction, 5

How he had recomposed the pines,  
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,  
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion: 10

The exact rock where his inexactnesses  
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,  
Recognize his unique and solitary home. [line numbers added]

In relation to point of view, “could” in the penultimate line (13) dangles. It is either redundantly “stupid” from the perspective of “he,” thereby dismissed. Or it is the mark of a framer’s consensus: “Where he could lie and gazing down at the sea, / Recognize his unique and solitary home” (13–14). But the framer does not use this structure to reveal consensus regarding the obvious; if so, two previous “would[s]” would suffice: “For the outlook that would be right” (9); “The exact rock where his inexactnesses / Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged” (11–12). Against the frame, the framer, and the framed, the determinism of “could” juts out self-consciously and inconsistently. It preserves itself as a word out of place, a nonjoking necessity to make a mark against history. It does not concede to narrative and judgment, but dares its existence.

The inability to narrate identifies an old gap between what has been controversially named constative and performative language.<sup>47</sup> “Behind every poem is there not an implicit narrative giving the voice an occasion,” asks Daniel R. Schwarz, “a context of experience, in which it speaks?”<sup>48</sup> He contends, “Because his [Stevens’s] poems are arenas in which to render acts of perception rather than to record prior reality, the spectator is rhetorically urged to act upon the poem in his act of reading” (15).<sup>49</sup> He summarizes that “we may find it helpful . . . to abandon the concept of a consistent persona” (7)—and that is a commonplace of poets. It is not surprising, then, that critics label this point of view in Stevens’s poetry modern and comic irony.<sup>50</sup> But this characteristic is also consistent with early framers. If abandoning the idea of a consistent persona takes place,<sup>51</sup> Stevens’s version of the tragicomic mode is held back by the dispersion through openly self-contemptuous and multiple framers waiting for language in their readers.

In favor of conversation and mutual self-recognition, the frames already make the reading of signs redundant. For example, in “Jouga” (337), “Ha-é-é-me is a beast.” But the framer’s self-realization instantly reinscribes Ha-é-é-me as perhaps only one of two beasts, like his guitar, thereby reducing likeness to the only thing recognized as possible, likeness: “. . . Ha-é-é-me is a beast. // Or perhaps his guitar is a beast or perhaps they are / Two beasts. But of the same kind. . . .” In this depiction the concern of reading turns from questioning the existence of the “thing itself” to inquiring for the poem’s point and transforms outsiders to insiders. In “Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors” (356) the creation of readers as instances of their own language appears once more. The poet first makes a framer, rather than a speaker speaking, unaware of fiction. This occurs precisely when the narrator exposes his own superfluosity: “The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians.”

The humor demanded by the absurdity of the bass’s fear (in the absence of any Indians) reflects the presence of a sane and self-elected narrator whose skepticism reveals what is already known. Any fisherman who is only, that is, “all / One ear” cannot reach the bass either. Like the Indians, the bass themselves no longer exist. More absurdly, the bass are safer. They do not exist for the Indians that are dead, and they are safely “dead” to all the living who believe themselves to be one-eared. Entrusted to fiction for humor the framer informs what listeners already know, that they are not one of the one-eared fishermen, hearers of a “deep” that does not exist. This narrator’s superfluosity is not directly part of the poem’s subject or doctrine. Instead it is a revelation of a character’s irrelevance. He chooses to tell a story that is but fact and therefore does not need to be told. The humor—the structure and not the statement often emphasized by modernists—is deadly serious. For instance, the following openings, which are frequently taken to be self-reflexive poems of process, reveal historical frames:

On her side, reclining on her elbow.  
 This mechanism, this apparition,  
 Suppose we call it Projection A.  
 (from “So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch,” 295)

The night knows nothing of the chants of night.  
 It is what it is as I am what I am:  
 And in perceiving this I best perceive myself.  
 (from “Re-Statement of Romance,” 146)

The poem must resist the intelligence  
 Almost successfully. Illustration:

A brune figure in winter evening resists  
 Identity. The thing he carries resists

The most necessitous sense. . . .  
 (from "Man Carrying Thing," 350)

Diction gives away the frames. In the first example "Suppose" (line 3) after "apparition" (line 2) ridicules both the language of determination and absence of language. "We" (line 3) adds a third voice to the common framer's "I." Multiple masks of humor, which are really backtrackings of self-doubt, proliferate where the letter "A," for instance, is tried. The first letter, "A" (line 3), already a projection, requires no final dismissal; the "unpainted shore" (line 25) in the poem's final stanza is anticipated for its obviousness, not its irony. The restatement of romance, indeed, is just that, heard, rather than seen, in the word "only," repeated for the third time in the last stanza: "The night is only the background of our selves," less invisible than inaudible next to the repetitions of what it cannot, by loss of contrast through repetition, foreground: "our selves." In "Man Carrying Thing," we hear again the humor of the "bright obvious" in contrast to the "brune figure in winter" who, of course, in the long tradition of frames, "resists / Identity" (capital "I"). The most bright adjective points to its joke of obscurity, just as the "thing" is by the end finally identified as precisely and literally, the "obvious" itself, no more identified, or not, than the more descriptively bound "brune" figure. I could go on with such instances of obviousness and frames that refuse revelation or are designated meaningfulness.

The humor in Stevens's poems is that of the tall tale, and more pointedly, the no-point shaggy dog. They too are self-evident—so much so that they are encapsulated in the shaggy dog (especially the no-point shaggy dog) or in the very titles of Stevens ("So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain"). One of the forms taking roots in the United States, shaggy dogs,<sup>52</sup> as we have seen, makes room, and in particular time, given their verbosity, for imminent "origin" replacing a perceived and designated one. Partridge explains one source of that in the Greek phrase, *para prosdokian*, that is, contrary to expectation; "usually," he says, this is of the form "of an unexpected word whimsically substituted for an apparently inevitable word."<sup>53</sup> Again, here is the beginning: "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully. Illustration:

// A brune figure in winter evening resists / Identity. The thing he carries resists // The most necessitous sense . . . ." (350). The ending of "Man Carrying Thing" with an adjectival noun "obvious"—"We must endure our thoughts all night, until / The bright obvious stands motionless in cold" (351)—suddenly substitutes an unexpected noun for the "thing." The "thing" is now not only "obvious," but the obvious: it is transformed from an inexpressible, the "thing," into nothing but the "obvious"; and it is the pronoun "we" that makes it available, if available at all. This oral move is long in the tooth, reframing what is there, "the thing," as not only the "obvious" for all to get, but "motionless" unless "we" make a move. Just so, "So-And-So" on her couch, reclined and fetal, "Born, as she was, at twenty-one, / Without lineage or language," is reborn in the paradigmatic fizzle ending, complete with substitution of name from "So-And-So" to "Mrs. Pappadopoulos": "Good-bye, / Mrs. Pappadopoulos, and thanks," the framer adds at the very end (295–96). The question often is "for what?" (commonly probed for its philosophical tendrils). A telling question might be "by whom?" The poem early sets out, again, "we": "Suppose we call it Projection A." But this time it comes to an end with "one": "one confides in" and "[o]ne walks easily." Pontification occurs at the very expense of the subject of the frame, Mrs. Pappadopoulos. By the end, she is not only dismissed but even more absent as a character than when she began as Projection B in an attempted verbal identification of object: "Let this be called / Projection B." Just her name (chiming "Mrs." with "Pappadopoulos") remains at the end, orally brimming, while she remains inexpressible, both past, gone ("Good-bye") and unexpectedly available, only when under direct address: ("Good-bye . . . and thanks"), now and as yet without "lineage or language" (line 7).

Many of Stevens's poems, then, are exploiting earlier frames that depict such still births of one kind or another, and at the same time resist them formally. Stevens's poetics of inexpressibility is inextricably tied to them. A good way to stand between these discursive patterns of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century frames is through Harold Bloom's proverbial comment, which flags tell-tale "self-consciousness": "Poetic Influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness."<sup>54</sup> He continues to explain: a "strong" poet identifies "a young man in the horror discovering his own incurable case of continuity. By the time he has become a strong poet, and so learned this dilemma, he seeks to exorcise the necessary guilt of his ingratitude by turning his precursor into a fouled version of the later poet himself." He concludes, importantly, "But that too is a self-deception and a banality, for what the strong poet thus does is to transform himself into a fouled version of himself, and then confound the consequence with the figure of the precursor" (62).

Based largely in Freud's family romance, Bloom's statements emphasize, as he acknowledges, priority, "for the commodity in which poets deal, their authority, their property, turns upon priority. They own, they are, what they become first in naming" (64). This is especially crucial for these frames that are coextensive with the topos of the inexpressible. An author such as Brown or even a critic such as Walter Channing articulates the "incurable case of continuity," especially since in this family romance, language is perceived simultaneously as both identity and identical. So the precursor English and the later American are felt as inseparable, making priority moot. Minimizing priority, framing strategies began under unusual conditions of influence, perceived and simultaneous doubling. But where identity is perceived as doubled, rather than linear, influence is especially complex. In Bloom's terms it produces literally overwritten models that reproduce an oral affect. That is, without conditions of priority, what Bloom calls "misprision" by a later author has no space (here precisely time) for "reducing" the precursor, thereby instituting a reduced self. What emerges is that time is luxury. Whitman and others who desire a more instantaneous and less risky version of what Bloom would call a "strong poet" are not faced with the reduction or the ultimate self-reduction that Bloom points to, where the poet transforms "himself into a fouled version of himself," confounding the result with the precursor. Discursive frames, where there is no prioritizing, join a past authorship with a forthcoming one, calling for the same as ever-present. These frames yield no ground to mistaken identity: the "author" was (and so remained unnoticed) or will eventually come. The present is cradle to all possibilities. "What is 1845 to do for us in literature?" asks *The American Whig Review*. "It has at least good opportunities of its own. . . . There is a new year opening of the Christian Era;—let it be so indeed, and like Boniface's ale, savor of the Anno Domini!"<sup>55</sup> Nature itself, *The American Whig Review* continues, guarantees it:

In these dim attempts at American literature, in the mere fact that people read and write at all, taken in connection with the natural scenery and adaptation of the soil, and the character of the people destined to fill the land, we read the sure elements of a glorious future. With such a people and such a soil—given, as in ancient Greece, simply the letters of Cadmus—and we are sure of the result. It is morally certain.<sup>56</sup>

The strategies of reduction by poets or authors, what Bloom calls "fouled" versions of themselves, and the intimate cooperation of the audience in written feats that act oral often entail risk. Early authors commonly substitute overwritten (and humorous) self-deflation, and the



resulting oral action of overwritten texts turns the fear of reduction on its head: Bloom focuses on “I,” but if every pronoun can be a subject, which pronoun—“I,” “he,” “she,” “they”—is not eligible in this simultaneity for mastery? Bloom links Whitman and Stevens as examples of this phenomenon, claiming that “Stevens antithetically completes Whitman” (68); at the same time he admits that Stevens, like any British revisionary, will “reduce in regard to the precursors,” correcting the earlier “over-idealizer” (68, 69). Bloom’s argument follows: “Source study is wholly irrelevant here,” and a poet need not have read a precursor for such studies to hold (70). With a new understanding of simultaneity and same-language discourse of framing, defensiveness in Stevens’s poems in that context can just as well be read as what is offensive, and that changes the terrain of defensiveness.

Stevens’s poems, therefore, offer resonance as well to those narratives that formally frame inadequate beginnings and inexpressibility, and the act of renaming and uttering them. This is exactly what Margaret Fuller, like Whitman a few years later, depicts as in 1846 she stages the nation’s difficult birth. First she thumps Great Britain’s “insular position” as a “parent” England in relation to the development of its “child”: “We use her language, and receive, in torrents, the influence of her thought, yet it is, in many respects, uncongenial and injurious to our constitution.” Then she renames such a constitution in terms of “forms” yet to be filled: “Nor then shall it be seen till from the leisurely and yearning soul of that riper time national ideas shall take birth, ideas craving to be clothed in a thousand fresh and original forms. Without such ideas all attempts to construct a national literature must end in abortions like the monster of Frankenstein, things with forms, and the instincts of forms, but soulless, and therefore revolting. We cannot have expression till there is something to be expressed.”<sup>57</sup> What appears, then, rhetorically is a framing around the topos of the inexpressible that Whitman or Stevens shares. And in between, at an edge of modernism in 1917, Amy Lowell reiterates that inexpressible “difference” (“We are no more colonies of this or that other land, but ourselves, different from all other peoples whatsoever”<sup>58</sup>) that still calls for time: “An individual brought up in one of the small towns scattered over the country was therefore obliged to reproduce suddenly in himself the evolution of three hundred years” (9). She concludes: “It takes the lifetime of more than one individual to throw off a superstition, and the effort to do so is not made without sacrifice” (10). On the defense against inferiority and universalism, for what Lowell calls a “native school” (v): no one can say that what is found in “the seething of a new idealism . . . *hidden away* in the dreams and desires of unknown men” (vi; emphasis added) is wrong any

more than Brackenridge's earlier "unmeaning phrases" of musical diction, sol, fa, la, can miss an unnamed target; so the speaker remains invulnerable. On the offense, the speaker's lack of explicitness allows it to pertain to everyone; no speaker or listener or unknown dream is let down. A framing practice, then, that evolves not to name, but to rename all as eligible for naming, found its centering practices of the inexpressible as equally eligible for imminent decentering practices of the modern "throwing off of superstition." As Lowell advises, "Sudden change can never accomplish the result of a long, slow process" (10), even when the frame to do so persists.

The ineffable and the inexpressible, by convention, are on the edge of language, their contours and configurations difficult to see, locate, describe. Framing is easily recognized in narrative and to a certain degree in the topos of the inexpressible, but takes more sorting out when it appears temporal—we are not as used to it appearing that way. The important oral strategies of framing, relocated to the shaggy dog tale and especially the no-point shaggy dog, can be elusive since they can concern nonmeaning itself: their point, at least on the surface, is that there is no point. And the writers themselves, even well-plumbed Whitman, can appear convoluted and obscure.

An effort to distance English from English, a late construing of a longstanding topos, is itself a construct and itself twisted. To imagine a language to be something other than it is while expressing the distance between the two simultaneously means relying on complex formal mechanisms first for creating the distance from itself, and secondly for crossing that distance as the expectation of the expression itself. In *Distancing English*, I have shown that the first distance is formed by engaging the inexpressible, noting the gap between expectation and expression. The second is bridged by the frames that are forged by the inexpressible and mark the distance as itself a set-up. The strategic use of frames that we have seen for shaking a language loose from itself refocuses a perceived statement in a received language that can appear at first to offer little.<sup>59</sup> Remaking the same inexpressible words as bound to expressibility, deriving power from the topos of the ineffable, frames hold off anxiety by formalizing it.

Thus, the absence of a felt language within the very terms of presence in a received same language lends itself to an already long history of self-promotion, recorded self-consciousness, and high expectations. Political severance and surprising successes of the War of 1812 add to the momentum and to anxieties of perfectibility. We hear it building between these

dates when a writer for *The Port Folio* in 1807 exclaims, “Till we exhibit a work which the verdict of scholars shall enrol with the great efforts of genius of other countries, the truth of the criticism I have delivered, harsh as it appears, is unimpeachable.”<sup>60</sup>

Finding the exact words for that “work” suggests patterns of expectation and discourses of propagation, rather than of course the achieved. We have seen how that discursive framing develops around the inexpressible. Publicity of productivity, suppression of hardships (for attracting further emigration from England), along with a developing religious “laboratory” of perfection in non-Anglican denominations produce expectations and self-promotion where “nothing” is guaranteed but self-revision to advantage. Whether in Whitman’s Preface, or in the critical debates on language, or the no-point shaggy dog, there exists simultaneously a rousing defensiveness, matching anxieties of insufficiency and critical attacks regarding degeneration, an adapted inexpressibility in the core of language’s perceived doubling. This intersection in frames of the offensive and defensive traces a reinterrogated line of inexpressibility. My aim in this study has been to recover a specific lineage of a topos, the topos of the inexpressible, and a series of opportunistic adaptations of that topos that straddle confidence and anxiety, while suggesting temporal amendments that fit eras of growing possibilities, at least, of expressibility and self-inclusion on a human scale of time.

This study is suggestive. Many other contemporary critics and journals could have been cited; many other writers could be included at length (such as James Kirke Paulding, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Henry James, or John Ashbery). Every reader will think of a poem or story that contains the inexpressible and wonder how I could have overlooked it. This study, nevertheless, suggests contexts and a frame for understanding that is important. It brings together much that has been peripheral or outside of critical discussion; it ties earlier discursive demands on expectation, hyperbole, and inexpressibility to major contributions; it enables us to hear anew the language of Whitman’s Preface and contemporaries; and it restores early discursive roots to self-conscious discourse in the modern era.