The Topos of the Inexpressible and Self-Critique

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The topos of the inexpressible has always put pressure on the theory of poetry. A convention of rhetoric that meditates on saying what cannot be said, it traditionally depends on an unbridgeable gap between inadequate human speech and its object of praise (one thinks immediately of God or beauty or a visionary state). The speaker comes to the edge of what can be said and points to the inadequacy of language. What can be said is a local perception, whether the king's glory in the Greek epic, God's ineffability in the middle ages, Troilus's heroism (and subsequent suffering) in Chaucer's tale, a state of wonder in Shakespeare's romances, or nineteenth-century American expectations for a unique literary language. Although the topos of the inexpressible is often conceived within this rhetorical convention, appearing with modification in many different texts, it rides a much finer line between poetic theory and practice. Its formal and self-conscious regard of the gap between expectations and delivery, between theory and practice, of *language itself* shapes critical questions of the efficacy of words. It intersects, therefore, a longstanding preoccupation of poetry as well: to represent and critique the very terms of naming and renaming.

When naming falls short, we hear the shape of this longstanding rhetoric. Historically the most common form of the topos occurs when human words appear forever inadequate to express an effectively unnameable subject (a high subject of praise such as God or, for example, a physical experience of pain or suffering). There is

another, less commonly identified branch of the topos: inadequacy is not identified exactly with human words but with human selection or absorption of them. Chaucer's narrator in *Troilus and Criseyede* already earmarks the "gret diversite / In Englissh" among a litany of impediments that can potentially cause a poet to "myswrite" (1957, 1793-95). In this shift of the inexpressible, locating the inadequacy of words branches out to the selecting them for expression and reception. As a formal map, the topos of the inexpressible in its entirety, therefore, allows us to see poets' self-critique better. It both features the politics of repositioning the terms of what can and cannot be accomplished in poems and queries the stance of critique itself. The topos, thus, can be a lens for how theory and practice find patterns of self-critique across centuries. It sounds out a range of approaches to the question of what cannot be named in the very act of naming. In this way, the topos offers the writer a rhetoric of self-critique. Although I will focus on patterns of selection when choosing either to deliver or receive words, we first need to see the history of the rhetoric as constituting the way that the inexpressible is delivered.

The topos of the inexpressible rhetorically constitutes a frame historically defined by two parts: first, a perceived object of perfection, and, second, the inadequate human speech that inevitably misses the mark. Traditionally the binary frame is the means by which the division between the (human) expressible and the (out-of-reach) inexpressible is delivered. The structure of the topos is essentially binary; its literary infrastructure, the two-part frame. The first part of the frame of the topos of the inexpressible is frequently taken to be precisely the power that is perceived to exceed human words, again whether God, beauty, or the sublime, for example. The second part of the frame is therefore drawn from the humility of being human: human language is unable to express this unspeakable greatness, praise, terror or grief. In very early periods, the two parts take place in a poem. A frame poem, such as the medieval "Alisoun," for example, is organized as a poem of "warning" and survival. It relates to the proverbial wheel of fortune poems. In such a frame, the wheel of fortune takes the "heroic" role of the unspeakable (sometimes seemingly arbitrary) power, situated in an inscrutable divine plan of God. In the second part of the frame, the act of self-critique,

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the speaker offers his humility as a warning of the transitory nature of human existence and utterance. Judith Davidoff notes a less well-known instance of the entire frame by the poet Henry Bradshaw: "With the grace of god / the tyme for to use // Some small treatyse / to wryte breuely // to the comyn vulgare / theyr mynde to satysfy" (1988, 59). The divine part emerges in "the grace of god"; the humility, in "Some small treatyse." The writing by those human beings who are humble signifies a "vulgar" inadequacy to speak the larger and spiritual truths, as it also signals a moment of survival and penance. The Old English "Seafarer," for example, is a frame of self-critique and self-warning on earth: "I sing my own true story, tell my travels…Fame is brought low / Earthly nobility grows old, decays" (1979, 33-34). Some medieval frame poems, acknowledging the inexpressible, have in common the choral attitude that allows the survival of those who recognize human limitations and loss, while acknowledging anonymity, suffering, or grief as the cost of such limitations and human generations. This is represented especially in the medieval spectrum, as in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, "Pearl," or the fourteenth-century poem "The Quatrefoil of Love."

Many of these medieval poetic framers may be heard as choral figures, characters who cannot adequately tell a tale but who go on to tell it. Representing the nameless crowd, they remain alive in anonymity and lament (inadequately) the death of the great and singled-out hero. In such divisions of the inexpressible frame, the binary is rooted to the early Greek chorus. David Lenson explains the choral root of that division:

> Tragedy from its origins possesses a language divided against itself, a fusion of choric, collective utterance and the more uniform, individual meters of the epic tradition. The first actor, a development from choric verse said to have taken place in the sixth century in the plays of Thespis, apparently did not use the same language as did the chorus from which he arose (1975, 7).

From this break with the chorus, Lenson suggests, comes the division and idea of heroic progress marked by the individual: "Should one live briefly as a completely defined individual? Or should one only endure in the timeless anonymity in which life, love,

and death are passed as burdens from generation to generation—but in which even such burdens are a cause for exhilaration?" (1975, 7-8). Again, Chaucer's choral narrator, for example, sings of Troilus, "As he that was withouten any peere / Save Ector, in his tyme, as I kan heere" (1957, 479). But the attempt to sing of unutterable greatness, of course, shows his own tongue but human and choral. The convention of human inexpressibility and human vanity, inclusive of all forms of impediments, is coined in Chaucer's concluding lines: "Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte, / And of youre herte up casteth the visage / To thilke God that after his ymage / Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire / This world, that passeth soone as floures faire" (1957, 1837-1841).

Hovering over these early frames, then, is especially what cannot be represented in words.[1] In *De Doctrina Christiana*, for example, St. Augustine refers to the fallen word and the ineffable: "Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable?" (1958, 11). These frames relentlessly resist, or they enclose without ever naming, certain experiences of words. They find roots in paradox, contradiction, and uncertainty of order, often refusing to draw a clear line between editing and authoring,[2] whether imaged through a development in the English language (Chaucer's increasingly complex tales of warning and authority in his dream visions), or seen through Renaissance and early modern practices of gathering and framing (Tottle's *Miscellany* and *The Boke of Margery Kempe*), or traced through their formal adaptations in Romantic or modernist development (Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" or Eliot's "Prufrock"). Unabating of self-division, they are based on a core of perceived human limitation to represent a perceived or nominal perfection ("That thou—O awful LOVELINESS, / Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express" from Shelley or "mermaids singing" from Eliot, for example). They highlight the line that self-consciously delimits language to express adequately or at all.[3]

Remaining firmly within the theoretical confines of the traditional topos, possibilities for what constitutes inadequacy in words, however, find less traveled roads. The topos of the inexpressible in which experiences of the divine or grief cannot be matched by human words lives on strongly in modern renderings of language's inadequacy to express isolation. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry circles the unnameable when she explains that "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (1985, 4). In frames that put in counterpoint an imagined and unreachable perfected state of unique existence, the secular choral figure is isolated and trapped, epitomized in Randall Jarrell's "The Woman at the Washington Zoo": "The world goes by my cage and never sees me…/ You see what I am: change me, change me!" (1996, 2-3) Margaret Atwood's female narrator in "Siren Song" also experiences choral entrapment of inexpressibility: "I don't enjoy singing / this trio, fatal and valuable." At its human, choral, and in this case male-dominated repetition, she balks: "Alas / it is a boring song / but it works every time" (1976, 196). Moment to moment, the song is isolating, fully inadequate to her own self-representation across the line of narration: "will you get me / out of this bird suit?" Such pain, irony, and indescribability are famously apparent in the work of World War I poets, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Edmund Blunden. For them, silence is not eloquent.[4] Blunden, for example, writes of his forefathers who are dead, "There is silence, there survives / Not a moment of your lives." (1939, 1139).

In these terms, the moderns depict isolated pain and loss and distance from an adequate or representation of it just at the Pearl poet denotes equally choral and human distance from the adequacy of words for grief in the fourteenth century. These expressions of human and choral fallibility around the inexpressible extend the traditional topos and its focus on inadequacy of human words to reach greatness or pain. The idea, not that the human words are to blame but that a speaker's *selection* or audience's *reception* of words is somehow flawed or disabled, takes an exaggerated and overstated form in nineteenth-century America regarding the conundrum of a

perceived overlapping English language. Peaking after the war of 1812, the perceived impasse of speaking and writing in English produced a chapter in the history of the inexpressible that repositions the self-critique of practice and theory implicit in the inexpressible; self-critique and warning in the topos focused on the poet's efficacy with selection and audience rather than on the poet's reach of words in praise or grief.

This less common strain of the topos of inexpressible appeared in Chaucer's narrator, who warns of potential inadequacies embedded in the variety and selection of the "Englissh" language. It was particularly well suited to the mediation of an anxiety regarding the practical status of a language's own efficacy. This is outlined in mid-nineteenth century America. In 1815, Walter Channing is blunt about the perceived inadequacy in expression and writing: "If then we are now asked, why is this country deficient in literature? I would answer, in the first place, because it possesses the same language with a nation, totally unlike it in almost every relation" (1815, 307-8). Channing feels that the language and literature can be potentially perfect (at best), but ultimately and hugely inhibited by its *own* expression of English and its link to England. Those like Channing (grounded in their sense that English still might lend itself to a perfect instrument) had ties, directly or indirectly, to England, its privilege, inherited or earned, and its language; they already had ties to ancestors, real or imagined, who by choice of emigration and settlement left a country that often seemed still to set the standard of perfection in culture, literature, and poetry. Perceptions of perfection, to which the rhetoric of the inexpressible is anchored, measure potential improvement and inadequacy. Thus, while the rhetoric of a perfect English for Americans is tied in general to privileged Americans of the expansionist period of the nineteenth century, privileged speakers such as Walter Channing, George Tucker, or Fisher Ames are anything but certain. Inadequacy and loss are just as prevalent to those who, seeking perfection, are wrapped up in attempting to achieve it.

Let me take a step back. This is a manifestation of a rhetoric that is deeply concerned with uncertainty and loss in the face of high expectations. The Middle Ages were a heyday of the inexpressible, with Christianity offering high expectations of

salvation in the face of earthly uncertainties: illness, plagues, and war. In the twentieth century the topos has come to be closely allied with writers such as Elie Wiesel and George Steiner, who rediscover the staggering gap between what can be said and what can never be said. Even in modern hands, the inexpressible is a tool of uncertainty, the stuff of ungraspable forces or events, lined up staunchly with potentially missed opportunities. The inexpressible comes up against language itself with the country's independence and emerging political position; due to the felt dependencies and continuities with England, the American language became a part of the history of the inexpressible. The same words, to put it bluntly, were local and foreign at the same time. They were both inadequate and (almost) adequate. Here, attempting to say-what-cannot-be-said is based on a language's *overlap* with itself, in which inadequacy and perfection are held in one and the same grip of the English language. In this compressed frame, perfection is perceived as lying not across an impenetrable line of eternity as it is often represented, but *inside* its own expression of inadequacy.[5] Inside claimed patience, Washington Irving attempts to push back a demand to express what is in effect already latent in the same English language:

> We wait with hope, but we wait with patience. Of all writers a great poet is the rarest. Britain, with all her patronage of literature, with her standing army of authors, has, through a series of ages, produced but a very, very few who deserve the name. Can it, then, be a matter of surprise, or should it be of humiliation, that, in our country, where the literary ranks are so scanty, the incitements so small, and the advantages so inconsiderable, we should not yet have produced a master in the art? Let us rest satisfied—as far as the intellect of the nation has been exercised, we have furnished our full proportion of ordinary poets, and some that have even risen above mediocrity, but *a really great poet is the production of a century* (1813, 226, emphasis added).

Such literary discourse framing the unreachable "perfect" poet is not primarily literary, but political. These writers want (both in terms of lack and desire) an economical (fast and efficient) way to get a culture that they fear does not meet their rising economic success. This quest for rapid perfection unwittingly generates frames of unreachability.

For these writers, the classics can define yet another form of expression both perfected and unobtainable: "The Greek and Roman languages," Theophilus Parsons writes, "are far more perfect, better contrived vehicles for thought and feeling than any modern tongue. No writer can, therefore, now equal the classic authors in mere style. . . ." "On the other hand," he continues, "an excessive and indiscriminate admiration of these last [the old English writers] might make him careless, diffuse, and declamatory." Finally, he says, "the fact is, that while some of our countrymen are vain enough, they scarce know of what . . . they are not apt to be proud in the right place." After denoting what has been called "unselectability,"[6] he adds *time* in his demand for literature, a literature that is inextricably linked to a "spirit of freedom" that has *already* happened ("has called them into being"): "Much yet remains to be said upon the subject, for which this is not the place or occasion. We would however remark, that if there be any truth, which reason and experience concur to teach, it is, that genius and liberty go hand and hand; and it is equally true, that we live under institutions whose very essence is freedom, and which must cease to exist when they are no longer animated by the *spirit of freedom* which *called them into being*" (1820, 33, emphasis added).

A same-language condition has led to a complex impasse. How can an overlapping condition of the inexpressible in the English language find a way forward? The answer has to do with a collapse into the English language itself: once the heroic and choral parts are in *one* place, one language, English, they belong to *time frames* in which the (heroic) inexpressible American English and the (choral) expressible English English exist in time and can be recast exactly one from the other. Compressed together, the two Englishes are no longer divided by a line that separates the human from the eternally unreachable.

Participating in this suspended discourse of a dare of a self-same language, Whitman's rhetoric in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* distances itself from itself to refashion it. The conversion of disadvantage to advantage features time frames in a topos that normally lies beyond the reach of time. This gives new dimension to the self-limiting English language, one that to be reconfigured back into an English that has

already taken shape: "The English language," Whitman asserts, "befriends the grand American expression . . . it is brawny *enough* and limber and full *enough*" (1982, 25, emphasis added). In the Preface, the convention of a traditionally timeless other-worldly topos is translated into a practical world of possibilities in language. In a same-language context, this inadequacy suggests a failure of words from (translations of the same) words, rather than a totality of human failing in relation to the eternal. Whitman's Preface tersely attempts to reverse the tide and perceptions of inexpressibility in English words: "The English language befriends the grand American expression" (1982, 25). Here, the Preface efficiently redresses human overreaching as merely English overwriting; its own hyperbole on speech self-consciously redresses the yet-to-be-expressed "eloquence" of "highest gradation" (consistent with the topos) named in an 1807 edition of *The Port Folio* as that which is already "conspicuously" excelling, though no one may yet to recognize that "gradation" (1807, 388).

Whitman's Preface not only adapts the topos but continually transforms it. It explicitly inserts time into a timeless topos. In this way, the inexpressible veers from its characteristic division of death and life, or "then" and "now." Its division is obfuscated, again, by the usual division between what can and cannot be expressed being rooted in *one* simultaneous instrument of expression, English. This adaptation of the inexpressible causes temporal somersaults: it situates the inexpressible in a past achievement turned backwards from a future that exists in the present. It can be seen in his response to Theophilus Parsons's familiar call in 1820 for a literature, "In this country, it should be the business and the object of literary men, not to reform and purify, but to create a national literature. We have *never yet had one*, and it is *time* the *want* should be supplied" (1820, 32, emphasis added). Addressing such impatience, Whitman's Preface supplies both time and need. In a long and literal act of pretense, verbs fuse the impatience of a missing literature with a future as good as achieved:

> America does not repel the past or what it has produced
> under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes
> or the old religions . . . accepts the lesson with calmness . .
> . is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough

> still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms . . . perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . perceives that it waits a little while in the door … that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who *approaches* . . . and that he *shall be* fittest for his days (1982, 5, emphasis added).

This package of redirected time frames will be repeated countless times. It forges a promise for the heir that cannot be named, but has already passed, and predates its own existence. Lodged in the "corpse," the past-up-to-present just short of a desired "literature" is itself descendent of the future, born to the heir of a national idiom yet to come. This sequence of verbs presumes a past that has not yet been. Equivalently that same past presumes a future that has already come. Simultaneous is the realization (both in time and imagination) of it in the present as having already been forged. There is only the framing, and a residual present. The middle ground of becoming, and with it the possibility of never becoming or never being expressed just right—is gone.[7]

The immediate cultural anxiety about language is not addressed, but redressed. It is not overcome, but bypassed casually and unhurriedly by a bystander: "Now that he [the greatest poet] has passed that way see after him!" (1982, 10). The frame around the already achieved inexpressible, referred to in a past tense that forges the future, refits the more traditional frame of the topos originally bound to human inadequacy; it suggests inadequacy of any single individual who by chance may have missed the boat *in time* to participate in the expression. Whitman's frames attempt to revisit disadvantage as already advantageous, and advantage as already disadvantageous. The frame presents a before as if it were an after, or an after as if it were a before, or both. Manfred Jahn makes this point, noticing to the simultaneous revisitation of both data and frame: "Frames and textual data enter a mutual dependent relationship corresponding to what is traditionally known as the hermeneutic circle, more recently, Harker has termed it the "interactive model' of the reading process. The adequacy of a frame is continuously put to the test by incoming data, and the analysis of the data

depends to a considerable extent on the current frame. The frame tells us what the data is, and the data tells us whether we can continue using the frame" (1997, 448). This same simultaneity occurs in Whitman's concluding statement in his first Preface, "The signs are effectual. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is true. The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (1982, 26).

These frames are both simultaneous and intensely tendentious.[8] The simultaneous elision of what can be expressed with what this language cannot express takes place in the same literal and written space that is occupied by itself, the English brought over from England. While writers are self-consciously overwriting in professed statements of English over English, something else is happening. The writers are, in effect, overdetermining an outcome: they are pointing to an alternative to failure. This brings up the problem of how can the two perceived Englishes wrapped up in one (the one choral and inadequate, and the other perfect and complete) ever appear to succeed? The traditional topos, consisting of one part praise and one part inadequacy, inevitably leans toward failure or human limitation. In Whitman's Preface, this topos steals time back from the heroic and eternal branch of its history: joined with the choral branch of its frame, as one, inside the same English language, the heroic branch joins its human counterpart in time. Time replaces the eternal. And then the human potential for expressibility forces itself back into time, rather than being stuck as forever inexpressible outside eternal time. In the traditional topos, perfect expression is out of time. It can never be achieved because inside human time there can be no success. But the moment the topos is placed in time by compressing the frame, perfectibility becomes possible because time is on its side. It is at least now possible on the scale of time, whenever it happens. Whitman and his contemporaries never make any exact predictions about when an American literature will emerge: they simply play out the assumption that in the fullness of time it will come, or has happened.

The adaptation found in Walt Whitman's Preface of 1855, drawn from contemporaries' discourse, thus, is particular and startling: the inexpressible does not center on a perceived inadequacy of a human being whose words cannot express

perfection, but with that of a language, English, thought by selection and reception to be unable to attain its (already) perfected American expression. To a theoretical rhetoric, Whitman's Preface adds practical complexity. Its focus here becomes temporal, a bid for language (just) in time, rather than the more common verbal array of paradox by which the inexpressible allows for speech only in an initial attempt. The problem of inexpressibility is exacerbated in certain ways, that is, when a resolution is specifically sought *not* in silence. With the introduction of time, the binary shape of the topos of the inexpressible transmogrifies: distancing a more adequate English from inside the same inadequate English depends on spinning a conceit of adequacy, expressibility, even superiority, from within perceived inexpressibility and inferiority.[9]

The Preface makes the story of an overlapping English a story of the inexpressible, but the inexpressibility topos always comes with frames and self-critique in its rhetoric. So Whitman's Preface also forges a story of *time frames* from the inexpressible. Further, by including time in a topos that normally deems it irrelevant to effort, Whitman's Preface revisits inevitable failure in the traditional topos as potentially inevitable achievement of the English language at every moment in human time. In Whitman's Preface of 1855, the desired American English is already found within the inadequate English one. Yet it must first be distanced from itself—separated into two—but just as quickly reintroduced as one all over again: only it appears a new English, already achieved. Each part of the frame in this adapted topos of the inexpressible is characterized, as we have been seeing, not by human characters of inadequacy and perfection but by time frames (that comprise the English English that is not yet and the American English that is yet to be). Finally, these times frames, carved from the topos of the inexpressible, must be put back together as already one. They must be seen as one, in particular the American English, in a (newly perceived) advantageous way, rather than *already one* in a (perceived) disadvantageous way, already English English.

By attaching itself to time—that is, something so far not achieved in time frames, rather than impossible to achieve in human time—the longed-for inexpressibility of a "original" language, seized from inside itself, anticipates more modern discussions of

theory and practice. The text becomes inexpressible in a literal way: the text is the very site of forces resulting from the point at which the object of the inexpressible is language itself and not something "beyond" language. In this way, the performance of the problem overtakes the problem itself. There is of course no answer to an imagined problem of an "original American" language, and the problem in the first instance is a coordinate pinned down by the topos of the inexpressible. The strategy of recasting, or renaming, or invitation is a set of options opened, not closed, by self-distancing and self-observation. Thus, the discursive focus on what Benedict Anderson names the imagined community, specifically "an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time" (1983, 63)[10] engages inexpressibility (a topos known for its concern with perfectibility). This kind of engagement with the topos of the ineffable, encouraged by a self-identifying community of settlers, a demand for perfectibility, and a perceived self-same language, produces framing that contributes to anticipating and predating patterns of discourse also associated even more self-consciously and in modern term s with "not being about anything"-- anything, that is, teleological. Unsurprisingly poets are among those most interested in this topos and specifically in the inexpressible "thing itself" (a good example is Wallace Stevens's "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself"). The form of engagement, however, bears telltale signs of early lineage with the discourse of framing derived from a perceived inexpressible and same-language frame. They are constructed around time as they adapt a topos of inexpressibility that is grounded in a conceit of what can never be expressed. They exploit rhetorical confusion, indeterminacy, and vagueness suggested by concerns with a path of built-in inexpressibility of a received language.

W. B. Yeats famously makes the distinction: "Out of the quarrel with others, we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves poetry" (1959, 331). In a same-language English, these frames from the inexpressible make the quarrel with "others" as "ourselves," a modern self-conscious matter of rhetoric and poetry as one. My concern is not to suggest the existence of a pattern in relation to this revived topos (which never loses the self-conscious rhetoric of *occupatio*, where a speaker says "Words fail me" and

continues), but to examine the topos's links to a politics and poetics of theory and practice, concerning exegesis, inclusion and exclusion. Henry Adams in 1918 catches the temporal refitting through the metaphor of a pencil or pen, striking out with this instrument word by word what is *not suitable* in an effort to leave in what may be:

> Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, [Adams] turned at last to the sequence of force. . . . The form is never arbitrary, but is a sort of growth like crystallization . . . for often the pencil or pen runs into side-paths and shapelessness, loses its relations, stops or is bogged. Then it has to return on its trail, and recover, it can, its line of force. The result of a year's work depends more on what is struck out than on what is left in (1931, 382, 389).

The topos has moved away from the unavailability of human language to meet divine and timeless perfection. Instead the inexpressible, the theoretical boundary behind the act of poetic self-critique, is refitted to an imminent realization of "an excess" of language itself, hard to adduce, select, and pinpoint. The less common branch of the topos in this adaptation refits its inaccessible perfection of statement to temporal and temporary impediments of reception and selection. Richard Shryock explains that an essential role of a frame "is to mediate." He continues that this is "an unusual tool in that it can bring about change not only to the receiver but also to the sender" (1993, 13). In this strategy of refitting the notional idea of self-critique, the topos modernly attempts in critique to cross out an estrangement with another's (own) language in the poems, to turn disadvantage to advantage. Compounding a new construction of the inexpressible by seeing *too much language* rather than *too little* or inadequate words certainly seems a roundabout way to achieve *saying*. It signals an even larger and more important understanding of practice and theory, framing and self-critique, saying and not saying. Not much is more important than these.

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NOTES

[1] Writing of medieval English poetry Dana M. Symons notices that the "emphasis on the trickiness of mediation raises the perennial anxiety . . . about the status of literary language." See "A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe," *Chaucerian Dream Visions and Complaints*, ed. Dana M. Symons. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, College of Arts & Sciences, Western Michigan University, 2004, 52.

[2] The traditionally editorial use of "gathering" and "framing" in sixteenth-century England, for example, in the commonplace book and throughout the texts of this period, is covered in Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993. In particular, she notes in this discursive practice an "uncertainty" (182) of the line between authorship and editing. See especially Chapter VIII, "Bend or Frame," 162-197. She notes that the "twin discursive practices of 'gathering' these textual fragments and 'framing' or forming, arranging, and assimilating them created for English humanists a central mode of transaction with classical antiquity and provided an influential model for authorial practice and for authoritative self-fashioning" (3).

[3] The binary topos can also be drawn out into nonpoetic forms of narrative, of course. This classic and narrative embodiment of the topos, rooted in dramatic tragedy, can focus typically on two characters (such as John Marcher and May Bartram in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle"; Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"). When the topos lends its infrastructure to fiction, the first part of the frame can be realized in a heroic character, the one who embodies a larger-than-life realm, such as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. The second part of the frame, the inadequacy of human speech, is revealed in its choral characters, such as, the servant Nelly Dean, who laments what she cannot bear to

witness or express: "something," dreaded, as she says, from which she can "foresee a fearful catastrophe." Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Heather Glen, London, Routledge, 1988, 119. Together these characters establish what lies outside the range of human limitations and expressibility, what Stephen Booth goes as far as to call the human experience of "indefinition." For an analysis of how the whole subject of tragedy exists to cope with human nervousness at the fact of indefinition" and further how it "puts the audience "through an actual experience of the insufficiency of our finite mines to the infinite universe," see *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 85-86.

4 Dante's silences, tied to glory and vision, for example, are marked in contrast to feeble speech: "Thenceforward my vision was greater than speech can show, which fails at such a sight, and at such excess memory fails" (55-57), he writes. "Now will my speech fall short," he continues, "even in respect to that which I remember, than that of an infant who still bathes his tongue at the breast (106-108). He concludes, "O how scant is speech, and how feeble to my conception, and this, to what I saw, is such that it is not enough to call it little" (121-123). See *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles S. Singleton, *Paradiso*, Bollingen Series LXXX, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, 375-379.

5 A major adversary around the seeming problem of a self-same, English-language exclusion is defensive self-perception. Most "adversaries" are not critics attacking American literature (though there was just enough criticism to feed impatience): "the states of America can never have a native literature any more than they can have a native character"; see the *Quarterly Review* 10, No. 20 (1814): 52 for a favorable take disputing the unfavorable views of the United States.

6 André Kukla defines this category of ineffability in this way: "We may, under certain circumstances, come to entertain the possibility of saying an unselectable sentence; but we always decide against it in the end." See *Ineffability and Philosophy*: *Routledge Studies in Twentieth Century Philosophy,* vol. 22, London, Routledge, 2005, 146.

7 This effacement of the middle distance is registered from a different angle when Stephen Fender writes of a recurring feature of the literature of initiation; he says that "it tends to elide, or even efface, the middle distance between the individual and the horizon. . . ." See *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 15.

8 For a take of building "readings" or frames degree by degree around a cast of character and characters, see Barbara Johnson's analysis of *Billy Budd*: " . . . the confrontation between Billy and Claggart is built by a series of minute gradations and subtle insinuations. The opposites that clash here at not two characters but two readings." See "Melville's fist: the execution of *Billy Budd*," *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Culler, Vol. II, London: Routledge, 2003, 230.

9 A similar cycle has been recognized by Paul K. Longmore: "All of this, the imitation, the sense of inferiority, the resentment, and finally the assertion of superiority based on native standards marked the social and cultural maturation of colonial America." See *The Invention of George Washington*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, 10.

10 Discoveries and contentions of pluralities also play a part. As Benedict Anderson argues, utopias are underwritten by the discovery of "irremediable human pluralism," and in particular a thinking of Europe as "only one among many civilizations, and not necessarily the Chosen or the best." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London, Verso, 1983), 67-68. A utopian and solitary underpinning of the

inexpressible, a single human being attempting to express what cannot be expressed except by God, is in these terms comparably fanned out by its base in a response to the pluralities of human existence. In this sense the inexpressible is a utopian gesture because at its root is human plurality. And in turn here we hear the drive, as noted by Cathy N. Davidson, of the "inseparability" of the individual action from the national, especially as its pluralities compromise imagined ideas of a community that is "Chosen or the best." See *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America, Expanded Edition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 6.