

## Frames and Discourse in American Writing

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A compelling idiosyncrasy of development originated in America's possessing exactly the same language as England. It was so important that in the early nineteenth century strategies were suggested to circumvent this perceived impediment of language, responsible for an absence of "national character" (Channing, "Essay" 311).<sup>1</sup> Walter Channing, interestingly, chose the word "character." Although by this period critics—including Charles Brockden Brown, William Cullen Bryant, Samuel Miller, and essayists for the *Port Folio*—noted successes (such as trade, science, the "*Mechanic Arts*"<sup>2</sup>), the language and literature were considered at times intractably non-original.<sup>3</sup> According to these nineteenth-century voices, language was a British prison on American soil.

Ironically, the disparity between self-governing commercial success and this sense of a hand-me-down language put pressure on the word "originality." The adjective "original" began as it should, referentially, relating one country *of origin* to another, synonymous with another adjective such as "distinctive" in this sentence: "Our descriptions, of course, which must, if we ever have a poetry, be made in the language of another country, can never be distinctive" (Channing, "Essay" 309). It ended up abstract, self-evident, equivalent to "natural genius," a noun: "The importance of a national language to the rise and progress of the literature of a country, can be argued from all we know of every nation which has pretended to originality" (Channing, "Essay" 311). As essayists linked "character" quite literally over and over again to imitative language, they ended up ordering (commanding and lining up) a new protagonist of American stories, the ways and means of "originality," a precious commodity. Stripped of its colonial antecedent, however, this mold is tricky. Unlike Aristotle's definition of "character," in which characteristics are ascribable—whether to "bravery, temperance,

generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, honor, mildness, friendliness in social intercourse [...]”<sup>4</sup>— “character” was made-to-order: “originality.” But what can this look like?

You can see wide reverberations of this anxiety in nineteenth-century America. Concerned about “mixed-language communities,” Celia M. Britton asks, “How does the colonized subject relate to a language initially imposed by the colonizer but subsequently, to some extent, subverted and reappropriated? And what role can fictional representation play in this process?” She cites Edouard Glissant’s work on “counterpoetics,” a “detour around the problem of the lack of a natural authentic language” (Britton 31). A sticky problem exists, however, in these terms, when it is not a “mixed-language” but same-language community. As Peter Hulme argues, “the inclusion of America will, and should, affect the shape and definition of the field” (119).<sup>5</sup> At the same time the inclusion of the nonoral in any approach of American language has yet to be fully recognized as an approach to generations of America’s texts. Voices are framed in America by the English of the colonizing country, England. What Britton terms the “natural authentic language” came close being to a national obsession, excessively isolated in America as a perceived hindrance to direct and “spontaneous” self-expression, given its recent and assertive past of political independence in the name of “autonomous social agency” (Britton 31).

Strategies to rectify the situation proliferated. One was to consider alternatives to English.<sup>6</sup> Another idea was to quash all British influences of language, making room for America’s character to take instant shape.<sup>7</sup> Those British influences included classroom education, forms of speech and grammar, and even the wholesale suppression of British literary tradition.<sup>8</sup> American schools began to remove Latin and Greek from the curriculum and abolished copying British texts in handwriting exercises. “The best authors,” Theophilus Parsons claims, “they whose effect upon the mind would be to give it strength and elevation, should be *studied*, with assiduity; but no writer, however excellent, however perfect in his own style, or however good that style may be, should be *imitated*; for imitation always tends to destroy originality and in-

dependence of mind, and cannot substitute in their place any thing half so valuable." (Ruland 142). Critics in the early nineteenth century (barely) resisted comparing English to American bodies to see if shape of hands or brain would promote or impede cultural success: "Now if we suppose, with some philosophers, that the operations of the mind are but the workings of matter in its most subtle form, it would not be irrational to infer that where, on a comparison of different subjects, the grosser parts of the material man appeared to be the same or, if different, superior, there would be the same relative equality or superiority in those finer parts which constitute the mind. Judging by this rule, we must believe that our intellects are at least as flexible, as alert, and as susceptible of vigorous and continued action as those of Europeans" (Tucker 89). George Tucker then asks "our haughty adversaries for some further proof that nature who has been so bountiful to us in the formation of our bodies should have acted a niggardly part in the structure of our minds" (41-2). Reducing imported British books perhaps would encourage people to read American work.<sup>9</sup> American churches—the Unitarian—offered nationalist reasons to justify their abandoning European notions of a three-part God.<sup>10</sup> Proposed solutions to the perceived problem were inordinately difficult to frame. In 1809 Fisher Ames said why he thought America would never succeed at it, leaving no recourse: "—giants are rare; and it is forbidden by [nature's] laws that there should be races of them" (487).

The "nation's mind in writing" (Channing, "Remarks" 269) carried the black mark of a colonizer's language. Even figurative language, we know, offered a problem for making stories.<sup>11</sup> Symbolism and fictions (of English class identity, of English historical superiority, of English landscape) represented politically what texts were formally trying to leave behind.<sup>12</sup> I want to begin with the critics' uneasy equations between national language and character, between genius and originality. If "absence of character" could be replaced by originality then originality all at once serves a different god. Again, usually originality is tied to something (a place, an idea, a characteristic). In another gambit, however, a character trait was stuffed with itself. This paradox demands

that writing make itself of itself. And the literalness of that demand raises questions: What kinds of situations demand that origin be identified simultaneously with an endpoint? How is the oral relevant in this process?

Attempting to circumvent the apparent absence of a “national” language, or to find what Jacques Derrida might call the “last instance” of “*infinity*, up to God” (12), is not unique to America. But the desired and missing guarantee, along with a doubled language that was “the inheritance which the Americans have received from their British parents,” created a brou-ha-ha (Webster 18).<sup>13</sup> The critics wanted their originality to be served like fast-food, immediately. Yet while they were looking in one place, something was happening in another: over there, the fear; over here, out of this cradle endlessly rocking, as Whitman would so aptly say later in a striking metaphor of un superseded youth, framing strategies. Robert Ferguson is close when he says, speaking of American documents such as the American Constitution or the Declaration of Independence or Paine’s *Common Sense*, “How best to explain this language of national creation remains problematic.” But he notes that “Works like *Common Sense* are thematically simple but rhetorically complex, and the combination is what counts” (24). American frames—whether frame stories, the Declaration of Independence, or plain old shaggy dog stories—allowed the cart to be put back behind the horse. Originality and character could be divorced from their long-standing and perverse union.

Frames have a long history, of course. Existing all over the world, across centuries and nations<sup>14</sup> (a large handful: *Panchatantra*, Boccaccio’s *Ameto* and *Decameron*, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*). While what constitutes a “frame” varies, common features include “connecting a series of tales” (Gittes 3) and calling attention to “mimesis of process as well as of product” (Isenberg 10). In a Renaissance commonplace book, the practice of gathering and framing textual fragments signaled both “authoritative self-fashioning” and “authorship that was collective instead of individualistic”

(Crane 3-4). In each instance, the problem of potential silence or interstitial gaps, of possibly “having nothing to say,” is compensated for by the act of controlling delivery and reception (Crane 24).

For my purposes, what these American frames have in common with the others is the question that frames pose as performance. What distinguishes them, however, originally from their Catholic, and later their tragic ancestors, is that they do not generally serve as formal tales of warning against pride (such as the classic medieval narrative poem “Pearl” or Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope*). As Jennifer Andrews says, white American tall tales “typically are not models of redemption” (4).<sup>15</sup> It is, I think, more useful to call attention to anxieties of the unspeakable silence (between texts, or framer and the tale, or between, in this case, overlapping languages) as empty, rather than full. These written frames *are* America’s oral history of naming.<sup>16</sup> To be fully appreciated, they need to be heard as oral in structure, rather than analyzed primarily as fiction, even when a story such as Henry James’s *The Beast in the Jungle* is presented as a non-frame tale; they need also to be heard as plain old shaggy dog stories, developed from the “sudden unexpectedness’ of the Greeks, passing into the epigram and the catch-poem or the catch-story, gathering strength from the limerick, the clerihew, and the tall story, and emerging finally as the ‘shaggy dog’ [...]” (Partridge 51). They perform the part of oral literature for a country that was born writing.

The fact is that American literature came into existence lacking a prior and longstanding oral tradition in English. But what it lacked in this tradition, it made up as performance. A specific kind of rhetoric or performance came into being as a written substitute for an oral English literature America never had. In this essay, I want to highlight rhetorical practices that were more auditory than literary in their origins. Defining oral literary performance, Augustine Okereke supports Richard Bauman’s idea that oral literature “bears a responsibility to display communicative competence.” According to Bauman, “Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its refer-

ential content.” Okereke explains that this “places a heavy burden on the performer, who must communicate in ways that his listeners are expected to understand” (40). Or, to put it another way, developed in a settler colony which had no time for a slowly-evolving oral past, frames are a device “intended to substitute for the very dimension in which it appears superfluous: the oral performance” (Belcher 19).

A “textual approach to the Founders also recovers one of their few forgotten virtues—their very conscious sense of themselves as men of letters” (2), notes Robert A. Ferguson. This puts it too mildly. Without an oral history, the pressure to make “originality” self-evident, rather than ascribable to a yet-to-be-agreed-upon characteristic or “character,” fell into the lap of a doubled and written language. No wonder so many frames appear. The pressure on the framer, “who must stoop to the lowest common denominator to find agreement,” is specifically not to leave the text to its margins of silence, as many frames do, but to *make* “a text within a consensual setting” (Ferguson 8). Like speech acts described by J. L. Austin and Emile Benveniste, such frames do not attempt to inform or describe, but “accomplish an act through the very process of their enunciation” (Felman 15)<sup>17</sup> and in each instance of performance original—“cannot be the same” (Okereke 42). Born of insecurity of language, hardened instantaneously into writing, frames typically assumed the shape of shaggy dog stories (probably named in the 1930s). They were one of the oral forms that had roots in the American Tall Tale (in print as early as the early 1800s),<sup>18</sup> while they also, more classically, made room for imminent “origin.” As Ferguson says more genuinely about early public texts in America: “One reduces the public text into an article of faith or icon.” Most of the important texts of the Revolution, he continues, “are composed to be seen and believed in without necessarily being read or mastered. [...] they seek substantiating form at every turn” (9). “These abstractions,” he says, “have very practical implication for both the literal word on the page and the space around it” (Ferguson 13).

Like the frame of an oral tall tale which “worked to diffuse the tensions created by the story proper and allowed tellers and listeners alike

to separate themselves from the danger and mystery of the natural world that was part of their daily lives" (Andrews 3), typical shaggy dog stories also invite interpretive commitment from listeners who lack either cultural experience or experience of the genre, or both.<sup>19</sup> But there is a big difference. A shaggy dog story is, as Roger L. Welsch points out, "a *parody* of a joke" (Welsch 21; italics added). It is not as funny as the tall tale. "The essence of telling them [shaggy dog stories] is to make them as long and detailed as you can before you finally reach the punch line. Well not so much punch line, perhaps. More "fizzle line [...]" (par. 2), claims Betty Rapkins. One part of the joke of a shaggy dog story is that there is no joke, after all. This is central for understanding the reconstitution of "originality" in American frames from the core of British English. The frames develop oral techniques of consensus of "character" and "originality" to relieve the pressure of dissent that a written word cannot help but create.

The frames that I am discussing, then, did not fundamentally grow from English or other models in a literary way; they grew out of defensiveness about the inadequacy of language in an extraliterary context.<sup>20</sup> Even cultural historians such as Thomas Paine, Jr. and William Dunlap were defensive to try to explain it. But they also had to prepare an audience to accept something that did not have immediately recognizable British legitimacy. In other words, a way of writing emerged out of a political situation and rhetoric; later it materialized as recognizably literary. This may be stated too strongly because writers are readers first, of course, but I want to focus on the strategies of persuasion and dissent that were, in their origins, more for the ear than for the eye.

An extreme and very clear example of an American frame tale is Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Like many contemporary frames, an American frame begins with the reluctance or refusal of a speaker to make a claim at all. (Even in *The Rhapsodist* of 1789, Charles Brockden Brown writes, "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 in it" (3; italics added). We may not even think, for example, that Raymond Carver's opening to his story "Cathedral" generates a frame from that

“loss” of character. But “Cathedral” is a classic American frame story, and, to use Whitman’s words, “I see again the forms, I smell the odor” (306). The doubling between the blind man and the speaking “I,” well-documented by Mark Facknitz and Nelson Hathcock, *does* something different from setting up its more obvious redemptive symbolism: it resequences the story as having at least one voice more than the speaking character’s voice *for* narration: “This blind man, an old friend of my wife’s, *he* was on his way to spend the night” (209; italics added). The narrator, like the tall-tale spinner, “projects multiple verbal meanings at once by addressing at least two audiences and his utterance is calculated to mean something different to each” (Wonham 310). 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 as a sentence, making an oral gesture of composition from inside a written one. It “demands,” as Eric Partridge says about the shaggy dog story, “an apt and imperceptible mingling of narrative and dialogue” (52). 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 humour 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 is sometimes called a “groaner” (Welsch 2); the tale is now, like the narrators themselves, “laughing their heads off” (Partridge 22). If we are not sure, we are equally not sure *what* is narrating. Partridge explains, “the ‘lead-in’ and the ‘lead up’ have had to be deceptively leisurely and almost diffuse” (52). This kind of frame springs in from a single hoop and, 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” (Belcher 2); the performance identifies two disqualified narrators (Bradbury 137): the speaking “I,” with clear written defects, and the blind man, with obvious physical ones.

Further, these disqualifications are meant to be literal: “exaggeration begins to act literally” (Wonham 19), and makes an incongruous



picture. If understood as symbolic, the story paradoxically flattens to triteness. In this frame, the characters are not easily distinguishable (as they are between Nick Carraway and Gatsby or between Jack Burden and Willie Stark). Even though Carver's story lacks this differentiation, it is still a frame, one put into motion by the "character" Channing might have described as "absent," now humourously and literally so, splitting that absent character into two false starts, a frame. This story puts into immediate effect two simultaneous openings, at least two narrators, each undermining, not corroborating, the authority of the other. Not only does this story reject 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 one 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*, for example, 9).

Unlike modes depending upon preventing "the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now, though painfully, recognized as a non-self" (de Man 207), this story pulls back from narrative into a joke, landing the narrator and the blind man in a frame which destroys narrative and that kind of painful self-recognition. Carver's narrative really works not as a story, not as irony, but as something akin to the shaggy dog story, in which "the story presents a *non sequitur* of psychology" (Partridge 87). If it were a conventional frame, you would judge which character can see (one or the other or both or neither). But in Carver's story neither character can be judged separately from the joke strategy. "He" (remember "he," the minor narrator who swaps with the major one) begins its existence as a misplaced pronoun in the sentence, and the primary narrator (who has to be seen as a framer) performs his own idiom of blindness. Carver's story is not great, but the trick of it is in the hearing, not the seeing: it is wonderfully playful, and deadly serious (again, the parody of the joke), if one discerns the frame: as Partridge says about shaggy dogs, "However absurd it may be, a 'shaggy dog' must never be silly" (52).

Most frame forms are not this extreme. The risk that I have taken may obfuscate how common the ordinary frame narrative is in canonical American literature. They exist all over. I have skipped over well-known frames, such as *The Leatherstocking Tales*, *Roughing It*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Manhattan Transfer*, *Gravity's Rainbow*. They also exist in places that you might not expect. Even The Declaration of Independence is a frame work; as Derrida famously argued: "One cannot decide [...] whether independence is stated or produced. [...] Is it that the good people have already freed themselves in fact and are only stating the fact of this emancipation in [*par*] the Declaration? Or is it rather that they free themselves at the instant of and by [*par*] the signature of this Declaration? This obscurity, this undecidability between, let's say, a performative structure and a constative structure, is *required* in order to produce the sought-after effect" ("Declarations" 9). Whether recently anthologized, a poem such as Celia Thaxter's "Alone," or long-studied, Henry James's famous story, "The Beast in the Jungle," some frames are not even recognized as frames. In these often-unnoticed works as frames, the narrator exists virtually in x-ray form, like the residual legs inside a snake's body—still present but demanding scrutiny to locate. And these set the stage for reconsidering prototypes and types in American-written texts.

Perhaps the best way to see the frame's importance is to look closely at one of the most well-known American stories, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in which the featured character lacks identifiable origins. In this frame, literally spreading out possibility for character, without characterizing, maps a desire, again, to equate character with zero, originality, birth itself. Consider Pip in *Great Expectations*, a character born in first-person narrative between two identifiable, if 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" (3). Actually there are more than two names. Pip is obviously funny with his two p's but the character has confidence to name himself Pip. Bartleby, though, with his two b's, is a different figure. He

have a kind of self-confident air, but the joke is *on* the character who spreads out possibility for himself; he is more placeholder than character. Pip can be laughed at. Bartleby, finally, cannot be; he risks losing his status as a narrative character (though he never loses his position in leg-pulls of the structure). The story "Bartleby" defies the audience to laugh at the character Bartleby. Even the title, with its name full of character, denotes its missing character and is part of the scaffolding: it is one of the red herrings of a shaggy dog. In this way, the frame supercedes narrative integrity at the same time that it attempts paradoxically to pull a narrative character out of the joke structure. So the speaker proposes a biography of one of the "singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written [...]." He immediately acknowledges that his materials for this particular biography must be thin: "I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man" (635). The narrator's self-consciousness makes all too clear his lack of qualification for the nonfictive, "biography." Simultaneously, as a frame, the story turns narrative back into a joke as it makes fiction from inside its own action of demanding order for exactly what is not there. In particular, the frame presumes an accomplishment that has yet to be credited, one character in the "canon" of figures for which there is merely a missing narrative. Its characters, like the American "character" attacked by Channing, remain elusive in narrative, obvious in joke structure.

What we have here is not so much a complete and full-blown story, such as American readers were used to in Sir Walter Scott, but an anxiety about a story that ought to be told if only it can be told and the resulting shaggy dog. What inhibits the telling is the central fear in Bartleby about storytelling itself, delivered by the lawyer's insecurity. Todd F. Davis says, "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'" (183-84).<sup>21</sup> Yet, that is exactly the

parody of a joke that shaggy dogs rub against, despite Davis's attempt to prop the lawyer up: "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" (Davis 184). This desire to understand presumes we can "learn" or "see." Just as he claims that Bartleby has few materials for identification, so he presents an insufficiency of data for his own story, making it impossible, *of course*, for the readers to believe in his change. His own frame has already demonstrated that joke, and so it is unavailable as interpretive irony at the end of the tale.

What has happened? In an attempt to defy time, actually two jokes aim at fusion: the narrator's attempt at change is framed; but that joke—its inconsequence—is also part of the *non sequitur* of what Partridge calls not logic but "attitude and response" (87).<sup>22</sup> And so it is "not all that funny" (Welsch 1). What is left? The frame story's structure dares the reader to pick the less offensive joke. Bartleby actually cannot be original and absent at the same time. But the lawyer's reasonable response to this is mocked by having him recognize (late) the "miracle" of Bartleby that he misses, which is absent *to him*. It is absent, of course, to everyone, since Bartleby literally is but a stand-in. The appeal (in a reversal of the same hindrances) *is* the dreaded American "absence" of character (contrasted to the mundane presence of the lawyer), and to laugh is not to laugh at the laugh that formalizes the tale, not the characters. It must be possible (just) in time to be both the lawyer and Bartleby, the mundane and the original. The desired splice is paradoxically available only in joke form to the readers (not to the story's characters).

The characters found in these frame narratives are almost unbearably thin.<sup>23</sup> In these frames, while mocking the rotund character—"I do not speak it in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed in my profession by the late John Jacob Astor, a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion" (636)—the fictional characters reveal their thinness, and, worse, the fizzle following such "build-up" and "red herrings" (Partridge 35): "Ah Bartleby! Ah! humanity!"

(672). Judged differently, however, by joke structures, the characters are thick. In heavy-handed prose, *Bartleby*, if a character too, is biblically led away by a constable, while “the silent procession filed its way though all the noise, and heat, and joy of the roaring thoroughfares at noon” (668). Or, classically, *Bartleby* “makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous—a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins” (651). The competing symbolic gestures fall flat. The more *Bartleby* is described, the more he disappears as a *character* and the more he reappears a “fizzle.” His famous line “I would prefer not to” (648) as in oral tall tales, rubs “the same spot as long as [...] listeners can stand it,” and 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” (Reaver 372). Only here the “remarkable” events are not remarkable, and the “spot” of *Bartleby* is just that, a point of no origin. So the parody of the tall tale, stretched to shaggy dog limits, sets up the absent remarkable events for a fizzle. If a frame in a tall tale conventionally “prepares the audience for the transition to the fantastic world” (Reaver 374), “where imaginary hypotheses are respected” (Reaver 373), then “*Bartleby*”’s shaggy dog structure respects only the parody, in which *Bartleby*’s “lack of origin” is *both* ridiculed and respected. We all know that *Bartleby* is designed to remain shadowy, but that narrative self-consciousness does not rescue the story; it practically sinks it. The narrator says, “While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of *Bartleby* nothing of that sort can be done” (635). The lawyer writes the story, of course, but “*Bartleby, the Scrivener*” is full of exactly this kind of qualifying statement that, if understood through the frame, gives the details of the story depth or, at least, breadth. Speaking of the tall tale, Ariane Dewey writes, “the fight was so desperate, to take it seriously was to surrender” (196). Yet, *writing* the oral (that never was) does take a fight for retrieving what the oral, over time, gives: indisputable “communicative competence” (Okereke 40). Okereke cautions that, “Folklore texts are, in most cases, tedious to read.” As these frames sound like (rhetorically) oral texts,

they are frequently tedious to read. But not when they are heard out loud *as* oral. *Bartleby*, thus, is a slippery put-together. The tale is absolutely not a story about any character, but a certain kind of response to American anxiety that concerns articulation of a received English language. Common figurative techniques of fiction are but red herrings, what Partridge identifies as one of the many “cosy human” touches that shaggy dogs set into motion. Figurative language is given away cheaply, thus removed from fictional practice. The strategies are not actually like those in postmodernism or “its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic [...]” (Harvey 44). “*Bartleby* was one of those beings,” the narrator says, “of whom nothing is ascertainable except from original sources, and in his case those are very small” (635).

Considered in light of the “oral narrative’s character of time unfinished” (Tonkin 67). *Bartleby*’s existence is clearer. If time “is one of the essential things [oral] stories are about” (3), then so is order: sorting out “history-as-lived” and “history-as-recorded” is not easy. As Elizabeth Tonkin says, “It is easy to slip from one meaning [of history] to the other” (2). The few scraps of his *Bartleby*’s turn from being hindrances (just as *Bartleby* himself is characterized by the narrator) to being part of a joke, in which the pressure to order “what comes first” is maximized. Additionally, given the need of a typical shaggy dog to have an ending of “inconsequence”—“The *dénouement* is a [...] a gaily illogical psychological inconsequence” (Partridge 43)—order is all there is, *if* it is there at all. This combination puts special pressure on readers regarding beginnings and endings—“how to get a yarn-spinner from an audience” (42). This is the opposite, in some ways, of postmodernism’s “loss of temporality,” though the experience of “loss of depth” can at any particular moment loom without its accompanying parody. If postmodernism can be described as “bottomless fragmentation” and the “collapse of time horizons and the preoccupation with instantaneity” (Harvey 59), these but point to the rhetorical complexity of effects for the American frame but not to what happens in a story such as “*Bartleby*.”<sup>24</sup> The character *Bartleby* is not depicting anything. All the

story wants (and that is a great “all”) is that the readers order the elusive “first” that so bothered the American spirit. In 1809 Fisher Ames takes a stab at order, resorting to presence (the question of genius and originality, national literature or language notwithstanding): “Our honours have not faded—they have not been worn. Genius, not doubt, exists in our country, but it exists [...]” (461). *Bartleby* then does not, as suggested by many, primarily represent Jesus denied by Peter. He does not represent an idea of imaginative purity wasted by American pragmatism. He is at heart non-representative.

This story just wants to begin, but it will not say what the beginning is; it insists that the reader recognize one. So it can be said that the narrator’s movement—from the first word in the story, “I,” to the last word, “humanity”—takes place as a narrative simply by having the word “I” finally and literally precede the word “humanity.” Such a sequencing gives birth in practice to narrative, to a “before” and an “after.” The voice, like *Bartleby* who likes “to be stationary” (667), remains inaudible otherwise; there is no defining point of origin without movement. Movement—the slide of one language (and character) from underneath the other—is made, not presumed. If understood more literally than one might imagine through the frame, there is no irony.

This order in many ways did not construe a *story* of American originality finally, but originals in its people. It was a tall order, stripped to its bare bones; like a tall tale (which is funny) and a shaggy dog (which is not), the stories demand in effect *not* to “lack inconsequence” (Partridge 43). In identical and doubled English, either every *one* or no *one* was original, or all (another matter) were, and what is required is proof (or, perhaps, the special advertisement that helped define the early shaggy dog tale, a story that should always “be told in your own words,” Rawoof, “Shaggy Dog Story”). As Britton says, “The question of language is central to the colonial [...] experience” (1). A subject requires narration, a cultural mode of agreement, in order to be made *in the first place*. When identity by consensus comes to depend upon language and that language is unfortunately “identical” with another

er's, then autobiography and character-production are indistinguishable and literal.

Resistance to the subjugation of inherited language is frequently identified as the centre of the frame: how is it possible for a settler country, lacking what Gandhi calls the "predominantly administrative and militaristic subordination of colonised culture in Africa and Asia" (170) to locate voice at all? Just being able to write defines a marker of the experience: the privilege of speaking, of resisting and reinventing "lack, negativity, and otherness" (Britton 183). But for this settler colony, one in which the language is oppression, to speak is already to acknowledge one felt form of self-subjection. Ames points to the fetters: "Nobody will pretend that Americans are a stupid race; nobody will deny that we justly boast of many able men and exceedingly useful publications. But has our country produced one great work of original genius?" (Ames 430).

"Originality" in America's particular twist directly engages language because it was the playing turf in this "dreadful secondariness" where the "soul of a nation" (Said 26) was suppressed. Trying to understand originality in the early 1800s meant to find a seeming instance of it, but no such instance was sufficient (or wrong). The diffuse definition often diminished ideas, as it multiplied voices, at the expense of ideas. Hugh Henry Brackenridge's parody in *Modern Chivalry* makes the point: "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, [...]" (3). Following through, the claim ducks criticism: "It will be needless for me to say any thing about the critics" (4). He explains that "in a model [an original] there can be no defect" (4). Defying the just-stated utterance in humor, the speaker paradoxically admits good judgment: "I have no objections [...] to any praise that may be given to this work" (4). The fear, carried in language, had less to do with what critics can associate with "alterity" or the "negativity" of the "truly oppressed." In this case it had to do with language, and it is revealed as nothing but language first.



“It may be more useful to take American English as a ‘new type of colonial language,’ which will always have the character of a second language,” Jonathan Arac writes. Creole “would start to place less weight on distinguishing the culture of the United States from the cultures of Britain and Europe and more on relating [...] the cultures of the United States to those of other areas once held as colonies of Britain and Europe” (5-8). Relating American English to other colonial languages in terms of its action seems to me to have direct relevance to literature.<sup>25</sup> When a study of storytelling turns up a pattern produced at the seam of a joint language, it makes sense to address these conditions.

Critical arguments show that defining “nationhood,” however, is all but impossible. In “Not in the Least American,” Judith Fetterly, for instance, writes “By playing with the terms ‘American’ and ‘unAmerican,’ I seek thus to join the effort to identify the naming of the field of ‘American’ literature as itself a site of contestation [...]”. She summarizes, “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” (20-21). By assigning to men the “privileged subject of American literature and culture” (22), Fetterly historically and accurately identifies a social thread, but she hopes to sew that thread of social values into an aesthetic fold. She claims that the values understood as “American” include violence and masculinity as production of violence, both of which define “the feminine and the foreign as legitimate recipients of such violence” (30).

But a text is more than the sum of its values, even though its values can help produce this or that kind of citizen (or represented citizen) believed to be missing from the national spectrum. And we frequently see, therefore, a too-heavy dependence upon theme to rectify the scale of social images that appear to be absent in the American literary landscape. Female power fantasies, liberation from marriage, community, inclusiveness, madness (Walker 235)—all of these replace themes previously understood as male. For Fetterly and others, these male themes (binary opposition, competition, hierarchy, for example)

have been understood as American. Nationhood, as she and others perceive, expands its social and self-imagery by enlarging its pool of qualified “heroes” or “heroines.” Therefore, the nation, often through essayists, sometimes looks to texts to find the absent image of America supposedly present all along, giving importance not just to the buried representation of certain citizens, but to the discoverer of the subjugated people themselves.

Here, one finds another desire to unname, which de-images by multiplying the number of candidates for nationhood. To “image” something lacks the very fluidity that the cry for social equality demands. But this fear of stereotyping slides into a fear of “typing,” in this case, absent characters through framing practices. And, ironically, this same fear of stereotyping produces strategies not far from those I have been describing so far, only with more contemporary fears of exclusions attached. Meanwhile as performance, frames forge the doubleness of voice and authority by which that doubleness is mitigated not in principle but practice. They presume ventriloquism and its self-limiting duration and relate both to documented history. Many of course attempt to look at the production of boundaries and the text as practice, an antidote to “theorized” cultural and formalist approaches, a hyper self-awareness not unlike strategies construed to put in deliberate suspension a relational model between art and text (Colebrook 23). The other side of the danger, however, has already currently been noted. As critic Arif Dirlik warns, for example, the theory may be inherently limited to nonliterary scope: there is always more to politics than theory (342).

Studying American frames that emerge from a period in American history itself entangled with the study of language looks at both fears. History and politics do not join in a cultural form: “The authority that is thus bestowed upon the written word is enormous” (Ferguson 28). Paradoxically, under such tremendous strain, it may be the authority of oral, rather than written strategies, that pops up. What are the “possible connections between large-scale political developments and fine-gauge narrative adjustments”?<sup>26</sup> By definition, a frame’s practice is to forge

the context and its immediate authority. By multiplying and reproducing, frames strangle narrative oxygen. They do not offer; they demand. Most importantly, they order. They put up for fiction only through nonfictional practices, including tall tale and shaggy dog strategies.

In its oral performance the frame demands a spontaneous, vocal generation after generation. It dares readers to crisscross boundaries of rhetoric (fiction, jokes, nonfiction) and denies their status as "subjected people." It moves between Homi Bhabha's mimicry (ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience, or colonial vocabulary and its anticolonial usage)<sup>27</sup> and an anti-mimetic form of symbolism which embodies resistance to "the American ideology" (Bercovitch xiii). Mimetic language and anti-mimetic form historically meet in frame narratives: nonoral demands upon the English language in America split the frame's division into two, sidestepping the question of originality in doubling narrative voices and trapping an effect inside itself.

In poetry, the debate about the effect of historical and colonial influences continues. Here is Terence Martin on the method of Hawthorne's Tales: "The method of Hawthorne's tales reveals the achievement of a writer who had to establish the conditions of his fiction in the very act of creating that fiction itself" (8). A traditional foil for "pure" aestheticism, the poet Wallace Stevens, for example, is being reevaluated in historical terms. Listen to Alan Filreis, who echoes a framing strategy. Stevens's "hardest work was to create the very conditions that might allow [the poetry] to be understood." Further, he argues, the acuteness of this problem dates back to the nineteenth century. Stevens "wanted to suggest that the poetic forms assumed by writing produced in the English revolutionary period were conditioned by a strong sticking to the facts." (15). So the concept of framing exists inside the lyric poem, no less than in narratives or documents. The basic distrust of authority, or of "figuring" in fiction, actually pertains to the residual distrust in *prefiguring*, or origins. Eliot, Berryman, Stevens: one can see that each uses frames (but that is a topic for other chapters). Against well-worn thematic concerns or mere "representations of ideas," formal analyses of frame narratives help to open up these texts too.

Frames, then, produce at least two beginnings. The lack of a beginning in the frame narrative staves off the question of origins and originality. What we feel instinctively to be the essential modernity of nineteenth-century literature resides in this form, echoing a simultaneous distrust of authority and American conditions. Tracing the subject in relation to both apparent national identity and language, Apter refers to Jean Paulhan's strategic use of terror ("the bloodiest phase of the French Revolution"): a "means of shaking language loose from the fetters of dead rhetorical formulas and *idées reçues*" (31). Instead of these statements, the frame offers nothing.<sup>28</sup> By substituting language as action for statement frames hold off terror by formalizing it.

What originated in a look over a British shoulder ended up ahead of its time, prefiguring international modernism. Modernism's retreating frame organizes the absence of "facts"—the "increasingly dominant ascendancy of consciousness," (Levenson 1) just as American frames organize the feared absence of an original language. By contrast a nearly personal gesture, redressing the problem of British English, an American frame tries to order or stabilize or at least cradle a solution. The self-consciousness of the American frame does not represent the modern's "instability in the forms themselves" (36), but just the opposite, stability or identity, a "faith in the text to stabilize the uncertain world in which they live" (Ferguson 4). Built defensively, by the "I," it is frequently offensive to the ear.

Language as action indeed permitted a politics and culture to merge in frames as a substitute for the fear of insufficiency and self-contradiction. Joining the "partitive or morselated subject affirming itself in the world through the projection and erosion of its 'native' base" (Apter 5) (this is a mouthful, but an intelligent one) to Roberta Cimarosti's more active narrative stage, one which depends literally upon the reader, provides a good beginning for analyzing American frames. Cimarosti says: "In their [post-colonial] search for knowledge the protagonists' double role as readers and writers projects a new challenging response to facts and literature" (283). Comparably, Walter Benjamin succinctly attributes importance to the "historical and production conditions" that

create a work (289-96). Tying frame works to speech acts helps to understand American writers and historians; they cannot speak for a stability or frame of reference that was nonexistent. I have looked at different kinds of frames and, in particular, "Cathedral" and "Bartleby"; but more attention has to be paid to the frame and what goes on inside it.

The settler nation's experience finds the question of subjectivity compelling but rejects nationalism for the "hybridity"<sup>29</sup> that anti-imperialism fosters. In this way, assumptions about American studies need to be reexamined in relation to the literalness by which subject and object of autobiography are one. In this larger view, the subject acts inside the tactics of evasion and of camouflage to subvert the typical predicament. Even this perceived *lack* of language, or doubled language, needs to be elucidated as a kind of self-representation. Writing of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, María del Mar Gallego Durán describes this kind of strategy that "clearly represents the fight of a nation to find its own voice from a marginal position that decentralizes the creation of any sense of identity" (176), except of course one of autobiography. Lawrence Grossberg locates it differently: affect is "an articulated plane whose organization defines its own relations of power and sites of struggle" (167). Whether the strategy is identified by its political modus operandi (tactics of evasion), or social (marginal position) or even stylistic (affect), the point is the same. In attempting to develop a recognizable list of *characteristics* identifying colonial work, each of these critics indirectly points to something else: work turns instead on performance, a series of verbal strategies, from which is born an oral act least expected from those American critics who commented on the joint language—English and English—that give it its character.

## Notes

- 1 In another essay on character, "American Letters—Their Character and Advancement," the editor warns against imitation: "We are no advocates indeed of looking ever at certain great words as models,—for this is just the way to make ourselves imitators; but it is the design of this 'Review' constantly

- to direct the attention of literary aspirants among us to those high *standards of Nature* on which those works themselves were fashioned” (575).
- 2 For instance, Samuel Miller writes, “In the *Mechanic Arts*, so far as respects the ingenuity of individuals, and the important serve rendered by numerous inventions and improvements, America yields to no nation under heaven” (394).
  - 3 For several telling examples, among many, see the following. Charles Brockden Brown’s defensiveness in his 1802 Preface: “No one is so absurd as to suppose that the natives of America are unfitted, by any radical defect of understanding, for vieing with the artizans of Europe, in all those useful and elegant fabrics which are daily purchased by us. Similar and suitable circumstances would show Americans equally qualified to excel in arts and literature, as the natives of the other continent. But a people much engaged in the labours of agriculture, in a country rude and untouched by the hand of refinement, cannot, with any tolerable facility or success, carry on, at the same time, the operations of imagination, and indulge in the speculations of Raphael, Newton, or Pope” (Brown iv); from a “literary friend” comes the following, which sets an apologetic tone: “There is no light, in which our country can be contemplated with less satisfaction to genuine patriotism than in her literary relations” (“An Examination” 385); even as late as 1845, resounding counterobjections continue: “We are no friends of precise prophecy. We cannot say of genius, it will be here or there, but the spirit of God breathes it, and lo! a Homer a Shakespeare” (“Literary” 150).
  - 3 For Aristotle on character formation, see Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, 61-66.
  - 4 He adds, tellingly, “‘postcolonial’ is (or should be) a descriptive, not an evaluative, term” (120).
  - 5 One of the most famous examples: in 1828 a motion was submitted in the Pennsylvania State Legislature to make German “co-equal” with English. The motion failed by one vote (Arndt 19-32).
  - 6 Edward Tyrell Channing (crying against the “imitator”) and Royall Tyler (in his preface to *The Algerian Captive*) set the tone. See, for example, the following: “If the borrowers and imitators are only encouraged, the swarm will go on thickening” (205) and “A country must be the former and finisher of its own genius. It has, or should have, nothing to do with strangers” (207); and, from another perspective, Tyler says: “There are two things wanted, said a friend to the author: that we write our own books of amusement, and that they exhibit our own manners” (6).
  - 7 George Tucker, for example, calls out for a change of behaviour: “Though this habitual veneration for the English name is very much diminished, it is far from being extinguished. We still continue to adopt their fashions in dress,

their customs and manners, and follow them through all their capricious changes" (52).

- 8 Trying to restore the slide against classical learning, an editor from *The Port Folio* argues rhetorically, "To the puny objections which have been urged against Classical learning, we mean not to reply" (357).
- 9 See, for example, Emerson's chapter on "Spirit" in *Nature* (40-42).
- 10 For a relevant discussion of a link between "an opposition to any product of the imagination" (68) and "metafiction as a self-conscious narrative" in early American literature, see Wolter. Another particularly telling essay on early leanings toward realism, as opposed to fictions, is Michael Davitt Bell's essay on *The Scarlet Letter* (36-37).
- 11 Francis C. Gray, among many, even worried that, regardless, America would not be able to match the English culture, while he still called for the attempt. He rues, "But our language, our literature, our taste are English [...]" (301).
- 12 Webster comments, in addition, of possible *advantages* of having a language that demands self-conscious separation from its twin: "We have therefore the fairest opportunity of establishing a national language and of giving it uniformity and perspicuity in, North America, that ever presented itself to mankind" (36).
- 13 As Manfred Jahn says, the "scope of frame theory" is "wide" (442). For a "model-oriented" and cognitive approach, see his essay emphasizing cognitive narratology. For a good historical background of tales, east and west, see Irwin. For a survey of what has been constituted as a "frame," see Nelles, especially 1-43. For an interesting look at the women's framed-novelle, a possible "progenitor of the novel," see Donovan, 29-57.
- 14 There are, of course, general redemptive patterns in Russian frame tales as well as in African-American humour. Framing, as in a tall tale, is not an uncommon strategy of survival for attempting to pull one voice out from a competing voice, recreating unpredictability in an attempt to dislodge assumptions, whether those assumptions involve White American and African-American voices or, earlier, English and American voices. At the same time, the trickster figure who, as Andrews points out, is "not simply a character in a story but also the model for 'a linguistic and stylistic principle' of tale telling" (89), plays a part in undermining cliché associated, again, with oppression. The White American frame narratives, though, are not generally oriented toward group survival, but toward instituting language itself through which cliché, as an element of mastery, is born.
- 15 In his essay "Latin America and Postcolonial Transformation," Bill Ashcroft recognizes a link between the oral and postcolonial: "Of course, orality is not by any means synonymous with postcoloniality, but it does focus the kinds of

discursive engagements which characterize the power struggle in all colonized societies" (22). While Ashcroft's focus remains on appropriation and reform in Latin American cultures, the point remains that the key to the strategies of transformation resides in the "use of language" (20), a point all the more taken in strategies of framing and humour designed against the backdrop of an overlapping language.

- 16 While Austin eventually modified the "purity" of his distinction between performatives and statements, he concludes that the "doctrine of the performative/constative distinction stands to the doctrine of the locutionary and illocutionary acts in the total speech-act as the *special* theory to the *general* theory" (Austin 148).
- 17 See Partridge 54. For a type index of the shaggy dog story, see Brunvand 42-68.
- 18 See Wonham 24.
- 19 Ferguson notes, from a different angle concerning founding eighteenth-century texts, the "strange medley of religious and secular voices in the eighteenth-century American texts," and concludes that "the ensuing tangle remains the single greatest puzzle in interpretations of the period" (20).
- 20 See also Vaughn.
- 21 Ted Cohen's essay on the figurative, the literal, and jokes, provides a good general background.
- 22 Philip Fisher analyzes the "thinness" of American character in his chapter on "Democratic Social Space."
- 23 The anticipatory complexity of frames toward "twentieth-century meta-fictional narrative," however, is relevant, and Jürgen Wolter has written, for example, "Brown and Irving were among the first American writers to pave the way toward twentieth-century metafictional narrative" (78). While I do not agree that they "paved the way," I think that the practice, if founded in different contexts, is important to recognize.
- 24 One kind of model is Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. He writes, "I have focussed on places and situations where literary tradition and real life notably transect" (ix). In this spirit, Fussell's imagined subtitle, "An Inquiry into the Curious Literariness of Real Life," could be recast: "An Inquiry into the Curious Literalness of American Letters."
- 25 I am indebted to Professor Jed Esty for these comments. Like Peter Hulme, he also encourages angles in providing the United States with what Hulme describes here: "a nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperial *and* colonial history that helps in the understanding of its current stance within the



world" (italics mine, "Including America," 120). More simply, he says, "a country can be postcolonial and colonizing at the same time. Such small complexities should not be beyond us, even as we recognize that they need more investigation than they have received thus far" (122).

26 For a full reading, see *The Location of Culture* and "The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism.

27 Stephen Booth, in the more general context of "nonsense" writes, "I celebrate the poem's ability to deafen us to the illogic of its assertion about the sheep, the poem's ability to let us understand something that does not make sense as if it *did* make sense [...]" (5)

28 For one long look at this issue, see *Journal of American Folklore* 444, *Special Issue: Theorizing the Hybrid*.

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