The English language "is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible," writes Walt Whitman in his preface to the 1855 Leaves of Grass. Whitman's poetic effort to find a language to embody what lies beyond the comprehension of man was at once a religious project—an effort to comprehend divinity on earth—and a national project: to capture the perfectionism that the American experiment implied. In one sense, this book re-examines Whitman's poetic project by placing it within nineteenth-century American history and setting it beside other examples, from English literary history, of this effort to speak the ineffable. The book focuses mostly on U.S. writings about American English, from the War of 1812 to the immediate antebellum period, with various excursions into post-Revolutionary writing and American modernist and postmodernist poetry, as well as English literature from the Middle Ages, which touches centrally on this question. Apart from Whitman, it is difficult to say who the most important writers are in this book since it ranges so broadly—at times sporadically—across literary history. For the twentieth century, it highlights Wallace Stevens; for the nineteenth century, its stops include Herman Melville, James Russell Lowell, Walter Channing, and Charles Brockden Brown.

The phrase, "rhetoric of the inexpressible" may seem an oxymoron, but to label it thus would be to miss the point of Richards's argument. She is not interested in moments that silence expression, or in individuals traumatically muted by oppression. Rather, Richards explores the poetic state of having too much language, rather than not enough. She analyzes not the gaps that stem from human inadequacy but the attempt of poetic language to capture the realm of perfection that necessarily goes beyond language. Thus she aims to define the sharp edge of literary expression more broadly, to show how it articulates unspoken (in this extreme case, unspeakable) experience.

Poetic language does this, Richards argues, through a kind of "framing" whereby language becomes distanced from itself (hence the title, Distancing English). In Whitman's 1855 preface, for example, two voices emerge: one says that it cannot express perfection, and the other that this expression has already occurred. The internal difference between these two voices forms the topos of the inexpressible, as Richards terms it, which emerges across literary history as a poetics of loss and inadequacy.

Turning to English literature, chapter two tracks the inexpressible in traditions of religious poetry. Subsequent chapters show how the impossibility of expressing perfection in imperfect language recurs in the temporal framework of American English, particularly following the new-found national confidence after the War of 1812. Here the book ties into a postcolonial anxiety about American English, in which the language of the past is heroic and inexpressible and thus remains in active tension with the expressive, "choral" language of the present. The main thrust of the argument is that the inexpressible, as a rhetorical problem, is part of language itself, not beyond it. Poetic language by its very nature is given life by its performance of the tensions in this effort to speak the inexpressible.

Since this book is a poet's account of the literary history of American English, it jars with the relentlessly political bent of American studies. The politics of American English has been examined closely by scholars such as David Simpson, Thomas Gustafson, Christopher Looby, and Michael Kramer, to name but a few. Unlike their books, this one studiously avoids the more obviously political valences of framing as a literary technique and a linguistic dynamic. But since Richards claims to be writing a kind of history, this avoidance creates a number of problems, especially in the chapters dedicated to American humor and the tall tale tradition-topics that do not quite fit the rest of the book.

Both the literary device of framing and the social tensions that tend to generate nineteenth-century American humor have distinct social trajectories. In American literature, a rich tradition of "framing"—much of it humorous in intent—works by juxtaposing speakers and/or languages from different social classes, or different races. Richards does not sufficiently situate her work in the context of this more obvious politics of the inexpressible, in which a tension emerges between the standard language and dialects that appear either beyond the phonetic range of conventional spelling or else beneath ideas of linguistic propriety. Richards's concern with the high tradition of poetic inexpressibility would have benefitted from some framing itself, to show how this poetics offers a way out of the now overly-scripted account of the politics of the de-voiced and the misspelled. Though the book does consider the politics of expression following the War of 1812 and American postcolonial anxieties about language in general, it slights many of the anxieties that tend to underscore debates over language— anxieties often emerging from attempts to speak the inexpressibly low, not high. More attention to both ends of this spectrum would have clarified the importance (and increased the argumentative scope) of the poetics of linguistic...
inadequacy. The book would thus have satisfied those readers who want to think about the limits of language beyond the questions of disenfranchisement and trauma that it usually implies.


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