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Distancing English

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

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Distancing English: A Chapter in the History of the Inexpressible.

The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

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*I*NTRODUCTION

This book is a chapter in the history of the inexpressible. My interest in the subject emerged in poetics. As a poetic topos, the inexpressible comes up, for the most part, in the context of forces considered to be at the very edge of representation, such as God, transcendence, suffering, evil. I found myself drawn in its long history to one node in particular: an exaggerated and overstated conundrum in nineteenth-century America, a perceived overlapping English language. Walter Channing is known for his blunt statement in 1815 about a 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.”¹

In postrevolutionary America, and peaking after the War of 1812, this node of language, bound in its articulation to the people and nation of England, found itself at the edge of its own seat of representation. The perceived impasse of speaking and writing in a language inextricably joined to itself with each utterance was a new chapter in the inexpressible. For me, there was a great deal to learn and ask. How does this perception

of English overlapping English come about? Who is most concerned with the perceived impasse? How does the rhetoric of the inexpressible intersect the already fervent political and social discourse of the period? How does it intersect the history of rhetoric and the inexpressible? How does it gain footing? Where does it *not* gain footing? How is it perceived to matter or to resolve itself?

I did learn, early, its scope. The rhetoric of the inexpressible in the nineteenth century regarding a “doubled” language had a long reach in which to take root. Inexpressibility, as I will show, is traditionally founded in a combination of perfection and inadequacy: the human speaker falls forever short of meeting expectations demanded by the perfection of his or her chosen subject, whether God or a saint or inexplicable beauty. The pivot for the rhetoric of the inexpressible, therefore, is not human inadequacy. It is first a determination of the subject of praise or perfection. From discovery to settlement, the colonies were concerned, as researchers have shown, with expectations of perfection, whether of a New Golden Age, the trope of Eden, or a City upon a Hill. Of course, expectations of explorers and emigrants fell short. Where imperfection or inadequacy of land or natural commodities was detected, hyperbole of self-persuasion, poetic encomium, not to mention propaganda of investors, were at hand. Though the combined currents of expectations and disappointment competed, the rhetoric of promotion, as David Cressy explains, by far outweighed, and frequently suppressed, the “negative impressions.”² Spreading the word of perfection by commercial entrepreneurs practically snowballed. “According to the favoured interpretation, New England promised wholesome air and brimming larders for the settlers, and enormous profits for the merchants and investors,” Cressy writes. “Doubts about the barrenness of the soil or the harshness of the winters were overshadowed by the general confidence and enthusiasm” (9). The degree to which this practically formed the earliest tall tales of inexpressible and miraculous occurrences can be heard in the occasional rebuttals. Mixed in with Christopher Levett’s observations of bounty in 1624, as Cressy points to, are these concerns: “Upon these Ilands, I neither could see one good timber tree, nor so much good ground as to make a garden,”³ he begins. He later adds,

And to say something of the Countrey: I will not doe therein as some have done, to my knowledge speake more then is true: I will not tell you that you may smell the corne fields before you see the Land . . . nor will the *Deare* come when they are called . . . nor the fish leape into the kettle, nor on the drie land, neither are they so plentifull, that you may dipp them up in baskets. . . . But certainly there is fowle, *Deare*, and Fish enough for the

taking if men be diligent, there be also Vines, Plume trees, Cherey trees, Strawberies, Goosberies, and Raspes, Walnuts, chestnut, and small nuts, of each great plenty. . . . (22)

The propensity for hyperbole of discovery, as well as the fertile land with which to ground and commercialize it, offered rich soil for inexpressibility in a continuing discourse of high expectation (along with its undercurrent of apology). Religious idealism and, particularly, new developments of inexpressibility in English Puritanism at the time of settlement traveled and intersected this node of high expectation; indeed, the rhetoric of the inexpressible, as I will show, has primary historical and fundamental ties to religious discourse. More, the turnaround and separation of the colonies from England in advancing commercial and political enterprise put new pressure on hyperbole. So did the always tailing anxieties of underachievement, which were transformed into often surprising successes (as in the *nondefeat* in the War of 1812).

Along with these acts of rhetorical self-persuasion—from discovery, to advertisement for emigration, to settlement, to political severance—an inordinate focus fell for a moment in time, cresting in the nineteenth century, on the perfection (or lack of it) in language, here, English. With every utterance, the English language and literature could be a perceived inexpressibility, potentially perfect (at best) but ultimately and hugely inhibited by its *own* expression of English and its link to England. The scope of the project, therefore, includes among many perspectives the history of the inexpressible; the delivery and style of its rhetoric in framing, even its rhetorical links to promotional rhetoric and shaggy dog stories; its intersection with commercial and religious discourse; the politics and periodicals of the period; and reference to settlement and self-persuasion. It is not a survey of the many modes or literary manifestations of the inexpressible or allied forms of frame narratives, but a look especially at extraliterary texts and contexts for this topos.

I pause at the limits of this study. This book of distancing English from English, focusing on rhetoric—not just persuasion but specifically *self*-persuasion—clearly follows lines of *choice*. As Stephen Fender says clearly, “Rhetoric may have had nothing to do with getting the African slave or the transported criminal to Virginia, but most of the anglophone emigrants to the United States up to the end of the nineteenth century . . . had the *choice* whether to go or stay, or go somewhere else.”⁴ As we know all too well, choice involves commercial and political lines of *power*. Following the rhetoric of inexpressibility as it presumes the privilege of its nineteenth-century English speakers in the first instance, this study focuses on

perfection and, in particular, poetics itself: the aesthetics of self-expression. The act of self-persuasion, to find for instance the English language a possible instrument of expression and not an impediment to it, is a matter of *perception* and opportunism based in actual economic and political options that slaves, women, Native Americans, and many others, including the English- and non-English-speaking lower class, had removed from them in their fight for basic freedoms and opportunities. Those interested in the English language as a searing source of impediment to national character (grounded in their sense that it still might lend itself to a perfect instrument) already have ties, directly or indirectly, to England, its privilege, inherited or earned, and its language; they already have 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. Thus, this study follows the rhetoric and topos of inexpressibility, knowing that the topos suppresses and truly misses those who actually cannot speak or be heard in horrific acts of political and social oppression.

Perceptions of perfection, to which the rhetoric of the inexpressible is anchored, may be considered degrees by which potential improvement is measured, and steps of inadequacy are marked along the way. 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, it is worth mentioning that these privileged speakers are anything but sure of the success in the English language, literature, or aesthetics that they put forth. Many of those most concerned with this question, such as Walter Channing, George Tucker, or Fisher Ames, return to this subject and give it succinct delivery. This is important only to the degree that we recognize that *inadequacy* and *loss* are just as prevalent and valuable to those who, seeking perfection, are wrapped up in trying to express it or achieve it in the first place.

In the quest for the “re-formation of the structure of public authority” in the early republic, as Bernard Bailyn points out, there is great loss of sight: failures, as we know, of “racism, sexism, compromises, and violations of principle.”⁵ Combined with this quest of re-formation and its blindnesses, there is also the underpinning of extreme uncertainty: “the possibility, indeed the probability, that their creative enterprise . . . would fail: would collapse into chaos or autocracy” (4). This uncertainty extends experiences of settlers in their separation from a more designed, more cultured land, and its perceived standard. This anxiety of separation, based on anything but the “newness” of the New World, and instead founded in continuities with the Old World, has now been discussed at length by

scholars and historians such as Stephen Fender, David Cressy, and Andrew Delbanco, revisiting the outdated notions of American exceptionalism and indefatigable Adamic beginnings. Many emigrants' homesickness and even their return to England, landing back on grounds of familiarity and perceived certainty, are only part of the continuing story of uncertainties and fears, blindnesses and anxieties, that ideas of perfection and resettlement typically engender.

The topos of the inexpressible, therefore, is 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 responses to the Holocaust, where writers like Elie Wiesel and George Steiner have rediscovered 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 missed opportunities. When in the nineteenth century the inexpressible comes up against language itself, it intersects postcolonial studies. The same language distribution of English in the United States at the time of independence, along with its emerging political position, put the perception of English into the category of inexpressibility as one minor but important mark of its growing influence, as well as a mark of its felt dependencies and continuities with England. A felt Englishness persisted. In 1776 an American general told his troops to behave in battle "like Englishmen,"⁶ and in 1802 a report from *The American Review* also registers the problems with an overlap of language and origins with the English: "The strong resemblance which prevails in this respect among the States, is to be ascribed to the sameness of their origin, and language, and to the similarity of manners and situations."⁷ The writer has to be close enough to that English to care that much. The distance achieved can appear to us to be minimal or exaggerated in its aims. We know from H. L. Mencken's *The American Language* the litany of minimal differences between American and British English.⁸ Yet, for just this reason, the problem of distancing English from itself is at its most acute because of the *closeness* of American and British English, a comparison drawn by settlers and their descendants in the nineteenth century. Thus Whitman begins his Preface of 1855, not with a declaration of newness and independence, but with a funeral of the past *descending* into the future that simultaneously approaches: America "perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house . . . that its action is descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches. . . ." *Distancing English*

is not, therefore, about the actual differences between American and British English but about the need to create distance politically and culturally and what was done about it in language.

I have now circled back to the scope of the book, which is based in poetics as it brings to bear instruments of the topos of the inexpressible, in which people reach traditionally an impasse in language and think that they cannot say anything more. Melville puts it well: “it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject.”¹⁰ *Distancing English* maintains, therefore, a narrow focus on the subjects and objects of a specifically rhetorical discourse of those looking back to England and former privilege and reaching a perceived impasse of language itself. “[I]t is hardly to be hoped, that we shall ever make our language conform to our situation, our intellectual vigour and originality” (308) writes Channing, finishing his thought on the overlapping language. There are many causes articulated concerning a deficiency of expression and “originality” after independence, lack of leisure, improper climate, laziness of mind, along with attacks on actual copyright issues, importation laws, and curriculum decisions in the schools. But the rhetorical center of a felt inadequacy after independence looked straight at itself for a root cause of inexpressibility: language. Thus *Distancing English* begins with this impasse in the nineteenth century. It magnifies the strand of inexpressibility not to distort its proportion in the larger conversations of inadequacy, but to see its influences on literary discourse. This study, then, examines the topos of the inexpressible, explores strategies of framing associated with inexpressibility in the nineteenth century, follows the qualities of adaptation and humor in its rhetoric, and ends in modern speculations of its travels. Since the width and breadth of any of these issues, whether the topos of the inexpressible, or framing, or humor, are extremely large, I have maintained a focus on the topos and, in particular, its important intersection in the nineteenth century with Walt Whitman’s 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. In examining this Preface, most of my arguments and observations regarding the inexpressibility of English overlapping English can be distilled and reconsidered from many perspectives.

Distancing English, with a special emphasis on the 1855 Preface, can be considered through genre, showing how the topos of inexpressibility works, where it comes from, and how it unfolds as a balance of literary forms. The topos of the inexpressible is not easy, nor is its context of articulation. What happens when a rhetorical strategy is aimed not only at an unbelieving audience but also at a speaker *as yet unpersuaded* of what is being said? Things are difficult to pin down with exactness. In such a text, how do we separate sincerity from insincerity, belief from unbelief, self-understanding from self-deception if the very aim of rhetoric itself is to

blur the boundaries between these things? We enter the realm of rhetoric combined with speech acts trying to bring about something, with the added complication of a felt uncertainty about whether the thing being brought about is actually the “right” or “perfect” thing. Where do we draw the line? The truth is we cannot. Ambiguities are everywhere, and intention is notoriously hard to plumb. As listeners we sort this out as best we can, depending on context, but in history all the nuances of context may not be fully available to us.

My aim has been to recover the context of a rhetoric of self-persuasion within which writers seek to distance one kind of English from another. *Distancing English* may be said to be both formal and historical, formal in that the topos of the inexpressible emerges from these writers who feel they are trying to say something they are not quite able to say, historical in that formal rhetoric does not remain stable over time and must always be seen in the context of its articulation and altered conventions. But this understanding of structure and history needs to be unfolded further. The topos of the inexpressible is difficult to see, first, because of its own complex guises. It often appears when loss is great, and words fall short of the pain. Even when the topos concerns inexpressible grief, however, its foundations in the rhetoric of praise inextricably remain in its desire for unity of the body and words, the perfection of self-expression, failed expectations. The topos, moreover, has often served the body politic, where it proffers unity, a political manifestation of perfection. Under varying historical situations, moreover, its migration is not always apparent. It can be dormant, subject to disappearance, revival, and transformation. Its formal study, thus, can be misperceived as ahistorical. Poetic forms, such as the topos of the inexpressible, although persisting, appear irregularly and migrate to different politics and purposes, often appearing not to be part of the same lineage. This is the case with the topos of the inexpressible, concerned with bewilderment, uncertainty, and finally the very inadequacy of language in the face of high expectations for it.

My interest is the topos of the inexpressible’s formal and historical migrations to the English language in nineteenth-century America. This migration can be said to be structural in its inception and historical in its practice; but both of these signposts can at first mislead. More accurately, it is political in its practice. The oldest form of political discourse *is* rhetoric; rhetoric is a common root of politics and poetry. Put the other way around, poetic structure and history are tied to politics. In the early nineteenth century, the topos reappears in the high expectations and dreams of perfection and consolidation concerning the language of the United States, but has been overlooked. A moment in history always looks both ways, and

often the direction of poetics and *its* history can vanish in political history. *Distancing English*, therefore, explores the unexpected intersecting of histories: the contact of the inexpressible's often ignored literary history and the largely explored political history of a decolonizing United States.

It occurs with great force in early-nineteenth-century America with Walter Channing, Fisher Ames, and Charles Brockden Brown, who, for example, can host dreams of perfection in language; the structure of the inexpressible will lend itself, again, to rhetoric and the privilege of self-persuasion. Focusing on high expectations and language's inadequacy, the topos therefore can serve to consolidate self-legitimation from perceived under-recognition or insecurity. (Even when the topos depicts inexpressible pain rather than inexpressible praise, it sees personal unity and political legitimation from perspectives of loss, not insecurity.) Thus, we will see Whitman emblemizing the efforts to forge a language from itself. And in further adaptations, the topos services those who forge ahead through the trial of one's own language, dislocated and relocated, as in John Berryman's retrieval of poet-ancestor Anne Bradstreet or Wallace Stevens's formalizing the frame, "The the."¹¹ Framed practices of written language, as I will show, draw on humor in dead seriousness.

In new shapes, dreams of self-unity and self-expression, rooted in the history of praise and high expectations, keep alive questions concerning the politics of privilege itself. In many nineteenth-century American hands, the form of the topos with its shaggy dog pointlessness, opens its margins, theoretically, for the wider inclusion of a democracy, though within its political limitations of privilege and consolidation. The topos of the inexpressible is patterned and political wherever it occurs. This book is but one chapter in its poetic and political history.

Thus, in *Distancing English*, I have tried to see how large historical questions can often be embedded in fine-gauge adjustments of rhetoric. Indeed, I will go to some length to show that, under the pressure of two languages in one, the topos of the inexpressible comes to be temporal and practical in its usage and application at a moment of a perceived impasse of distancing English from English between 1812 and 1855. Seen in this way, a topos as seemingly otherworldly as the topos of the inexpressible can actually be minutely responsive to time.