



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Difficult Speech [Review of *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* by Rowan Williams]

**Citation for published version:**

Grumett, D 2015, 'Difficult Speech [Review of *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* by Rowan Williams]', *Expository Times*, vol. 126, no. 11, pp. 568. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524615579982w>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1177/0014524615579982w](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524615579982w)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Expository Times

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **DIFFICULT SPEECH**

Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014. £20 hbk / £17 ebk. pp. xiii + 204. ISBN: 978-1-4729-1043-1).

In November 2013, Lord Williams delivered a series of six Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. This book, published under a year later, is the result. Williams calls into question language based on description, by which he means a 'mapping exercise in which we assume that the task is to produce a certain traceable structural parallel between what we say and what we perceive' (p. 22). This purportedly ordinary speech about things in the world is, he contends, afforded an unjustified primacy. Instead, Williams embraces representation, which is in his words a 'way of speaking that may variously be said to seek to embody, translate, make present or re-form what is perceived' (ibid.). This more demanding form of speaking gestures towards the difficulty of all genuine speech.

Language is difficult because it continually needs purging of idleness, self-indulgence and self-reference in order to become a tool suited to shared reflection and self-narration. In this labour both poet and dramatist have key roles, putting language under pressure and provoking linguistic crises. By over-determining phrase length, metre or rhyme, the poet pushes the boundaries of language, while the dramatist stages discourses that, being beyond intervention, are absolutely and inaccessibly other. Their linguistic flights are generative but, being excessive and paradoxical, point equally to finitude, taking discourse outside the sphere of reference in which it is reliable and coherent. A theological example is Thomas Aquinas's arguments for God's existence, in which mundane movements and causes are presented as ultimately dependent on a reality beyond them.

Williams rightly opposes uses of silence to avoid difficult but needed speech. Nevertheless, he views silence as potentially liberating, freeing the self from the compulsion to master itself and its surroundings by means of power and projection and marking a threshold beyond which straightforward description or analysis may not venture. Simple, clumsy breakdowns in communication can say more than the speech framing them. Language is an embodied activity and sheer physical presence is communicative, supremely in the incarnation.

Although written at a high level, this book contains many insights that could improve our everyday speaking and all that flows from it, whether in families, social groups, churches or workplaces. So much speech retreats into what Williams calls description, asserting an objectivity or superiority that, being unreal, can be maintained only through rhetoric, filibuster, manipulation, bullying or the like. All these illegitimate silencings undermine language users and linguistic communities.

DAVID GRUMETT

School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh