Wage war with words

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Title: **The Language of War**
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The late *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael famously declared that Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* would be a landmark equivalent to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps. Absit omen*, James Dawes's *The Language of War* reminded me of my first reading of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

The Language of War has a wider scope and a denser style. It guides us from the American civil war writings of Herman Melville, Mary Chestnut, Stephen Crane, Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman through the first world war (Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, W. H. R. Rivers and John Dewey) to the second world war and its aftermath (William Faulkner, Joseph Heller, Hannah Arendt, Elaine Scarry, Georges Bataille, Paul de Man, organisational sociology, trauma theory and the Geneva Conventions). The first five chapters introduce the theoretical schools of interpretation, philosophical, epistemological, psychological, literary-critical and sociological, that developed in response to the human experience of war between the singing of "John Brown's Body" by federal troops marching into Washington DC in 1861 and the publication of Catch-22 in 1961.

The final chapter examines how these interpretive schools, especially post-structuralism, influence our post-Holocaust discourse-relationship to war in the field of human rights law. Dawes's intellectual history of how language was used for 100 years in thinking and writing about war gives us the critical tools to understand his inquiry into the difficulties of meaning inherent in formulations of modern laws of war.

For example, Article 51 of the 1977 Geneva Protocol I aims to protect civilians by abandoning language focused on "the subjective intent directly to harm particular categories of combatants", because users of force against civilians had circumvented the conventions by simply denying intent to harm. Instead, Article 51 prohibits

indiscriminate attacks by defining them as "those which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by this Protocol; and consequently, in each such case, are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction".

Dawes first explains how Hemingway in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* "frequently registers suspicion of language's slipperiness and its capacity to distort". We feel Hemingway's distrust in Frederic Henry's famous declaration that "[A]bstract words such as glory, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates". We also feel it in the shockingly "easy interchangeability" of tools and weapons. In Hemingway's view, according to Dawes, "every artifact contains within it the explosive potential of a weapon". A shell cap sought as a souvenir becomes shrapnel that slices the eyes; soldiers use boots to march and boots cause them to drown; a barber's razor cuts a beard or a throat; "and the bicycles that mechanics dream of wistfully during their retreat can also carry enemy carbines and stick bombs into their homeland". Away from combat, a trolling line accidentally tears teeth out by the roots, and doctors cause Catherine Barkley's death using knives as surgical tools during childbirth. In Article 51: "(T)he battleground is a junk heap of objects and weapons that deploy themselves, as in a scene from a Hemingway novel. And the individual will is displaced as arbiter of meaning by the consequences deemed inherent to the equipment there deployed."

The Language of War documents the ability of violence to destabilise epistemological and moral categories, to destroy fiction, to put "tremendous pressure on nations, persons, ideas and language", to "achieve bare truth negatively", to dislodge "the boundaries that structure social meaning", or, as Freud puts it, to "breach protective borders". Dawes notes that Karl von Clausewitz rejected the notion of "war by algebra" and similarly stressed that "(i)n the conduct of war, perception cannot be governed by laws". War produces "a kind of twilight, which like fog or moonlight, often tends to make things seem grotesque".

If war "legitimates itself through 'unanchored language'" in words such as glory, honour and courage, then it is understandable that Hemingway counters with concrete names and numbers; that Sherman resorts again and again to precise body counts (9,918, 19,452, 32,233); that fascists "wield violence by atomising and decontextualising individuals"; and that Adolf Eichmann says nothing in "3,564 type-written pages from 76 recorder tapes", all in "officialese", "my only language". It is equally understandable that Yossarian and other alienated pilots in *Catch-22* distrust official-speak and dismantle the life-threatening language and logic of military bureaucracy by asking "Who is Spain?" "Why is Hitler?", "When is right?" We can

and should extend Dawes's, Hemingway's, Heller's and Clausewitz's observations backwards to the fogs and mists that deceive soldiers in Homer's Iliad and forwards to the phrases used by American soldiers in Vietnam to talk about the unspeakable: "Don't mean nuthin'." "There it is."

I have one caveat. In *The Language of War*, Dawes interprets many examples of the plain, distilled, anchored language favoured by human beings who have experienced war at first hand. Ironically, his own critical analyses sometimes vie with the five specimen passages of problematic writing in Orwell's "Politics and the English language". This is perhaps unavoidable for anyone trying to explain Kant and Bakhtin, and to use them to explain something as ultimately incomprehensible as war. But the automatic formulaic use of a word such as "imbricated" three times in 17 pages borders on what Hemingway would call, in this context, stylistic obscenity. And some near-Ciceronian sentences reverse the famous ratios of the first paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms*: 126 words: one trisyllable: 22 disyllables: 103 monosyllables.

Such passages will envelop even the most determined readers temporarily in Clausewitzian fog. But those who break through these patches will find many thought-provoking insights about the human response to war packed into this ambitious and important book.

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