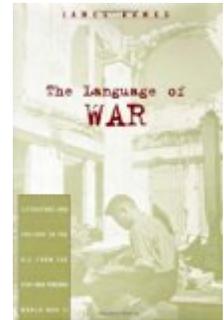




**James Dawes.** *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War through World War II.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. x + 308 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00648-5.



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## War of the Words

Excise a single consonant--the letter "l"--in a passage he quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Robert Oppenheimer's reaction to Trinity, the world's first atomic blast, would have been: Now I am become Death, destroyer of *words*. Since then, of course, postwar Americans have grown accustomed to the close proximity of words and warfare, even though it can and often does produce bewildering effects. Military terms co-mingle with sports metaphors, blurring accounts of action in the arena and on the battlefield. Combat and the impulse to euphemize its results often require substantial, even torturous, rhetorical contortion. The re-kindling of hostilities in Iraq, NPR reports, has given us "kill boxes," the grid coordinates of intended targets, and "de-conflicted airspace," where combat pilots from the "Coalition of the Willing" run less risk of mid-air collision or, presumably, sustaining "friendly fire." [1] Meanwhile homefront Americans, factionalized into rival camps of red and blue, wage the "Culture War" over one of its hottest issues, "Hate Speech," either side denouncing the other's Nazi-like intentions.

Suffice to say, few subjects more broadly contextualize the postwar American experience than words, warfare, and their relationship, the subject of James Dawes's ambitious study of "the reimagination of literature and culture in the United States in the wake of the Civil War, World War I, and World War II" (p. 1).

In a complex mix of textual analysis and theoretical speculation, Dawes posits two models of language, the "emancipatory" and the "disciplinary," then explores their tension in modern warfare. The emancipatory model "presents force and discourse as mutually exclusive" and "is predicated on the idea that social structures built around democratic language practices emancipate us from the reign of force" (p. 1). Words and war are antithetical; when one stops, the other starts. The "disciplinary model" treats language both as a "regime premised on the use of force and as a method of disciplining and controlling violence in order to concentrate its effects" (p. 1). Sticks and stones might break your bones, but words will kill you dead. Each model claims its own apostolic succession: among others, Kant,

Habermas, and the Geneva Conventions on one side, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Post-structuralist theorists on the other; and the two remain at loggerheads until their reconciliation, worthy of Fanny Bryce, on the book's very last page.

With its lengthening casualty lists and widening definition of acceptable targets, the Civil War ushered in a new dark age. Organized society achieved unprecedented sway over individual lives, and its defining means of expression, the statistic, baffled all literary attempts to express the war's true essence. Instead, dwarfed by the conflict's scale, commander and caregiver alike abandoned words and embraced the aggregate. Ulysses Grant and William Sherman counted bodies. Louisa May Alcott and Walt Whitman catalogued wounds and categorized diseases. But if the "real war" never made it into the books, as Whitman famously lamented, it did influence philosophical dispute and literary expression for the balance of the century, especially over such emerging modernist notions as relativism, fragmentation, and the conditional nature of knowing. The debate between Henry James and Josiah Royce over monism, the doctrine that reality is an organic whole, foreshadows a discussion of Stephen Crane, the father of modern war fiction, whose response to the Civil War clearly anticipated the widened violence and destabilized categories of the looming century. Focusing primarily on the lieutenant in "Episode of War," Dawes suggests that Crane understood the late-nineteenth-century dilemma, an existence torn between the conflicting tendencies of self-aggrandizement and self-abasement worsened by collapsing faiths in reason, order, progress, and reality. As uncertainty eclipsed assurance and absolutes grew conditional, absurdity thrived. Indeed, next to a mountain of severed limbs, the lieutenant's empty sleeve hardly mattered.

Doubts initiated by the Civil War only multiplied and intensified after World War I. Given its global scope, industrial base, technological sophis-

tication, and bureaucratic management, things could hardly have been otherwise. What else to do in the face of machine guns, mustard gas, and the inverse relation between rear echelon intent and frontline consequence but reject all attempts to convey new horrors through old homilies? Dawes explores this conflict in a brief reading of Dos Passos, who excoriated "clean words ... made ... slimy and foul," and an extended discussion of *A Farewell to Arms*, whose protagonist "was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice..." (pp. 102-103). Crane's "absurd" gives way to Hemingway's "grotesque," in Dawes's view, "the analogue at the level of image and sentence structure of the broader epistemological confusion generated by collective trauma," and what "became [after the war a primary] means of raising specific questions about cultural givens" (p. 136). The novel is, in essence, an extended rumination on modern uncertainty whose famous opening sequence reveals the fine line easily smudged between pastoral landscape and lethal battlefield and establishes the setting for its dramatic development: the disastrous love affair between Frederic Henry, a man bound by "rules," and Catherine Barkley, whose situational ethics emphasize result over intention. In the end, he deserts, she dies, and the once-enduring categories, "right and "wrong," buckle beneath the destabilizing power of chance.

Such irony became the central motif of Great War fiction and autobiography. Long before jetliners whisked American grunts from rice paddy fire fights to beach front bars, Flanders Field was at times audible from Piccadilly Circus. After months of muddy stalemate in the summer of 1917, the British offensive ended only after the fall of Passchendaele. And Paul Baumer died "almost glad the end had come" on a day "so quiet and still" that the army report confined itself to a single sentence: All quiet on the western front."<sup>[2]</sup> Yet nothing, it seems, can ever or will ever outdistance the estrangement of experience and explanation attained during World War II. George

Steiner and Hannah Arendt, among others, offer the Holocaust as archetype with much justification. But we should also confront the scale of the pattern, how for Allies and Axis alike so much of the war effort, large and small, depended on the systematic subversion of language through rumor, acronym, encryption, euphemism, and propaganda--the way language sanitized the apocalyptic intent and other-worldly effects of Bomber Command (survivors at Hamburg had to create a word for "fire bomb victim," literally unspeakable horror), or how false identities assigned to corpses delivered phony invasion plans to the enemy. The architects of the "Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" brutalized Korean "comfort girls," the gates of Auschwitz linked labor and freedom, and the telegram sent Harry Truman announcing the success at Alamogordo disguised its contents in the syntax of a birth announcement.

Along with its tragic toll of lives lost and cities shattered, the war exacted a fearsome price on language. The "rationalized organization of violence in World War II," Dawes writes, "saw language shattered in the centralizing bureaucracies of the military-industrial complex" (p. 23), and its reconstitution remains the on-going project of the post-war world. William Faulkner in *A Fable*, Joseph Heller in *Catch-22*, and the rise of Organizational Sociology all affirm the concentrated power of bureaucratic organizations to compartmentalize communication, crush autonomy, stifle dissent, and abrogate moral responsibility. The question remains, for Dawes as for us all: what to do with the wreckage? How do we reconstitute language, restore meaning, and reconcile his opposing speech models now embodied by postwar human rights doctrine on one hand and on the other by post-structuralist theorists? Pitfalls accompany each. The epitome of human rights doctrine, the Geneva Conventions, operates on faith in language, the power of naming to restrain violence. Clear labels universally recognized and accurately applied, the doctrine maintains, impart humanity to enemy citizens otherwise dismissed

as verminous creatures deserving wholesale slaughter. But troubles arise when universal symbols fail to penetrate local conditions or accommodate unique circumstances--witness the ensuing catastrophe when Colonel Nicholson confronts Colonel Saito over who can and cannot construct the Kwai Bridge. Moreover, human rights doctrine demands the acceptance at face value of belligerent promises to limit warfare, an act of incredible faith in a deeply cynical age. Can we really trust "smart bombs" to contain violence in a world still haunted by "relocation," "special treatment," and the rumble of "trains bound for the east"? Meanwhile, post-structuralist theorists reject naming out of hand as an inherently violent act. Naming is power, the extension of authority, this argument maintains, and those named become victims as real as butchered children or ravaged nuns. "Regimes of power" control through language, clearly an ominous development; yet post-structuralists offer an unworkable strategy of resistance. We must, they insist, "wage linguistic guerilla warfare" (p. 197) by learning "to speak a language power does not know" (p. 197), whatever that is. Who will create this language and by what justifying authority no one says. Nor is there much discussion concerning the armistice, an agreeable set of terms ending the guerilla war. Ultimately, the rabbit comes out of the hat, but only for those willing to see it. Whipsawed between the unattractive alternatives posed by Geneva and Post-structuralism, Dawes attempts to bridge the cultural impasse at century's close with a solution offered to break the philosophical deadlock at its beginning. William James understood the fragmented and conditional nature of "reality" but resolved to make the real "real" by believing it so. Likewise James Dawes with the reconstitution of language, whose closing paragraph endorses faith in efforts devoted to identifying and justifying the urgent sense in the human rights community that collective goals of the highest priority, which revolve around the protection of the most vulnerable, depend upon a concerted and continuous ef-

fort to stabilize our most basic moral categories along with the language that constitutes them. Whether or not one finally accepts these moral categories as objectively valid or universal in scope, procedurally grounded in the workings of our autonomy as Kant argued or in the interactive structure of discourse as Habermas argues, it is at the very least in our collective self-interest to treat them as if they were so (p. 218).

Firm belief in clear, inclusive words will make them thus, providing authority without coercion, negotiation and not negation. Given the alternative, the twentieth century charnel house and its lingering effects, one prays that Dawes is right. Still, many who pursue such noble ends will likely find greater comfort in more active roles than the one he offers: click your heels and hope.

*The Language of War* makes a considerable, if less than complete, contribution to an immensely significant topic. Academic titles are often easy targets, especially these days when they owe less to content than market strategy and keyword positioning. Still, this book on "literature and culture" is highly selective concerning the one and strangely silent about the other. Such a narrow range of canonical voices, very few of them with combat experience, severely restricts the broader range of American literary responses to modern warfare. Meanwhile, few words in the contemporary academic lexicon cry more loudly for clarification than "culture," the one Dawes never explains. Additional shortcomings of argument and presentation hamper this otherwise important work. For all their usefulness in framing his argument, the author's language models remain more stalking horse than anything else, handy for scholarly exchange, but unable ultimately to convey the protean nature and subtle nuance of either war or language, much less their complex interrelationship. That task, as Whitman warned and as Paul Fussell agrees, may well be above us. But if we are ever to accomplish it, as surely we must try, we might also listen to voices closer to

the firing line than to the faculty lounge telling plainer stories. James Dawes is right: clean language, concise words, and clear expression are of paramount importance to our individual well being and our collective social future. But his message comes cloaked in thick, sometimes opaque, clouds of puffery and theoretical jargon, the very syntax he warns against. Also, by focusing on the increased rationalization of modern society and emphasizing the essential amorality of bureaucratic management, Dawes overlooks the important influences of reform enthusiasm and religious fervor in shaping a distinctively American brand of modern warfare.

The Civil War generation with which this study begins embraced combat as a regenerative social force. Northerners and southerners alike fantasized about apocalyptic vengeance visited upon the enemy as a way simultaneously to defeat external foes and to purify internal corruptions. This climaxed an "Era of Reform" noteworthy, among other things, for the development of the modern social statistic, a way not only of identifying problems but measuring progress toward their eradication. Cloaked in rhetoric drawn from evangelical Protestantism and personal accountability, it may be less ironic, if more chilling, that the body count began with them, less to distance the battlefield than measure the Almighty's approach. A generation later, when he pursued a right "more precious than the peace," Woodrow Wilson became at once the father of twentieth-century international human rights doctrine *and* a former college professor determined to "win the minds of the American people" through a disciplinary message linking number and noun: 100% Americanism. FDR reduced fourteen points to four freedoms; but in the immensely popular illustrated versions of Norman Rockwell, two of the four—people at prayer and the Thanksgiving dinner—were openly pious. And while the President and the OWI struggled to express the war in more secular terms, the unambiguous message making "unconditional surrender" the sole basis for its

satisfactory conclusion not only emphasized its manichean character, but intensified the violence and prolonged the suffering. Similarly, in more recent times, for all the power of bureaucratic organization and corporate rationality, despite the triumph of machine-dominated consumer society, postwar Americans remain very much their fathers' children. Robert McNamara tracked the campaign against "Godless Communists" in Southeast Asia with pie charts and bar graphs, measuring "pacification" through percentage. So, too, today, when reform and religion, numbers, naming, and regenerative violence form the root issues among those who support and those who oppose the determination of a self-professed born-again Christian to make a better society and a freer world by waging war on "evil-doers." Perhaps before clicking our heels, we might cast one more weather eye at forces responsible for sending the cyclone careening across Kansas.

#### Notes

[1]. "The Language of War," on "The Connection." Hosted by Dick Gordon. Originally aired April 2, 2003. <http://www.theconnection.org/shows/2003/04/20030402bmain.asp>.

[2]. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), epilogue.

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