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KEYWORDS TO WAR

REVIVING LANGUAGE IN AN AGE OF TERROR

MARY ZOURNAZI

SCRIBE
Melbourne

THE POWER OF WORDS

Moral gravity makes us fall towards the heights.
Simone Weil

Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once noted that there are two types of political freedom: one is freedom from violence, the other is freedom from lies. These freedoms have become the site of a modern conundrum, echoes of which can be heard today in the ways language is caught within spiralling cycles of violence and lies that serve to alienate us from ourselves and others. It is also evident in the political attitudes towards freedom and justice that have surfaced in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks and been fed by a climate of fearful and terrorising politics. Within this scenario, betrayal and a perpetuation of injustice pervades much social and political thinking and agendas, as a result of which, truth becomes veiled in an ever-increasing violation of language and, at the same time, the violation of human dignity and life.

Keywords to War is a response to this profoundly disturbing environment. The book emerges at time when the cultural dimensions of English language use have altered key words and concepts, such as freedom, justice and truth, that we hold dear in our democracies. Underpinning this corruption of language is what Bertolt Brecht famously called a 'moral conscience' of war that structures our day-to-day experience and activity. Taking this structure seriously, this book explores the inextricable link between language and a deteriorating moral conscience; taken together these elements infiltrate our perception of and how we function in the world. Now more than ever it is necessary to extricate ourselves from this quagmire, and from the confused and disputed meanings that permeate and have produced an often latent, but significantly charged, mental state of war in our everyday lives, so much so that our interior worlds and social spaces are infused with the language of war.

Historically speaking, this is not a recent phenomenon, but what we face today, with the expansion of technology and the unholy alliance between new forms of power, morality, and terror, is a more intense violation of language. Taking note of the power of words and their articulation within language is somewhat paradoxical though, because as English continues to grow and expand, the precision and depth of our language use, particularly in public and political debate, appears to have contracted. In other words, there is a collision between language and the political upstaging of fear and terror that creates insecurity in individuals, and the improper treatment and violence done to language, shrinks and restricts the language that could otherwise be invented in diplomacy and accountability in the global public sphere.

Inspired by the traditions of Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1983), and Don Watson's *Death Sentence* (2003), in which he examines the death of language, this book is an urgent call to under stand how much of our language has become surrounded by fear and suspicion, by the annihilation of meaning, and by the deadening of its use. As these circumstances appear as a natural state of affairs, the revival of language used to remedy this situation is a vital task that cannot be ignored. In this way, I have gathered together select keywords to war as tools to help us think past terror and to restore a revitalised language into our everyday lives and political environments.

Keywords to War is a continuation, albeit in a different form, of my earlier work on a political vision of hope. In it, further questions and issues emerge around how to act ethically and take responsibility for our political actions, directions, and visions, in ways that correspond to our personal and individual choices and attitudes. It is clear to me that unless there is a radical shift in how we approach attitudes to war, violence, revenge, and terror through our language and conceptual frames, we risk destruction and catastrophe far greater than ever imagined, greater even than sci-fi fantasy and our multicoloured technological dreams than transform into nightmares.

Given this, I explore how the real effects of pain and suffering are often destroyed in our use of language, and how morality is often equated with violence. In a different context, former US vice-president Al Gore has noted that issues affecting climate change are moral, not political. But 'moral' and 'political' cannot be so easily separated, as morality is at the very core of social and political activity. In short, our moral responsibilities directly affect our political language and practice. The spoils of this have been evident in how the terms 'good' and 'evil' have resurfaced in attitudes that Islam and the West hold towards each other, and on a world stage that has seen an escalation of terrorist politics since 9/11. Thus, it is important, indeed, essential, to express how language slices across the morality and values that structure our political terms of reference. As such the moral question that Gore poses is pertinent here, as this book is about the remaking of the world through the language that has gone awry on a global scale. But we must be careful, as the language of climate change and responses to it, may also continue a language of war. It is precisely because morality changes and language does too that we have to take seriously the interplay between them. Yet we rarely do this, despite how essential it is to do so in order to imagine and construct an alternative vision of our world.

SEARCH FOR MEANING

Writing this book has been a mixed blessing for me - it has emerged out of the present political context as a way for me to see through, and respond to, the dark and murky cultural malaise and political violation of these times. Most acutely, it has challenged my own conception of language and political use - as language has always been an alienating experience for me. Growing up with multiple languages - Greek, Arabic, French - I have frequently experienced the inexpressibility in each, and I have often been frustrated by expressions in English that have left me perplexed and ill at ease. Existing on the outer limits of Australian culture at a time when government and social policies of integration and multiculturalism also taught me to be, in many ways, suspicious of political vocabularies and moral attitudes that have a tendency to be exclusionary and set up false ideals and tensions around allegiance and loyalty. So, in a refreshing way, by examining the intricacies of public and political abuse of language in the name of national and international security and justice, along with its everyday effects, I have also been able to explore the possibility of language's renewal. Rather than leaving me steeped in anger and despair (although at times I felt both of these), writing this book became a search for meaning in what has become the vicissitudes of modern language use in an age of terror, where attitude s shift and new target groups become the focus of hostility, resentment, and violence.

In such a sense, when I was midway through writing this book, I asked one of my neighbours what keywords came to mind when she thought of war. She responded by saying blood, rape, torture, murder, and injustice. Brutal words. I reflect on this story because I believe it is instrumental in how our immediate responses can sometimes be the most strident and astute, but can often conceal more insidious language use, as there are other, more subtle, and at times more overt, violations of language that we take for granted. The refrain of history is precisely how we are blinded to their dangerous use. This is what *Keywords to War* is about. When you scratch the surface of the ideals of justice, compassion, and love, for instance, there is a tendency - in a self-perpetuating way - to demote deeper and richer senses of the terms according to ways in which our language manipulates and distorts the world.

What has become clear in writing this book is that when the historical sense and etymology of words are traced there is often in the public and political sphere an inversion of meaning in what is stated or understood. Take, for instance, freedom (q.v.) - when it is used in existing democracies or in the setting up of democratic institutions in other countries, such as

in the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the sense of and reference to such freedom can often be limited or under siege. It could be stated that the more freedom is spoken of, the less real freedom becomes available, and the greater are the restrictions placed on people's movements through censorship and issues of sedition. The feeling and experience of freedom becomes less obvious to people living day to day, although the intrinsic quest for freedom is a force that keeps us alive.

Quintessentially, then, the means by which we can clarify the distorted use of words and the precise nature in which we can reclaim and remake them is available in the structure of the English language itself - and that 's its beauty. It is by working with the deeper threads in between the various meanings of the words selected here that I employ a method that can be termed a dialogic struggle (see Mikhail Bakhtin), that is the internal dialogue and imaginative potential that exists with in words themselves. What this dialogic struggle means is the values and ideas contained within the kernel of words, evident in their root meanings and etymological histories become elements that can lean towards an imaginative and creative use that can proliferate their meanings or distort them to a restrictive and manipulative sense that renders meaningless their intrinsic worth in public and political use. Throughout the interconnecting essays in this book, I explore this internal dialogue and struggle in a realm of meanings that have, over time, been altered, confused, adapted, inculcated, and deployed to create a vision of war. In particular here, the reference and focus is on the internal struggles 10 Western Anglophone traditions of English language use.

In this method of interpretation, I focus most specifically on the popular and public imagination of the selected words, and where they intersect with their political and sometimes the philosophical import. This is a deliberate choice to show a strangely intimate but discriminant public use, and how words a re cultural artefacts. Whether they are felt, ignored, misused, or employed for particular purposes, the resonance of their history and contemporary sense provides a structure to understand how we can renew and alter them.

In many ways, the interconnecting and intersecting chapters in this book are a meditation and reflection on ambient war and terror, but ultimately, they are an effort to explore a more human e and cultural under standing of language, war, *and* peace. It is through the acceptance of how we use and treat language that we permit ourselves to take responsibility for our actions and the effects they have on a world at war - in many senses of the term.

The book shows, too, how meaningful communication in everyday life and language has been altered, and how, at the same time, it is possible to create a social world in which understanding the use and deployment of language marks our relation to it and how we speak it in our everyday lives and relationships. This understanding of language would help to create a more authentic and truthful response to and respect for the world in which we live.

REVIVING LANGUAGE THROUGH FEELING

When I began this project, it seemed a relatively straightforward task. As it unfolded over several years, what became apparent was how thinking and feeling are so closely intertwined, and that to separate this interconnectedness from ourselves alienates us even further from the truth. While this probably happen s to most of us, it becomes doubly salient when language is experienced as an alien tool, not just in schema, but also when it is reinforced by the cultural values and morality that surrounds us. On a personal level, this was confronting: as I wrote words such as death, fear, hate, suffering, and violence the viscera l affects were palpable: I wandered around, tormented by their use, more often than not the words challenging my own preconceptions and beliefs. Some times, as I travelled through the arcane, sacred, and profound depths that words can offer, I experienced real exhaustion and extreme emotional responses. When language becomes a medium of expression connecting our embodied thoughts and

feelings, it can provide and promote exquisite beauty and depth, a richer and fuller potential of how words can be conveyed. In many ways these feelings offer us a type of redemption.

In a unique way, the poet Wallace Steven 's wrote that 'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation'. The writing of this book has been about the discovery and resourcefulness of the life of words and their strange relations. Hopefully, it can be useful to readers as a resource and method to explore words and excite debate. It is also an observation, one of perception, and an attempt at clarity and lucidity for that in which we are immersed : language and communication. Mindful of this, by connecting thoughts and feelings that are alienated by usage and wrenched out of place, we may be able to approach and define all humanity in more compassionate and veridical ways. As such, this book is conceived as a totality, but offered within its parameters is an infinite array of concepts to be further expanded and used. It can be read from start to finish or by selecting different chapters that connect and reverberate with each other to provide fresh insights into such words as evil, terror, fear, and war, and what they might mean in terms of leadership, accountability, and responsibility of governments. What is most fundamental to this reinscribing of language and meaning, if not somewhat strange to the modern ear, is the understanding of compassion, faith, and trust in our everyday lives and political experience.

And although it may appear an outmoded concept, it is safe to say that the human soul requires this faith in political life - the dignity, respect, and safety that it can afford - yet in public life these crucial factors have diminished. Feeling safe and secure in the world - being able to trust, and to take responsibility for what has come before and what may lie ahead - is a requisite for our global community. When security is burdened under the weight of fear and terror as a permanent state, it can, as the philosopher and theologian Simone Weil wrote, create a diminished sense of safety and assurance for people, and, ultimately, for their trust in the world. While this book is by no means definitive or exhaustive, in it lies much promise that it will extend public discussion and debate on matters that are life affirming. The selected words provide a map, a blueprint to war, and demonstrate how language has been deadened, alienated from our feelings and responsibilities, and thus, our capacity to feel safety and assurance in the world. Through this intricate maze-this journey of words I present to you - I hope to show the visions and values that are needed now for the revival of language, and, in that revival, the ability to perceive freedom, to act ethically, and be morally responsible. To do all this requires us not only to think about language, but also to feel and to express it, in every facet of our daily bread that is language, to keep alive our shared communication by this choice and our use.

NOTES

Etymological histories derive from the *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* and the *Oxford English Dictionary: New dictionary on historical principles* (2nd edn) and its online version, *Oxford English Dictionary Online@* http://www.oed.com Following the tradition of Raymond Williams' (1983) *Keywords-A Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* I have opted for a user-friendly citation model in this book. Quotations that are cited by a name and date only, or a date only, are from primary examples in the *OED.* In other cases, quotations are followed by specific sources. References to secondary works that are by author name are entered in the select bibliography.