

A NOTE ON HEMINGWAY'S *IN OUR TIME*
—WERE THEY “COUCHED” OR “CROUCHED”?

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In the *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway wrote of the difficulty he found in creative writing:

I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing truly what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced.¹

This is Hemingway's reflection of his early days when, apprenticed to Gertrude Stein, he was studying how to write, not journalistically, but as a creative writer. Between journalism and creative literature, there is, of course, a vast difference—a difference in the nature of writing. “In writing for a newspaper,” Hemingway observed, “you told what happened and, with one trick and another, you communicated the emotion aided by the element of timeliness which gives a certain emotion to any account of something that has happened on that day.”² The tricks are various. Journalistic writings need, first of all, to be explicit in order to give a correct picture of a scene or an event. Ordinary words are therefore preferred for the sake of simplicity. At the same time, in order to plant in the reader the emotions which the reporter actually felt, very emotional words, particularly, descriptive adjectives are often used. Therefore, in spite of the assumed objectivity, journalistic writings usually reveal the writer's point of view.

One of the journalistic reports Hemingway cabled for the *Daily Star* of Toronto on October 20, 1922 shows, as Mr. Charles A. Fenton has pointed out,³ an unusual capability of Hemingway as a journalist:

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1. *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 2.
 2. *Loc. cit.*
 3. *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway; The Early Years* (Compass Bks ed.; New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 231.

In a never-ending, staggering march the Christian population of Eastern Thrace is jamming the roads towards Macedonia. The main column crossing the Maritza River at Adrianople is twenty miles long. Twenty miles of carts 'drawn by cows, bullocks and muddy-flanked water buffalo, with exhausted, staggering men, women and children, blankets over their heads, walking blindly in the rain beside their worldly goods.

This main stream is being swelled from all the back country. They don't know where they are going. They left their farms, villages and ripe, brown fields and joined the main stream of refugees when they heard the Turk was coming. Now they can only keep their places in the ghastly procession while mud-splashed Greek cavalry herd them along like cow-punchers driving steers.

It is a silent procession. Nobody even grunts. It is all they can do to keep moving. Their brilliant peasant costumes are soaked and draggled. Chickens dangle by their feet from the carts. Calves nuzzle at the draught cattle wherever a jam halts the stream. An old man marches bent under a young pig, a scythe and a gun, with a chicken tied to his scythe. A husband spreads a blanket over a woman in labor in one of the carts to keep off the driving rain. She is the only person making a sound. Her little daughter looks at her in horror and begins to cry. And the procession keeps moving. . . .⁴

In the cable, to use Hemingway's words, the 'one trick and another' center in his use of adjectives. This was the cable which so impressed Lincoln Steffens that he recalled it some ten years later "in terms of adjectives."⁵ Most of the adjectives are descriptive of the emotions Hemingway felt for the refugees of the Greco-Turkish War. Some are complex in their meanings and denote an emotional quality such as the word 'ghastly' or 'brilliant.' Others are compound adjectives such as 'never-ending' and 'muddy-flanked.' Others, like 'staggering' which was used twice, are participles which function as adjectives. They all describe, not what Hemingway saw, but what he

4. These are the first three paragraphs of the cable, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 230-31.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 231. Of the excellent detailed analysis of the cable, see *ibid.*, pp. 230-36.

felt at what he saw. The writer's point of view is more explicitly stated in such phrases as; 'They don't know where they are going. They left their farms . . . and joined the main stream of refugees. . . . Now they can only keep their places in the ghastly procession.'

On the other hand, what Hemingway tried to do in prose literature, and successfully did in actuality, is to describe, as he put it, 'what really happened in action,' or the sequence of motion and fact, and not what he felt about it. Besides, a creative writer need not state everything like a journalist, who tries to answer every question the reader might raise from curiosity. Of the literary selection, Hemingway wrote elsewhere in the *Death in the Afternoon*:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.⁶

A sketch of the evacuation, the heading of Chapter II of *In Our Time*, will serve as an illustration of prose literature in Hemingway's concept. The sketch was born directly out of the 1922 cable, but there is a great difference from the journalistic style of the cable:

Minarets stuck up in the rain out of Adrianople across the mud flats. The carts were jammed for thirty miles along the Karagatch road. Water buffalo and cattle were hauling carts through the mud. No end and no beginning. Just carts loaded with everything they owned. The old men and women, soaked through, walked along keeping the cattle moving. The Maritza was running yellow almost up to the bridge. Carts were jammed solid on the bridge with camels bobbing along through them. Greek cavalry herded along the procession. Women and kids were in the carts couched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles. There was a woman having a kid with a young girl holding a blanket over her and crying. Scared sick looking at it. It rained all through the evacuation.⁷

6. *Death in the Afternoon*, p. 192.

7. Hemingway, *The First Forty-nine Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944, 9th impression, 1956), p. 100.

In this imagistic sketch, the sentences are short and most of them are simple. There are no compound-nouns or compound-adjectives. Except for a few participles, the adjectives are basic, such as 'old,' 'yellow,' 'solid,' 'young,' and 'sick.' Besides, no writer's point of view is revealed. *And* connects bluntly one image with another, making them appositions as in 'no end and no beginning.' The effective use of verbs in *ing*-forms, functioning as either modifiers or participles, enhances the sense of movement and flow of the sketch.

Here is an abrupt presentation, with brisk rhythm, of a scene through understatement and compression. Yet the sketch is not without suggestiveness which arouses an emotion in the reader. The emotion is climaxed at the end in the images of the woman in labor and the crying girl who is 'scared sick looking at it.' These images function as the culmination of the whole scene. They were not so emphasized in the original cable, but here in the sketch they give the intensity of potential 'dignity.' By these images the laconic sketch is made more directly and vividly evocative of the sense of fright, misery, and exhaustion. Moreover, it is also through these images, particularly the image of the woman giving birth to a new life among the confusions of war, that the sketch comes to have symbolic overtone of life in death. Understatement in Hemingway is compression, and compression is full of suggestiveness.

However, there is in this sketch one word which, I think, is inappropriate in this scene of evacuation. That word is 'couched' found in the tenth sentence.

Obviously it is raining in this scene. The old men and women who are walking are 'soaked through.' The carts and their goods, too, are probably wet through, because no mention of covers is made. Hence the young girl had to hold a blanket over a woman, presumably her mother, in order to protect her from the rain. The use of blanket was explicitly stated in the 1922 cable, as we have seen: 'A husband spreads a blanket over a woman in labor in one of the carts to keep off the driving rain.' Therefore, when we come to the tenth sentence where women and children in the carts are described as "couched," we gain the impression that they were so exhausted from walking long in the rain and from the emotional tension of the evacuation that, despite of the rain, they could not help lying

down with their worldly goods.

If so, however, this seems to me a little overdone, because the effect of the images of the woman in labor and the crying girl, appearing immediately after that sentence, is diluted to a certain degree. The exclusion of the husband in the sketch suggests that the woman and the girl are the summit images for the sense of misery and helplessness the sketch presents to the reader. From this point of view, the posture of other women and children in the carts blurs the crescendo of the sketch towards the summit, because their posture claims, as suggested by the word 'couched,' as much attention as the woman in labor and the scared girl do for the sake of wretchedness. Therefore, it seems to me that their posture itself is irrelevant to the coherence of the total effect of the sketch.

For one thing, this idea is fairly well supported by Hemingway's own view. For, obviously reminding himself of the scene of evacuation he actually saw in 1922 at Adrianople, he described in *A Farewell to Arms* a similar scene. Note the posture of women on the carts:

In the night many peasants had joined the column from the roads of the country and in the column there were carts loaded with household goods; there were mirrors projecting up between mattresses, and chickens and ducks tied to carts. There was a sewing-machine on the cart ahead of us in the rain. They had saved the most valuable things. *On some carts the women sat huddled from the rain* and others walked beside the carts keeping as close to them as they could.⁸ (Italics mine.)

As a matter of fact, however exhausted they might be, they cannot lie down on the carts in the rain.

Secondly, there is a surprising fact that in the earlier editions of the sketch, the word 'couched' was not used. The sketch of the Karagatch road evacuation was first published as one of the six miniatures in the *Little Review* in 1923. In 1924, these six miniatures appeared again, together with other miniatures, as *in our time*. The sketch was chapter III of this book.⁹ In this Paris edition of

8. Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Bantam Books, 1955), p. 148.

9. See "A Working Check-List of Hemingway's Prose, Poetry, and Journalism," in Charles Baker, *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), pp. 331-2, 338.

in our time, the word in question was spelled as “crouched,” and the whole sentence in which this word is found was as follows:

Women and kids were in the carts crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles.¹⁰

This sentence was to have a very interesting history of variations. When the first American edition of the capital lettered *In Our Time* was published by Boni & Liveright in 1925, the sketch of the refugees was incorporated into it as the heading vignette of the second chapter. In this 1925 edition, the tenth sentence was:

Women and kids were in the carts, crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles.¹¹

The difference from the 1924 Paris edition is the insertion of a comma between ‘the carts’ and ‘crouched.’

In 1927, Boni & Liveright published the second edition. But this was merely a reprint of the 1925 edition without any change and revision of the part in question.

However, when this book was published in 1930 by Charles Scribner’s Sons Company for the first time, there were several differences from the former editions of *In Our Time*. A new introduction by Hemingway was added, which consisted of a miniature later entitled “On the Quai at Smyrna.” A critical essay by Edmund Wilson was also added. In the sixth sentence of the evacuation sketch, “walking” of the 1925 and 1927 editions reverted again to “walked,” the form used in the 1924 Paris edition.¹² While the tenth sentence appeared as follows:

The women and children were in the carts, crouched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles.¹³

The remarkable variations from the previous versions are that ‘the’ was added before ‘women’ and that ‘kids’ was altered to ‘children.’ But ‘crouched’ preceded with a comma remained as it was in the

10. Hemingway, *in our time* (Paris: Printed at the three mountain press and for sale at shakespeare & company; london, w. jackson, 1924), p. 11. My thanks go to Mr. H. J. Dubester, Chief of General Reference and Bibliography Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

11. *In Our Time* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), p. 23. Jonathan Cape Edition, published in 1926 in London, follows after this version.

12. See Fenton, p. 285. The word ‘walked’ suffered no changes any more in the subsequent editions.

13. *In Our Time* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930). p. 13.

1927 edition.

It is in the edition of 1938, published with other short stories and a play as *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories*, that the word in question appeared for the first time as “couched”:

Women and kids were in the carts couched with mattresses, mirrors, sewing machines, bundles.¹⁴

In this version, ‘the’ is eliminated and ‘kids’ is used again, and the comma is removed after ‘the carts.’

These alterations in each edition show that Hemingway was continually revising the sketch—a fact that illustrates Hemingway’s punctiliousness and conscientiousness as an artist. Even in other sketches, there are several changes between the first American edition and the 1938 edition. To point out only a few of them, in Chapter I, a kitchen Corporal, capital lettered in the Boni & Liveright editions, became small lettered in the 1938 edition; in Chapter II, “in Mons” was altered to “at Mons”; and many commas were eliminated in the edition of 1938.

However, the alterations found in the 1938 edition are not always the author’s revisions. The 1938 edition is not without typographical errors; such as “his soon [son] Eddy” in the second sentence of “The Doctor and The Doctor’s Wife,” or “That’s what may [my] old man would say when he’d kid George Burns” in “My Old Man.”¹⁵ These printer’s errors are easy to discover and are actually corrected in later editions.¹⁶ But ‘couched’ has remained unaltered ever since.¹⁷ Was the change, then, the author’s? If so, why did Hemingway change the word from ‘crouched’ to ‘couched’?

This might have been the question only Hemingway could have

14. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), p. 196.

15. *Idid.*, pp. 197 & 294.

16. But not in the Modern Library edition of *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The First Forty-nine Stories and the Play The Fifth Column*, c 1938. It is after the 1939 Jonathan Cape edition of *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories* that those printer’s errors were corrected.

17. This does not mean that I have checked all the editions and impressions of *In Our Time* published after 1938. But so far, ‘kids’ and ‘couched’ without a comma are used in most cases. The only exception I noticed is *The Essential Hemingway* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1st pub. 1947, 4th impression, 1951), in which the version of the 1930 edition, *i. e.*, ‘The women and children . . . , crouched. . . ,’ appears. Its American edition has not yet been accessible.

answered. But apart from the author's intention, is there any particular reason for the alteration relevant to the total effect and meaning of this sketch? The answer seems to me in the negative.

Compared with 'couched,' 'crouched' used in the earlier editions of *In Our Time* and 'sat huddled' of *A Farewell to Arms*, as we have seen above, seem to describe more natural posture of people in the uncovered carts. The sense of actuality or naturalness seems to prefer 'crouched' to 'couched.'

Furthermore, 'couched' is derived from the noun *couch*. But, as a verb, to couch is scarcely used in colloquial style in the sense of lying or laying something. "The past participle," says *OED*, "survives in archaic, poetic, or literary use," as in "Cleopatra, couched at feast."¹⁸ As is apparent in almost all of Hemingway's works, one of the chief characteristics of his language is the use of simple, colloquial words. No one would deny that the evacuation sketch tries to be more colloquial even than the original cable. One should be reminded of the fact, as has been pointed out, that in this 1938 edition Hemingway altered 'children,' used in the 1930 edition, to the more colloquial, original word, 'kids,' and eliminated a definite article before 'women,' thus reducing the sentence to colloquialism once again. 'Couched' is, in this sense, irrelevant to the style of this sketch.

18. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1933. As a transitive verb, *OED* mentions, to couch is used in the ordinary meaning of the word "now only in past participle" implying "laid or lying on, or as on a couch," as seen in the sentence quoted above. As an intransitive verb, to couch means "to lie in a place or position of rest, to lie at rest or in sleep: to recline, to repose. *Archaic.*"

Webster's New International Dictionary (2nd ed.) does not mention in particular the use of past participle as archaic or literary; nor does the *New Standard Dictionary* (1914), which, however, cites from Tennyson the use of past participle: "With two tame leopards couch'd beside her throne. *Princess* ii, st. 2." But it is apparent that 'couched' is not a word most commonly used in colloquial style.

On the other hand, no dictionaries say that "crouched" is archaic or literary. It is commonly used, if not very often, as an ordinary word. "To crouch," unlike "to couch," is used only as an intransitive verb. In American English, however, the past participle of an intransitive verb is used where the present participle is usually expected: "The dog sat with his tongue lolled [lolling] out." See G. V. Carey, *American into English* (London: Heinemann, 1953), p. 24.

Other alterations in the very sentence, in which 'couched' appeared for the first time in 1938, would indicate that Hemingway had probably read this sentence very carefully before publication. However, this is open to doubt. The year 1938 was one of the busiest in his life. He was absorbed in the Spanish Civil War which had broken out in July, 1936, and was still being fought in 1938. Between 1936 and the end of 1938, he made several trips to and from Spain. *To Have and Have Not*, published between such flying trips, did not undergo the thorough revision the author intended to do in Part III.¹⁹ In 1938, after coming home from Spain on January 28, he returned to Spain for the third time on March 19, returning to the States on May 31. A fourth trip was made to Spain on September 1. It was on October 14 that *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-nine Stories* was published. Therefore, under such circumstances, we may presume that the revision and the proof-reading were done very hastily. At least it is most probable that Hemingway did not read proofs very carefully, because, as I have pointed out, there are many typographical errors in the 1938 edition.

In short, the only justification for the belief that 'couched' is not the printer's error nor the author's slip is the legendary punctiliousness of the author and the fact that it is still found in recent editions and impressions of *In Our Time*. But this does not positively prove that Hemingway intentionally used the word 'couched,' instead of 'crouched.' Should this be an actual revision, the coherence of the sketch, both in style and in literary effect, is violated. The word 'couched' seems to detract from the potential dignity of the sketch, which tries to create in the reader an intense emotion by presenting a picture of miserable refugees with the summit images of the woman in labor and the crying girl.²⁰

19. See Baker, pp. 203 ff. Other biographical facts and dates are from this book.

20. Mr. C. A. Fenton, author of *The Apprenticeship of Ernest Hemingway*, wrote me: "I have always assumed that 'couched' was simply a printer's error for the 'crouched' which Hemingway intended." Mr. H. H. Waggoner, Professor of English at Brown University, told me that he also believes 'couched' is a printer's error.