

ANALYSIS

“On the Quai at Smyrna” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Ernest had not been back in Paris more than a week [1922] when a cable from the *Star* ordered him to Constantinople to cover the war between Greece and Turkey. Late in August, the Turks had launched an offensive to drive the Greeks from Anatolia. The action had just culminated in the Turkish occupation and burning of the port of Smyrna. The Turks also threatened to take over the neutral zone which the Allies had established to guard the Straits from the Black Sea on the north to the Dardanelles in the south. Units of Turkish cavalry advanced to the British barbed wire at Chanak on the Dardanelles, and it was generally supposed that Kemal Pasha would soon occupy Constantinople.... British troops had arrived to head off the expected Turkish invasion, but all the foreigners were scared. They remembered the tales of Turkish atrocities at the sacking of Smyrna... [The massacre at Smyrna is dramatized by Thomas Doulis in *The Open Hearth* (2000), a novel mainly about Greek immigrants to America.]

In the gray drizzle of the October morning he saw a sight that he never forgot. Almost the entire Christian population of Thrace jammed the long stone road which led westward through Adrianople and on towards Karagatch. There were twenty miles of refugee carts, drawn by bullocks, cows, and water buffaloes. Thousands of exhausted men, women and children walked blindly through the rain with blankets over their heads. Mud-splashed Greek cavalymen herded them along.... These dogged troops, said Ernest, were ‘the last of the glory that was Greece’.”

Carlos Baker

Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner’s 1969) 97, 99

“In his early work in particular, Hemingway stood ready to sacrifice the logic of traditional narrative and rhetorical modes in order to present the incoherence and incompleteness of action. As though in recognition of this impulse toward incoherence, ‘On the Quai at Smyrna,’ which Hemingway added as a new introduction to the collection in 1930, seems deliberately designed to confuse the reader. The piece begins, ‘The strange thing was, he said, how they screamed every night at midnight. I do not know why they screamed at that time. We were in the harbor and they were all on the pier and at midnight they started screaming.’

Immediately we lose our bearings amid a profusion of pronouns. Who are ‘they’ and who are ‘we,’ and what is the connection between the speaker and the ‘we’ in the harbor, or between the speaker and the events he describes (‘You remember the harbor?’). As the piece unfolds, we begin to realize that the speaker is describing the evacuation of refugees from Smyrna during the Greco-Turkish war. But the piece gives rise to more narrative questions and doubts (such as why the refugees scream at midnight) than it answers. Like the vignette in the garden at Mons, ‘On the Quai at Smyrna’ explores not the clarity but the terror of events that rupture the boundary of what is rational and comfortably known.”

Thomas Strychacz

“*In Our Time, Out of Season*”
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
ed. Scott Donaldson
(Cambridge 1996) 60

The response to “On the Quai at Smyrna” by Thomas Strychacz just above is a revealing example of Postmodernist criticism. Such critics claimed to be “contextual,” but Mr. Strychacz never gets outside his own head. Within those small confines he says this opening to *In Our Time* “seems deliberately designed to confuse the reader.” Postmodern critics blamed authors for their own limitations as readers. Hemingway knew exactly what he was doing, it is Mr. Strychacz who is confused. At “the boundary of what is rational

and comfortably known” Strychacz concludes that the piece “explores not the clarity but the terror of events.” Strychacz did not *feel* the terror, however. Entirely in his head, he felt nothing. Postmodernists were so doctrinaire they were dissociated from the feelings of other people expressed in literature, especially Politically Correct critics like Mr. Strychacz. (See also his misreadings of “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” and of Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*)

More than anything else, Hemingway wanted to elicit feelings. His success in doing so was so great that he became the most popular literary writer. Both “On the Quai at Smyrna” and the second vignette in *In Our Time* dramatize the tragedy of massacred and fleeing Greeks. The book ends with a vignette depicting the King of Greece overthrown. Strychacz does not mention these works as part of the literary “context” of “On the Quai at Smyrna.” Hemingway portrays Greeks at the beginning and end of his book to evoke the origin and present state of democracy in western civilization.

Smyrna is known in modern history primarily for the massacre of Greeks by Turks there in 1922. The setting of this narrative is on the quai in Smyrna and the action is a massacre. Mr. Strychacz was unable to figure this out until “the piece unfolds.” He got confused because “Immediately we lose our bearings amid a profusion of pronouns.” With the regal “we” the Postmodernist critic attributes his own confusion to all humanity. Strychacz is not even able to see the British fleet: “Who are ‘they’ and who are ‘we’?” he asks. Well, “They” obviously refers to the screaming victims of the massacre. “We were in the harbor and they were all on the pier and at midnight they started screaming.”

The speaker is on a ship in the harbor, an officer as it turns out, talking to another man on the ship—probably another officer—about the screaming of the victims. Hemingway does not differentiate the two officers to make the point that their attitudes are the same—superior and aloof from the atrocities going on. That they are British is evident from the upper-class tone, language and clipped sentences of the speaker: “frightful rage,” “the fellow,” “topping,” and “My word yes a most pleasant business.” British ships are in the harbor to block an expected Turkish invasion of Constantinople and to evacuate Greeks. Ironically the British officer is focused instead on silencing the Greeks who are screaming on the pier. “We used to turn the searchlight on them to quiet them. That always did the trick.”

Mr. Strychacz cannot imagine why the Greeks are screaming at midnight. He acknowledges “the terror of events” in the abstract, but it does not occur to him that bad deeds might be going on in the dark. He describes what is going on as an “evacuation” rather than a massacre. That is the kind of euphemism used by totalitarian states like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Hemingway does not specify exactly what the Turks are doing to the helpless Greeks in the dark, he knows it is more effective to leave that to the imagination of a reader. The British officer sounds as if it is the Greeks who need to be exposed—“to quiet them”—whereas we may surmise that exposing the Turks by searchlight in acts of rape and torture and murder is what stops the acts, temporarily, and hence the screaming. Ironically, Mr. Strychacz is more insensitive and blind an observer than the British officer.

All the information needed to understand what is happening is presented in the first paragraph. Then the speaker says he was the British senior officer on the pier when a Turkish officer accused an “inoffensive” British sailor of insulting him repeatedly—which was clearly false. This triviality, absurdly out of scale, was intended to deflect accusations of atrocities being committed by the Turks. Lying is a motif throughout the narrative. Hemingway casts a searchlight on the truth. The British officer lies in promising the Turkish officer to “severely” punish the innocent sailor. Being diplomatic to avoid conflict he accepts the false accusation, colluding in the atrocities being committed by the Turks under uplifted British noses. The Turkish officer “felt topping about it. Great friends we were.”

After the detached perspective of those responsible for the atrocities, the next paragraph is shocking. The pathos could not be greater. But the worst part of the situation to the British officer is not the atrocities but what he has to witness—“the women with dead babies.” He makes the babies seem a waste disposal problem: “Wouldn’t give them up. Nothing you could do about it. Had to take them away finally.” Babies are archetypal images of great power to people with hearts. These babies and all the Greek survivors on the pier are starving to death.

When the Turks ordered the British to stop the evacuation, the British threatened to “shell the Turkish quarter of the town.” They have the firepower to blow the whole town “simply to hell.” But after the Turks “just fired a few blank charges at us,” the British backed off. Then the Turkish commander got “sacked” for “exceeding his authority or some such thing. He got a bit above himself.” All the officers in the story exceed their moral authority as human beings and get above themselves playing God.

The British officer continues to be aloof and sarcastic: “There were plenty of nice things floating around” in the harbor—bodies and such. In contrast to British detachment above it all with their searchlight, the Greek women are heroic giving birth to more babies down in “the darkest place in the hold.” The mothers are the indomitable human spirit carrying on through the worst circumstances, while their babies represent undying hope: “Surprising how few of them died.”

Hemingway does not idealize Greeks as opposed to Turks: “The Greeks were nice chaps too.” Rather than leave their baggage mules behind for the Turks, “they just broke their forelegs and dumped them into the shallow water.” The image is repeated to fully evoke the horror: “All those mules with their forelegs broken pushed over into the shallow water.” In shallow water the animals would try to struggle up onto their feet until they drowned. The cruelty is a heartbreaking indictment of humans—men if you like—in contrast to the self-sacrificial mothers giving birth.

Michael Hollister (2012)