

ON HEMINGWAY'S USE OF SPANISH IN *DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON*

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Ernest Hemingway first published *Death in the Afternoon* in 1932, in the middle of his best known and perhaps also his best appreciated creative period that can I call his modernist cycle. It expands over a period of time of, roughly speaking, twenty years (1923-1940) then followed by a decade (1940-1950) of intense literary writing that doesn't transcend the editorial world till 1950, the year of publication of his novel *Across the River and Into the Trees*, title which, so, inaugurates Hemingway's second creative cycle. This second cycle of production has a start, from the editorial point of view, in the aforementioned year of 1950 and an end in 1961, the year of Hemingway's death.

Both deaths, the fictional *Death in the Afternoon* and Hemingway's "personal" death, though separated by thirty long years of experience and career, were but for one thing closely related. They each took place at a peak in one of those waves of interest that Hemingway felt for Spain and Spanish institutions, its countryfolk and land.

Both waves of experimental interest in Spain brought the Spanish bullfights to the foreground of Hemingway's writings and the literary output was a group of texts that either depend heavily, though not overtly, on the very structure of the bullfight or else have the bullfight protagonists openly as their main theme and subject.

Among the group of texts that overtly thematize the bullfight we find the already mentioned *Death in the Afternoon*, written in English for an English speaking readership not excessively well acquainted with either Spain or the bullfights. At least that seems to have been Hemingway's own presupposition if we let ourselves go by the textual strategies he develops throughout this book.

Hemingway presupposes a certain knowledge of the Spanish matter in his English readership, but a knowledge the authorial-narrator hardly ever takes into account as either accurate or objective. In Hemingway's (or, to be more accurate, the authorial-narrator's) words, such objective knowledge could hardly have been

presupposed in the audience; audience which he did not consider to be free of pride and prejudice, both deeply rooted in a cultural gap that usually raises a communication lag causing two different modes of viewing Life and Death. Two facts which, by belonging to the realm of natural necessity might seem to be free of ideological interpretation but for which the bullfight becomes a test and proof of the social construction of reality¹ .

Facts of universal application are by no means universally agreed upon. They are also subject to cultural artifice and, consequently, to interpretation and "misreading". Well aware of it, Hemingway realized the distance between Spanish and Anglo-american culture must somehow be lessened if his American readership, and eventual spectatorship of the bullfight, were ever to come in contact with the Spanish corrida. Hemingway's writing of the text of *Death in the Afternoon* , is a complex bundle of pragmatic intentions voiced by the narrator.

The text is meant to be an essay on the bullfight which includes its encyclopedic definition, an interpretation of it that counter-balances the expected audience's prejudice against the bullfight and a glossary, a small dictionary of the terms used in the jargon. All of it together provides the Anglo-American reader with objective information and an adequate communicative tool leading him/her to understand the foreign Fiesta and its implied values as different but worth attention and respect.

What is more, Hemingway (the authorial narrator) is very open and clear about this multiple task undergone in *Death in the Afternoon* , the same text mentions other books previously written about Spain and the Spaniards that he can hardly accept as valid records of truth and which he disqualifies on the grounds of mystification and incompetence. *Death in the Afternoon* includes a reference to its contemporary, *Virgin Spain* , a good example of what a book on Spain should not be like, let us read Hemingway's criticism:

The bedside mysticism of such a book as *Virgin Spain*. The author of this book once published a piece in a now dead little magazine called *S4N* explaining how he did his writing (...) the gist of it was how this writer lay naked in bed in the night and God sent him things to write, how he ' was in touch ecstatically with the plunging and immobile all'. how he was, through the courtesy of God, 'everywhere and everywhen.' The italics are his or maybe they are God's. It didn't say in the article. After God sent it he wrote it. The result was that unavoidable mysticism of a man who writes a language so badly he cannot make a clear statement uncomplicated by whatever pseudo-scientific jargon is in style at the moment (...) If a man writes clearly enough anyone can see if he fakes. If he mystifies to avoid a simple statement (...) the writer takes a longer time to be known as a fake and other writers who are afflicted by the same necessity will praise him in their own defense. True mysticism

should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge or the inability to state clearly.(1932: 55-57).

This long quotation may allow us to learn about Hemingway's conviction that the first responsibility of a writer is to understand and know well that which (s)he may want to write about so that (s)he can afterwards state it clearly in writing for others to be able to read and understand it in turn.

If that is his declared opinion about what a book on Spain should be like, then *Death in the Afternoon* posits itself as a good example of a piece of honest writing aiming at truth, objectivity and the highest degree of simplicity of style.

From a critical point of view, these goals, though reasonable, are far from being easy to define, for, What is Truth, and what Objectivity, outside of a particular convention? Anyway, these were Hemingway's literary leading principles at the time of writing *Death in the Afternoon*, and the result was a text that is to be read as an essay or a guide-book more than as a book of fiction.

This said, we must not totally "believe" Hemingway, his text tells us differently. His writing follows, underneath a surface of microstructural simplicity of language, a complex design at the macrostructural level of stylistic strategies². Let us digress for a minute, and say that all information that is difficult to convey because of its being socially unacceptable at a given time, is either taboo or bound to meet cultural prejudice and misunderstanding. It also becomes pretty ineffable in the sense that it cannot be overt, especially so if the 'informer' is young and still not widely recognized as a writer, as Hemingway was then, an author striving to make his way through by making himself accepted by an extended readership.

Hemingway faced the difficult task of explaining some negative aspects of America to the average american citizen, his proud public. Criticising America's imperialistic progress towards modernization could not possibly be done in a too explicit manner, without risking opposition and a likely fall in book-store selling and audience acceptance. But where language fails to be both clear and safe, designing a good textual strategy can help and Hemingway's first textual strategy is to hide his main subject matter in a deceiving move to the background of the text. Hemingway is not going to take his subject matter _America and the americans_ directly but by an excursion to a foreign country.

It is a clever disguise. The macrostructural study of the text *Death in the Afternoon* allows us to affirm that, by studying a foreign institution, I mean Spanish bullfighting, Hemingway exposes a photographic negative of his native country. Contrast is the basic architectural design from which *Death in the Afternoon* develops. By explaining the differential aspects of another culture, Spain's in this

case, he manages to bring up the differences and contrasts that he found between both, Spain and the U.S.A. By choosing this inferential strategy Hemingway manages to allude to America by omission and implication.

That way, he is presenting the readers, with a text that refers them back and forwards to the absent, the unspoken yet there. As a result he foregrounds one world, Spain, the alien country, 'America's other', while hiding America. He is, therefore, helping to develop an ironic contrast between the old world, European Spain, and the new emerging world, the U.S.A. Europe is in the foreground but slowly decaying into inexistence, so, absent, and America in the background but alive and truly present.

The old world and its values could still be found *in situ* over in Europe and, more concretely, in Spain. It is essential to underline that Hemingway's modernist topical attitude towards Europe does not rely upon any British bond, so strong in the case of other American writers belonging to the same generation, like T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. Though Hemingway breaks the modernist pattern of admiration for the Europe of the pilgrim forefathers, he does it only partially because, as a matter of fact he belongs to the Parisian circle of American writers gathering around Gertrude Stein. It is important to stress that Hemingway chose Spain as a paradigm of the values of old civilizations, regulated by the values of individuality, nobility and stoicism.

Apparently Britain did not offer Hemingway adequate ground for contrast. Moreover, in *Death in the Afternoon*, Britain is coupled together with the U.S.A. as forming part of the same Anglo-Saxon tradition. Again, this is not explicitly stated but it can be easily inferred from the following textual strategy: at the near end of *Death in the Afternoon*, there is a section entitled "Some reactions of a few individuals to the integral Spanish Bullfight" (1932: 341-346) containing the testimony of fifteen men and women, of which thirteen are American and two British, of different age, sex and walk of life but all having in common both, their native English language and their sometime having attended a bullfight.

All of them answered a basic question on the relevant subject stated in the aforementioned title; the question might have been worded as follows: what was your reaction on the occasion of seeing your first Spanish bullfight?

From their answers Hemingway (the authorial narrator) concludes:

In these few reactions of individuals I have tried to be completely accurate as to their first and ultimate impressions of the bullfight. The only conclusion I draw from these reactions is that some people will like the fights and others will not. (1932: 346).

Hemingway cares about the feelings and opinions of these people, mainly tourists, that have seen a fight, but the main concern of the text is with those who

might eventually have the chance to attend a Spanish bullfight and not understand the meaning of what is going on there.

For Hemingway believes a bullfight means something, it is a well-structured system of signification, a “visual text” that is Spanish and that need be translated and interpreted into English before it can ever be understood and enjoyed. So he tells the readers about his first experience of the bullfights and how his expectations were met by a complex system of definite actions that he came to care for very much:

I quote:

The only place where you could see life and death, i.e., violent death now that the wars were over, was in the bull ring and I wanted very much to go to Spain where I could study it. I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things, and one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental is violent death. (...) So I went to Spain to see bullfights and to try to write about them for myself. I thought they would be simple and barbarous and cruel and that I would not like them, but that I could see certain definite action which would give me the feeling of life and death that I was working for. I found the definite action; but the bullfight was so far from simple, and I liked it so much, that it was much too complicated for my then equipment for writing to deal with and, aside from four very short sketches³, I was not able to write anything about it for five years - and I wish I could have waited ten. (...) every year I know there is more to learn, but I know some things which may be interesting now, and I may be away from the bullfights for a long time and I might as well write what I know about them now. (1932: 10-11)

Hemingway's interpretation of the bullfight to his English speaking readership involves a twofold task, decoding an intertextuality of linguistic and sociocultural texts. This task takes place in a way that is analogous to the development of encyclopedic explanation, by which I mean that the text of *Death in the Afternoon* can be read as the text of a small-size encyclopedia dwelling on a set of entries that make up the jargon of the aficionados, as Hemingway calls them in Spanish.

The twenty chapters of the book are interspersed with Spanish words whose dictionary-like English counterparts are not too useful because of a lack of adequate context to clarify their meaning. Take for example the word 'aficionado' just mentioned, and see how Hemingway tackles the difficulty. We read:

The aficionado, or lover of the bullfight, maybe said, broadly, then, to be one who has this sense of the tragedy and ritual of the fight so that the minor aspects are not important except as they relate to the whole (1932: 16)

This broad definition cannot possibly be understood without the help of reference to previous pages where the deictic term 'this' can find its appropriate referential context. By this token, *Death in the Afternoon* offers itself metafictionally

as the adequate context for learning and understanding about the Spanish language of bullfighting. And it is Hemingway (the authorial narrator) that presupposes this capacity in his own text and simultaneously affirms its necessity, we read:

(...) it might be good to have a book about bullfighting in English and a serious book on such an amoral subject may have some value. (1932: 11)

We can frequently find examples of this type of encyclopedialike translation in *Death in the Afternoon*. Spanish terms like 'banderillas' appear in the English text and then must be explained. For instance, in chapter ten we read:

Act two is that of the banderillas. These are pairs of sticks about a yard long, seventy centimetres to be exact, with a harpoon-shaped steel point four centimetres long at one end. They are supposed to be placed, two at a time, in the humped muscle at the top of the bull's neck as he charges the man who holds them. They are designed to complete the work of slowing up the bull and regulating the carriage of his head which has been begun by the picadors; so that his attack will be slower, but surer and better directed. (1932: 95-96)

This constant interference of Spanish is rendered necessary by the type of text we have under consideration. *Death in the Afternoon* is written in English with frequent american modisms. This fact adds a further filter or distance between the reader and the facts presented by the textual semiotic system under study. There are a number of ways to overcome this distance, and Hemingway is certainly willing to take them in order to help the american reader, and prospective spectator, to fill in the information gap and avoid the misinterpretation of the violent aspects of the bullfight, so far removed from the quiet polite ways of the puritan world towards useful animals. This is the way Hemingway puts it:

If they [tourists] sense the meaning and end of the whole thing even when they know nothing about it; feel that this thing they do not understand is going on, the business of the horses is nothing more than an incident. If they get no feeling of the whole tragedy naturally they will react emotionally to the most picturesque incident. Naturally, too, if they are humanitarians or animalarians (what a word!) they will get no feeling of the tragedy but only a reaction on humanitarian or animalarian grounds, and the most obviously abused thing is the horse (...) the person who has identified himself with the animal (...) will suffer genuinely and terribly, seeing only this aspect of the bullfight, while, when a horse pulls up lame in a steeplechase, he will not suffer at all and consider it merely regrettable. (1932: 16)

Returning, in view of the difficulties, Hemingway's central strategy at the time of writing must be pragmatic, that of meeting the opposition of a potential reader of his book on the bullfights, - also a potential future spectator of them- English-

speaking, white, protestant, and well off, either Northamerican or British. In addressing this type of readership he must also succeed in bridging the gap between their familiar custombound experiences and the experience of death and suffering that takes place in the Spanish bullfight afternoons. That distance takes place in the realm of two cultures which belong in two different traditions, Anglosaxon and Spanish. It is a kind of cultural distance that can be described in spatial and chronological terms as well.

Along the space dimension that distance separated North (U.S.A.) from South (Spain and Southamerica) on a vertical axis, while horizontally it separated East (Spain) from West (U.S.A.). Similarly, along the chronological axis the same distance existed between Past (Spain) and Present-Future (U.S.A.). The next question might well be, and what about Europe?

If we take the two-axial scheme, I think we can see now that Europe could not be a party in the fierst of the two bipolarities, Europe could not be a suitable opposite number in the polarity North versus South because Europe could not be considered part of the big and mythical South. As you can see, Hemingway seems to go by the old saying, Africa begins at the Pyrenees.

This being the situation in the thirties, *Death in the Afternoon* was published in 1932, Hemingway must surely have considered his position to be weak. Belonging, as he himself did, to the first of the two traditions, Northamerican and English, _ his ancestors came from Britain _ his claim to objectivity and truth might have been questioned. No wonder that, in order to get rid of any eventual accusation of prejudiced partiality, Hemingway built himself textually inside the Spanish circle, the narrator aligns himself with the group of the 'aficionados' and, as a token, he uses the jargon. Therefore, he strategically uses an abundance of Spanish words in the English text. The spanish terms are place names, antonyms or jargon of the bullfight. A good example of this abundance can be found in chapter three, where we read:

No one is called a toreador in Spain. That is an obsolete word which was applied to those members of the nobility who, in the days before professional bullfighting, killed bulls from horseback for sport. Anyone who fights bulls for money, whether as a matador, banderillero or a picador is called a torero. A man who kills them on horseback with a javelin, using trained thoroughbred horses, is called a rejoneador or a caballero en plaza. A bullfight in Spanish is called a corrida de toros or a running of bulls. A bullring is called a plaza de toros. (1932: 31)

Quite often the text overaccumulates Spanish words that, sooner or later, are explained in the text. But in the meantime, as the jargon might make it difficult for the readers to follow the reading along the twenty chapters of *Death in the*

Afternoon, Hemingway adds a Glossary comprising 585 entries plus their definition. This glossary is tagged on as an annex at the near end of *Death in the Afternoon*, and it is introduced by the heading “ An explanatory Glossary of certain Words, Terms and Phrases used in Bullfighting” which is followed by seventy seven pages of explained words and phrases occupying a volume of, roughly, a fifth of the total 359 pages of the book.

So, this Glossary serves as a small dictionary and stands to the whole text of *Death in the Afternoon* in the same relation as a dictionary stands to an encyclopedia. J. Hayman has studied the Dictionary/encyclopedia relationship in depth⁴. Hayman’s discussion is relevant because his article shows that different linguistic schools give different accounts of the Dictionary/encyclopedia relationship but a most common one would say dictionaries differ from encyclopedias in that the former make attempts at a linguistic description of their entries while the latter emphasize the extra linguistic context and bring in all types of useful information dealing with society and culture as part of the description of a given word.

Hemingway’s “Glossary of Spanish terms and phrases”, although encyclopedic in itself, is, in relation to the twenty chapters of *Death in the Afternoon* a type of dictionary that limits itself to the system of the bullfight, which can be described as a semiotic system, a communicative structure or an actual language. This “Glossary” is the repetition in kernel of the information already given in the first twenty chapters of the book and is built as an annex, a redundant device that functions as an index of the interpretive quality of the whole text. Chapter X offers a wonderful example of redundancy:

The first act, where the bull charges the picadors, is the suerte de varas, or the trial of the lances. Suerte is an important word in Spanish. It means, according to the dictionary: suerte, f. , chance, hazard, lots, fortune, luck, good luck, haphazard; state, condition, fate, doom, destiny, kind, sort; species, manner, mode, way, skilful manoeuvre; trick, feat, juggle, and piece of ground separated by landmark. So the translation of trial or manoeuvre is quite arbitrary, as any translation must be from the Spanish. (1932: 95)

The chapter is doubly redundant not only because it repeats information easily found in any Spanish dictionary, information that is not strictly relevant to the matter under discussion, but because the Glossary offers the same information again in the following entry:

suertes: all predetermined manoeuvres in a bullfight which has rules for the manner of its execution. Suerte in the singular also means luck. (1932: 328)

A Glossary is, by definition a list of words paired to a system-related definition, detached from its recopiator’s subjective intrusion. It is easy to understand why

Hemingway, always intent on objective truth, adds this apparently redundant Glossary to the overall design of *Death in the Afternoon*. The most important consequence of this pragmatic strategy is that by adding the glossary at the end of the fiction, the narrator manages to restore the reader's confidence in the text's realism. And the device is successful, *Death in the Afternoon* is generally read and classified as non-fiction by its editors although a deeper critical reading renders it quite fictional as a matter of fact.

Once this de-fictionalization has been accomplished, *Death in the Afternoon* constructs itself also as an interpretive text that can be trusted because it is self-authorised by its confidence in its own capacity to fill in the gap, first, between two different linguistic codes (Spanish and English), second, between two cultural codes, one American of Anglosaxon tradition, and the other, Spanish, and third, between the world of fiction and the world of fact.

The confidence of the text in its own power to convey different levels of meaning and play by truthfully translating one system into another without sensible loss seems to me quite a nostalgic if not conservative endeavour, and what is more, a symptom of Hemingway's clear tendency towards realism that codifies his early production. But being a realist, Hemingway is not naïve: there comes a point in his text when he explicitly acknowledges that it would be more desirable for the readers to turn to experience if they want truth, or, what is the same in this case, it would be better for the reader to forget the printed text and go watch a bullfight before making up his/her mind, as to whether (s)he likes bullfights or not. We learn it in Chapter VII of *Death in the Afternoon*, which starts by saying:

At this point it is necessary that you see a bullfight. (...). So with any book on mountain ski-ing, sexual intercourse, wing shooting, or any other thing which it is impossible to make come true on paper (...), it being always an individual experience, there comes a place in the guide book where you must say do not come back until you have ski-ed, had sexual intercourse, shot quail or grouse, or been to the bullfight, so that you will know what you are talking about. So from now on it is inferred that you have been to the bullfight. (1932: 65)

It is only after experiencing the bullfight that the public can judge and value what they have seen and felt, the effects that the bullfight has had on them. This is the way *Death in the Afternoon* puts it:

Finally, when they (spectators) have learned to appreciate values through experience what they seek is honesty and true, not tricked, emotion and always classicism and the purity of execution of all suertes, and, as in the change in taste for wines, they want no sweetening but prefer to see the horses with no protection worn so that all wounds may be seen and death given rather than suffering caused

by something designed to allow the horses to suffer while their suffering is spared the spectator. But, as with wine, you will know when you first try it whether you like it as a thing or not from the effect it will have on you. (1932: 19)

It is obvious that, although Hemingway insists here that literature wants to be true in its description to external reality, he is ever conscious that art cannot match reality on a same plane because the reality of fact cannot be equalled by any esthetic copy. Literary art can only present reality to the reader and do it by the words and conventions of Literature as understood by a particular writer.

Whatever remains of the literary endeavour is a complex literary artifact, *Death in the Afternoon*, or, in other words, an English interpretation of the Spanish bullfights. And the bullfights are, in turn, the ritual Spanish translation of a myth revealing a state of sociological facts, past and present, which have been semiotically processed into a type of dramatic visual artistic performance.

What this means is that *Death in the Afternoon* is a literary text that depends heavily on multiply coded intertextuality. *Death in the Afternoon* is the English interpretant⁵ of the Spanish non verbal text of the bullfight. And the bullfight, a kind of mute performance of a drama enacted by a bull and a man, is itself the interpretant of facts like death which are experienced in the text of 'real life'. Hemingway seems to know this very well for we read:

The bullfight is not a sport in the Anglo-saxon sense of the word, that is, it is not an equal contest or an attempt at an equal contest between a bull and a man. Rather it is a tragedy; the death of the bull, which is played more or less well, by the bull and the man involved (1932: 22)

In this drama, the death-bound bull represents not only its own death but the death of any living individual. This basic metaphor is widely applicable beyond cultural conventions on the grounds of the similarity of the factual experience of death that all, Americans or Spaniards, share. This community of experience is what interests Hemingway most and what makes the bullfight translatable to any English speaking audience or readership.

Whatever differences can be found in the experience of death belong to the social dimension of reality, belong to the idiosyncratic ways in which the American and the Spanish systems of socialization view it. So Hemingway leaves *Death in the Afternoon* as an example of the possibility of getting over crosscultural misunderstanding and prejudice by true and honest watching and writing. As all dictionaries and encyclopedias, *Death in the Afternoon* can be seen as a monument to language and communication made of the very stuff of words.

NOTES

- 1 In overt reference to Berger & Luckman (1967).
- 2 See E. Bernárdez (1990) on Macrostructures.
- 3 The four sketches are part of his first collection of short stories entitled *In Our Time* (1925).
- 4 Ver John Hayman(1980) on the differences between "Dictionaries and Encyclopedias", *Lingua*, 50: 329-357.
- 5 The interpretant is a type of sign in Ch. S. Peirce's triadic theory of the sign. A sign that stands for another one and by so doing, interprets it.

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