

The Last Ole

**Review of The Dangerous Summer
in the New York Times
by William Kennedy, Jun 9, 1985**

HERE we have a great writer who set out to write an epilogue that turned into a book-length manuscript that died of unwieldiness but was years later edited to its literary essence and became a book, truly, and is here with us now, and is good.

The epilogue was conceived by Ernest Hemingway in 1959 to conclude a new edition of his 1932 treatise on bullfighting as life and art, *Death In The Afternoon*. Life magazine editors heard of his plan and asked him to expand the piece into an article of a few thousand words, which they hoped to publish as successfully as they had published his novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Hemingway's subject for the epilogue was the *mano a mano* (or hand-to-hand, a duel) between Spain's two leading matadors, Luis Miguel Dominguin and his brother-in-law, Antonio Ordenez. Hemingway wrote to his close friend A. E. Hotchner: 'It looked like one or the other of the men might be killed and Life wanted coverage of it. Instead, it turned out to be the gradual destruction of one person by another with all the things that led up to it and made it. I had to establish the personality and the art and the basic differences between the two great artists and then show what happened, and you can't do that in 4,000 words.'

This was Hemingway's way of apologizing for having extended the epilogue to 688 typed pages covered with 108,746 words. What had happened was that he turned both the *mano a mano* and the epilogue into a quest for, and a statement about, his own youth, his own heroism, his own art, his own immortality; for he was dying, psychologically and artistically, and he seems to have intuited that.

Hemingway had begun his writing career in journalism, and though he denigrated it in later life ('Journalism, after a point has been reached, can be a daily self-destruction for a serious creative writer'), he never really left it. The last two books on which he worked so diligently before his death in 1961 were this one and his superb non-fiction sketches of Paris in the 1920's, *A Moveable Feast*.

He lived all his life with his own *mano a mano* between non-fiction and fiction, primarily believing that fiction was supreme. He told George Plimpton that 'you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive, and you make it alive, and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality.'

In an author's note to his 1935 book on big-game hunting, *The Green Hills Of Africa*, he also wrote this: 'The writer has attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination.'

His use of the novelist's tools — dialogue, scene construction, interior monologues — in *The Green Hills* was the style that such New Journalists as Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe would popularize so abundantly well in the 1960s. Hemingway's Ego Journalism, wherein the writer's point of view is more important to the reader than the subject matter, would be carried to splendid new heights in a later generation by writers like Hunter Thompson and Norman Mailer.

The Green Hills of Hemingway, however, was only a valiant failure. The book perished in the bush from overkill: too much hunting detail, too much bang-bang banality, insufficient story. By contrast, his two fictional stories of Africa, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, were both masterworks.

By 1959, when Hemingway was 60 years old, his plan to write the bullfight epilogue trapped him anew in journalism, and he went to Spain. He followed the *corridas* (afternoons of bullfighting) in which Dominguin and Ordonez fought the bulls. He worked manically at recording the small and large details of it all, wrote voluminously for five months and in September 1960 published three articles in *Life*.

I remember the articles. I looked forward to them but could not read them. I don't think I finished even one of the three. The great Hemingway had resuscitated all the boredom I'd felt in reading *The Green Hills*. This was also the response of *Life*'s other readers. The articles were a disaster. Nevertheless, plans continued at Hemingway's publishing house, Charles Scribner's Sons, to publish a book from the material. For many reasons, chief among them Hemingway's suicide in 1961, the book remained a manuscript with elephantiasis until now, 26 years after the writing.

The Dangerous Summer is a singular document, as studded with ironies as it is with taurine terminology. What it is also, because of the long hiatus between inception and publication, is the centerpiece of a much larger composite work that readers may put together for themselves. The basic books required for this composite are Hemingway's *Selected Letters*; the autobiography of his widow, Mary, *How It Was*; A. E. Hotchner's peculiar but valuable 1966 memoir, *Papa Hemingway*; Carlos Baker's biography, *Hemingway: A Life Story*; James A. Michener's non-fiction book on Spain, *Iberia*; and a long and sensitive memoir by a Spanish journalist, Jose Luis Castillo-Puche, called *Hemingway in Spain*.

When they confront the subject of the aged Hemingway, from 1959 until his death and its aftermath, these books together offer a prismatic vision of the dying artist, a complex and profoundly dramatic story of a man's extraordinary effort to stay alive; so that when we come to Mr. Baker's succinct and powerful final sentence in the biography,

we have a new comprehension not only of a writer's despair but of suicide as a not unreasonable conclusion to a blasted life. 'He slipped in two shells,' Mr. Baker writes, 'lowered the gun butt carefully to the floor, leaned forward, pressed the twin barrels against his forehead just above the eyebrows and tripped both triggers.'

The *Dangerous Summer*, as centerpiece to Hemingway's final tragedy, does stand alone. It is novella-length, 45,000 words, with an introduction by James Michener that defines terms necessary for understanding the bullfight world as Hemingway describes it. Mr. Michener is reverential to the memory of Hemingway, but as an aficionado of the bulls himself he finds fault with Hemingway's conclusions.

Mr. Michener had access to the entire original manuscript and says it is so excessively detailed that most readers would not finish it. Hemingway knew it was far too long. Mr. Hotchner went to see him in Havana and reported that Hemingway, not trusting Life's editors to cut his work, had labored for 21 full days by himself and cut only 278 words.

Hemingway plaintively asked for Mr. Hotchner's help in the cutting but then strangely rejected all suggested cuts with explanations in writing to Mr. Hotchner, who was in the same room with him. Hemingway's mind was out of control and would get progressively worse. His vaunted ability to leave out what was irrelevant, his great talent for synthesis, were malfunctioning. Mr. Hotchner pressed on, but Hemingway continued to resist. 'What I've written is Proustian in its cumulative effect, and if we eliminate detail we destroy that effect,' he told Mr. Hotchner.

On the fourth day of talk Hemingway yielded, the cutting began, and 54,916 words were excised. These are Mr. Hotchner's figures, and they differ somewhat from Mr. Michener's; but then Mr. Hotchner did the cutting. The residual manuscript went to Life and formed the basis for the three articles. Charles A. Scribner Jr. said earlier this year that he tried to cut the script to publishable size in later years, eventually giving it to a Scribner's editor named Michael Pietsch, who reduced it to its present size, 'a wonderful job' by Mr. Scribner's lights.

And so here is Hemingway — who derided F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'gigantic, preposterous' outline for *The Last Tycoon* and wrote that Fitzgerald would never have finished the book — unable to finish his own runaway journalism. Here is Hemingway — calling Thomas Wolfe the 'over-bloated Lil Abner of literature' and saying that if Wolfe's editor (and his own), Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's, 'had not cut one-half million words out of Mr. Wolfe everybody would know how he was' — psychopathically viewing his own rampant verbosity as sacrosanct.

Nevertheless, I concur with Mr. Scribner that Mr. Pietsch has done a wonderful editing job. Hemingway was very cuttable, and the book is indeed wonderful; but the question remains: whose wonderfulness is it? Is it half Hemingway? Hemingway by thirds? Should the byline read: 'Words Put in by Hemingway, Words Taken Out by

Hotchner and Pietsch'? When the same issue was raised with Thomas Wolfe about his reliance on Maxwell Perkins to produce a coherent book, Wolfe left Perkins, even left Scribner's, to assert his independence.

The question is not easily answered, for there is another question: does it really matter, in terms of what the finished book is? And just what is the book? When I began reading it, I felt instantly in the presence of the old Hemingway wit. At the Spanish border in 1953, his first return to Spain since the Spanish Civil War, he expects hostility because he fought against Franco. A border policeman asks: 'Are you any relation of Hemingway the writer?' And Hemingway answers: 'Of the same family.' Instead of enmity he finds warm welcome, and the policeman has read all of his books.

He quickly takes us into the bullring and gives us a lesson in how to cheat at bullfighting. You shave the bull's horns so they are sensitive and he is not so deadly with them; or you use a young bull who does not yet know how to use his horns; or you drop a heavy sack of feed on the small of the bull's back so his hind legs are weakened and he is a diminished threat to the bullfighter. Hemingway accused the managers of the once-great Manolete of shaving horns, and when the articles appeared in *Life*, Hemingway was attacked by Spanish aficionados and idolators of Manolete.

We soon meet Ordonez, the son of Cayetano Ordonez, who was Hemingway's friend in the 1920s and the model for the bullfighter Pedro Romero in *The Sun Also Rises*. Hemingway tells Ordonez he is better than his father. 'I could see he had the three great requisites for a matador: courage, skill in his profession and grace in the presence of the danger of death.' But in the same paragraph, after Ordonez asks to see him, Hemingway tells himself: 'Don't start being friends with bullfighters again and especially not with this one when you know how good he is and how much you will have to lose if anything happens to him.' But Hemingway doesn't heed his own advice, could not heed it. He was in the grip of a compulsion to return to bullfighting, to revisit Pamplona, the setting of *The Sun Also Rises*, where he had become a mythic figure and to re-create the past when he was living so well, writing so well.

He also meets the capable enemy, Dominguin, and describes him in a fine sentence: 'Luis Miguel was a charmer, dark, tall, no hips, just a touch too long in the neck for a bullfighter, with a grave mocking face that went from professional disdain to easy laughter.' There is a bronze life-size statue of Dominguin in his own home, and Hemingway finds this odd but uses it to define his qualified vision of Dominguin: 'I thought Miguel looked better than his statue although his statue looked just a little bit nobler.'

Hemingway returns to Spain in 1959 and very early on establishes the Dominguin-Ordonez rivalry. Ordonez emerges as a saintly fighter, who even when the bulls are stupid can work with them until they are brave. 'His second bull was difficult too but he rebuilt him.'

Dominguin alternates between being brave, noble and talented, and being a cheat: he ‘really loved to fight bulls and he forgot about being rich when he was in the ring. But he wanted the odds in his favor and the odds were the tampering with the horns.’ Hemingway and his entourage traverse Spain by car, and he exults in victory like a great hunter: ‘We were like a happy tribe after a successful raid or a great killing.’ Along the way, as always in his best works, he celebrates food and wine and companionship and evokes a vivid sense of place in both present time and in memory.

These moments also serve as changes of pace from the tense reporting on the rivalry, the bulls, the wounds, the pain, the ascension toward the exalted climax. The competition peaks at Malaga on Aug. 14, 1959, with both matadors triumphing over their bulls. Hemingway even approves of Dominguin.

‘He made two series of eight *naturales* [passes with a small red cloth] in beautiful style and then on a right-hand pass with the bull coming at him from the rear, the bull had him. . . . The horn seemed to go into his body and the bull tossed him a good six feet or more into the air. His arms and legs were spread wide, the sword and *muleta* were thrown clear and he fell on his head. The bull stepped on him trying to get the horn into him and missed him twice. . . . He was up in an instant. The horn had not gone in but had passed between his legs . . . and there was no wound. [He] paid no attention to what the bull had done to him and waving everyone away went on with his *faena* [work].’

Dominguin goes on also to be overshadowed by Ordonez in the fourth *mano a mano* at Ciudad Real, and Hemingway ends the chapter on a note of negative suspense: that Dominguin will now go on to Bilbao ‘to be destroyed’.

The final chapter is a triumph — for Hemingway. He throws aside journalistic convention and as novelist enters into the heads of the matadors as they battle to the conclusion Hemingway knew was inevitable.

On Dominguin: ‘Too many things were piling up and he was running out of luck. It was one thing to live to be the number one in the world in his profession. . . . It was another thing to be almost killed each time he went out to prove it.’

On Ordonez: ‘A bullfighter can never see the work of art that he is making. He has no chance to correct it as a painter or a writer has. . . . He can only feel it and hear the crowd’s reaction to it. . . . The public belonged to him now. He looked up at them and let them know, modestly but not humbly, that he knew it. [He] was happy that he owned them.’

So that, in brief, is the book, and while I have lived remote from bullfighting all my life, have next to no personal interest in it and tend to identify with the bulls, I think nevertheless that *The Dangerous Summer* is one of the best sports books I have ever read. Not everyone could agree. Dominguin, who retired in 1961 and came back to the bulls in 1971, said in a 1972 book about him by Keith Botsford that Hemingway was ‘a

commonplace bore . . . a crude and vulgar man' who 'knew nothing about fighting bulls.' He dismissed Ordonez as a 'cowardly fighter' with 'feet of clay all the way up to his brain.

In Iberia, Mr. Michener reports on the latter-day Ordonez, the man Hemingway said could be one of the greatest matadors of all time. In a *corrida* at Pamplona the crowd dislikes his work and so Ordonez spitefully kills the bull in a disgraceful way. 'It was a shame-filled conclusion to a shameful performance,' Mr. Michener says, and the crowd chants: '*Ordonez, Ordonez, sinvergüenza! Ordonez, Ordonez, paga la prensa*' ('Ordonez, Ordonez, shameless one! Ordonez, Ordonez, pays the newspapers' — to write well of him).

Mr. Castillo-Puche, who was close to Hemingway, argues in *Hemingway in Spain* that the *mano a mano* series was a publicity stunt, that Hemingway was suckered by the promoters and that Ordonez used him to advance his career.

All of that may be true, and in the last judgment by the bulls of history, Hemingway may be gored in his journalistic femoral artery. But that is irrelevant to why this is an important and wonderful book. The value emerges from the subtext, which seems to have two principal elements: the drive to write this book and the behavior of the writer as he reports and writes it.

How does a man fight the dying of the light? Is it really with rage? Mr. Castillo-Puche writes: 'I saw [Hemingway] get all confused, tear up whole sections of his manuscript, rip up photographs or fling them across the room in a fit of temper, swear at those present in the room and others elsewhere, and swear at himself.'

Also, while they are at the Pamplona fiesta, Hemingway, Ordonez and other friends make 'prisoners' of two young American women and keep them in thrall for a month. Hemingway writes that 'turning up with a couple of prisoners is sometimes ill-received in marital circles.' Mr. Castillo-Puche says that Hemingway's relations with all the young women in Spain that year were very chaste, but Hemingway's wife, Mary, was less than thrilled, especially when Hemingway took yet another 'prisoner,' a young Irish woman named Valery Danby-Smith, who, Mary says in her autobiography, 'became Ernest's secretary-handmaiden.' Miss Danby-Smith remained close to Hemingway until his death and eventually married his son Gregory.

Mary writes that in the new situation, a 'non-stop circus,' she became 'inaudible' to Hemingway. Soon she 'seemed also to be invisible, a worthless quality in a wife,' and so returned to Cuba and wrote Hemingway that she was leaving him. He cabled his respect for her views but disagreed profoundly with her decision to leave. 'Still love you' he added, and she stayed on until the end.

The pursuit of young women, the vicarious life as a matador, the preening before hordes of autograph-seekers in Pamplona, everything is monkey glandular to Hemingway: 'The wine was as good as when you were twenty-one, and the food as

marvelous as always. There were the same songs and good new ones. . . . The faces that were young once were old as mine but everyone remembered how we were.'

The self-portrait and the portrait-in-the-round from the other books emerge with great clarity. The *mano a mano* is also a story made to order for the dying man's need not to die. He creates Ordonez as an immortal, for isn't that the status of all the very best dead people?

Hemingway went to Spain searching for youth and found mortality and madness. But what is clear is that this story, these sentences and paragraphs, however truncated from the original, are not the work of a lunatic, and could not have been written by anyone except Hemingway or his spirit. If this work had been publishable, or even conceivable, at this length and with this quality during his lifetime, he might not have shot himself. But that's not how it was.

It is only over Hemingway's dead body that this book could have come to be. And I think it very clever of Hemingway's spirit to relent about the editing and come back to Scribner's to tell the folks there how to prepare the text.