

Bull In The Afternoon

Review of Death In The Afternoon

**by Max Eastman in the
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THERE are gorgeous pages in Ernest Hemingway's book about bullfights — big humor and reckless straight talk of what things are, genuinely heavy ferocity against prattle of what they are not. Hemingway is a full-sized man hewing his way with flying strokes of the poet's broad axe which I greatly admire. Nevertheless, there is an unconscionable quantity of bull — to put it as decorously as possible — poured and plastered all over what he writes about bullfights. By bull I mean juvenile romantic gushing and sentimentalizing of simple facts.

For example, it is well known and fairly obvious that bulls do not run and gallop about the pasture; they stand solid 'dominating the landscape with their confidence' as Hemingway brilliantly says. Therefore when they have dashed about the ring some minutes, tossed a few horses, repeatedly charged and attempted to gore a man and thrown their heads off because he turned out to be a rag, they soon get winded and their tongues hang out and they pant.

Certain bulls, however, for reasons more or less accidental, go through the ordeal in a small area without much running and therefore get tired in the muscles before they get winded. These bulls do not hang their tongues out and pant. This plain fact, which would be obvious to anybody without smoke in his eyes, is romanticized by Hemingway to mean that some bulls are so 'brave' that they will never let their tongues out, but hold their mouths 'tight shut to keep the blood in' even after they are stabbed to death and until they drop.

This is not juvenile romanticism, it is child's fairy-story writing. And yet Hemingway asks us to believe that what drew him to bullfights was the desire to learn to put down 'what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced.'

In pursuit of this rigorous aim he informs us that bullfights are 'so well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual that a person feeling the whole tragedy cannot separate the minor comic-tragedy of the horse so as to feel it emotionally.' And he generalizes: 'The aficionado, or lover of the bullfight, may be 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.' Which is just the kind of sentimental poppycock most regularly dished out by those Art nannies and pale-eyed professors of poetry whom Hemingway above all men despises.

Hemingway himself makes plain all through his book that the performance itself is not an artistic tragedy as often as one time out of a hundred. When it is, there is about one man out of a thousand in the grandstand who would know what you were talking

about if you started in on ‘the whole tragedy’ as opposed to the ‘minor comic-tragedy of the horse.’ The aficionado, or bullfight fan, is the Spanish equivalent of the American baseball fan. He reacts the same way to the same kind of things. If you could get the authorization to put on a bullfight in the Yankee Stadium, you would see approximately the same crowd there that you do now, and they would behave, after a little instruction from our star reporters and radio announcers, just about the way the Spanish crowd behaves. And they would not be — ‘broadly’ — the kind of people, if there are such people, who can see an infuriated bull charge across a bull ring, ram his horns into the private end of a horse’s belly and rip him clear up to the ribs, lifting and tossing his rider bodily in the air and over against the fence with the same motion, and keep their attention so occupied with the ‘whole tragedy’ that they cannot ‘separate’ this enough to ‘feel it emotionally.’ Bullfights are not wholly bad, but sentimentalizing over them in the name of art-form and ritual is.

Whatever art may be, a bullfight is not art in exactly that particular which exempts art from those rules of decent conduct which make life possible and civilization a hope — namely, that its representations are not real. A bullfight — foolishly so called by the English for it does not except for a moment resemble a fight — is real life. It is men tormenting and killing a bull; it is a bull being tormented and killed.

And if it is not ‘art’ in a sense to justify Hemingway’s indiscriminating recourse to that notion, still less is it ‘tragedy’ in a sense to sustain the elevated emotions which he hopes to pump over it with this portentous term.

Suppose that you attend a bullfight with your eyes and emotional receptors recklessly wide open, as a poet should. What do you see to admire and what to despise? Men moving in the risk of wounds and death with skill, grace, suavity and courage. That is something to admire — and the wild free fighting force of the animal as he charges into the arena, a sight so thrilling that words fail utterly. They fail Hemingway. Until Christians thought up the sickly idea of worshipping a lamb, this noble creature symbolized the beauty of divine power in a good half of the great religions of the earth.

Here, then, are two things to admire and they command admiration; they command sympathy. And then you see these admirable brave men begin to take down this noble creature and reduce him to a state where they can successfully run in and knife him, by a means which would be described in any other situation under the sun as a series of dirty tricks, these tricks being made possible by his well known and all too obvious stupidity — the limitations of his vision and rigidity of his instincts — this stupidity being further assured by breeding, by keeping him in a dim light before the running and by never giving him a second chance in the ring.

You see this beautiful creature, whom you admire because he is so gorgeously equipped with power for wild life and despise for his stupidity, trapped in a ring where his power is nothing, and you see him put forth his utmost in vain to escape death at the hands of these spryer and more flexible monkeys, whose courage you admire and whose mean use of their wit you despise. You see him baffled, bewildered, insane with fright, fury and physical agony, jabbed, stabbed, haunted, hounded, steadily brought dreadfully

down from his beauty of power, until he stands horribly torpid, sinking leadlike into his tracks, lacking the mere strength of muscle to lift his vast head, panting, gasping, gurgling, his mouth too little and the tiny black tongue hanging out too far to give him breath, and faint falsetto cries of anguish, altogether lost-babylike now and not bulllike, coming out of him, and you see one of these triumphant monkeys strike a theatrical pose, and dash in swiftly and deftly — yes, while there is still danger, still a staggering thrust left in the too heavy horns — and they have invented statistics, moreover, and know exactly how much and how little danger there is — dash in swiftly and deftly and plunge a sword into the very point where they accurately know — for they have also invented anatomy, these wonderful monkeys — that they will end that powerful and noble thing forever.

That is what a bullfight is, and that is all it is. To drag in notions of honor and glory here, and take them seriously, is ungrown-up enough and rather sophomoric. But to pump words over it like tragedy and dramatic conflict is mere romantic nonsense and self-deception crying to heaven. It is not tragic to die in a trap because although beautiful you are stupid; it is not tragic to play mean tricks on a beautiful thing that is stupid, and stab it when its power is gone. It is the exact opposite of tragedy in every high meaning that has ever been given to that word. It is killing made meaner, death more ignoble, bloodshed more merely shocking than it has need to be.

Fortunately it is no great trick to close one's receptors in a certain direction, to deaden sympathies that are unfruitful. We all go through life with these emotional blinders on; we could not go through otherwise. I remember an anxious mother in fits of anxiety because her husband had taken their infant son into one of those sidewalk horror exhibitions — it was an illuminated view of a 'famous painting of Nero throwing Christians to the lions.'

'George, George, how could you subject Bobby's tender little growing soul to that shocking experience? What did he do? What did he say?'

'He said, 'Oh, Papa, there's one poor lion hasn't got any Christian!''

This being the nature of the human infant, it is obvious that if you grow up in a society which does not extend sympathy to bulls in the bull ring, barring some heightened consciousness or gift of reflection in you amounting to an eccentricity, you will not do so either. For this reason the idea that bullfights prove Spaniards to be cruel, or as Havelock Ellis says, 'indifferent to pain both in themselves and others,' seems to me — with all respect to that eminent authority — the veriest nonsense. The appetites to which bullfighting appeals are a universal human inheritance, and if its survival in Spain must have some explanation other than cultural accident, I should associate it with the almost feminine gentleness of character to be felt in that country which seems to have need of this stoical over-protest of courage without mercy. At any rate, we expect an American poet who goes down there to see more and not less than a Spanish adolescent, whose one-sided obtundity in this matter is as inevitable as the misshapen callous on the bottom of any man's foot.

Why then does our iron advocate of straight talk about what things are, our full-sized man, our ferocious realist, go blind and wrap himself up in clouds of juvenile romanticism the moment he crosses the border on his way to a Spanish bullfight? It is of course a commonplace that Hemingway lacks the serene confidence that he is a full-sized man. Most of us too delicately organized babies who grow up to be artists suffer at times from that small inward doubt. But some circumstance seems to have laid upon Hemingway a continual sense of the obligation to put forth evidences of red-blooded masculinity. It must be made obvious not only in the swing of the big shoulders and the clothes he puts on, but in the stride of his prose style and the emotions he permits to come to the surface there. This trait of his character has been strong enough to form the nucleus of a new flavor in English literature, and it has moreover begotten a veritable school of fiction-writers — a literary style, you might say, of wearing false hair on the chest — but, nevertheless, I think it is inadequate to explain the ecstatic adulation with which Hemingway approaches everything connected with the killing of bulls in the bull ring.

He says that he went to see these spectacles because he was trying to learn how to write, and he wanted something ‘simple’ to write about; violent death, he thought, was one of the simplest things; he had seen a great deal of violent death in the War, but the War being over and he still learning to write, it seemed necessary to see some more. I do not think you can call it psychoanalysis to remark that the only simple thing here is Ernest Hemingway. A man writes about — and travels over the earth to see — what he likes to dwell on. Moreover, it is not death Hemingway writes about or travels to see, but killing. Nobody above fourteen years old will contend that he has got into his book that ‘feeling of life and death’ which he says he was working for. He has got into it an enthusiasm for killing — for courage and dominating and killing.

Hemingway cannot feel — he cannot even see — the hero of his ‘tragedy’ staggering toward death in blood loss and bewilderment. He withdraws automatically from any participation in that central fact. He did once feel, he tells us, the surprise of pain which makes the animal toss awkwardly like a great inflexible box when the banderillas are jabbed into his withers, but this live feeling vanished instantly and by an extraordinary magic the moment he learned that the bull is more and not less dangerous after he has been ‘slowed’ in this way, and will now make better aimed, because more desperate, efforts to defend his life. After learning that, Hemingway felt ‘no more sympathy’ for the bull ‘than for a canvas or the marble a sculptor cuts or the dry powder snow your skis cut through.’ Which is a clear statement — is it not? — of indifference to ‘the feeling of life and death,’ and total preoccupation with the art of courageous killing.

A like numbness of imagination afflicts this poet when the life and death of the matador is in question. The climax of his enterprise of learning how to write, at least the last mention of it, occurs on page 20, where after seeing a matador gored by a bull, he wakes in the night and tries to remember ‘what it was that seemed just out of my remembering and that was the thing that I had really seen and, finally, remembering all around it, I got it. When he stood up, his face white and dirty and the silk of his breeches

opened from waist to knee, it was the dirtiness of the rented breeches, the dirtiness of his slit underwear and the clean, clean, unbearably clean whiteness of the thigh bone that I had seen, and it was that which was important.' Is the clean whiteness of a man's thigh bone the 'important' thing to a poet working for the feeling of life and death, or is it merely the most shocking thing, and therefore the most sought after by an ecstatic in the rapture of killing?

'Do you know the sin it would be,' he says, 'to ruffle the arrangement of the feathers on a hawk's neck if they could never be replaced as they were? Well, that would be the sin it would be to kill El Gallo.' And we turn the page with a shudder for El Gallo.

It seems, then, that our ferocious realist is so romantic about bullfights, and so blind to much of what they 'actually are,' because he is enraptured 'with courageous killing. He is athirst after this quality of act and emotion with that high-fevered thirst of the saint after the blood of the living God, so that little else can open its way into his eyes or down to his heartstrings. He is himself, moreover, courageous enough — and with a courage rarer than that of toreros — to state plainly that he loves killing, and try to state why. It is because killing makes him feel triumphant over death.

'Killing cleanly and in a way which gives you esthetic pride and pleasure,' he says, 'has always been one of the greatest enjoyments of a part of the human race. ... One of its greatest pleasures ... is the feeling of rebellion against death which comes from its administering. Once you accept the rule of death thou shalt not kill is an easily and a naturally obeyed commandment. But when a man is still in rebellion against death he has pleasure in taking to himself one of the godlike attributes; that of giving it. This is one of the most profound feelings in those men who enjoy killing.'

Hemingway is quite right about the pleasure derived by a part of our race, and, in imagination, indeed, by all of it, from killing. One need only read the Old Testament to see how easy it was for our most pious ancestors in morality to cut a whole people out of the tiny circle of their tribal sympathy like the ring of light round a campfire, and enjoy with free hearts the delight of slaughtering them 'so that there was none left in that city, man, woman or child.' And one need only remark the popularity of murder stories — or of Hemingway's own book so gorgeously full of horse's blood and bull's blood, and matador's blood, and even the blood of 'six carefully selected Christs' crucified in his riotous imagination to make a holiday for his readers, in order to see that this little-satisfied thirst is well nigh universal.

Had men not enjoyed killing, they would not be here, and the bulls would be doing it all. That is a significant fact. But nevertheless the important part of the killing has been done, and the present tendency is to suppress, to sublimate in representative art, even in some measure to breed out this dangerous taste. For this we have the authority of Gene Tunney, a writer who stands at the opposite pole from Hemingway, having abundantly established his prowess in action, and in literature therefore being somewhat concerned, strangely enough, to establish his sensibility. Speaking in his biography of the 'killer-instinct boys,' he remarks that 'the higher in human development one goes, the more

controlled one finds this reaction.' And if that is true in the prize ring, it is more certainly true among poets and artists and sensitive young men generally.

It is so true that the nervous horror of these young men, and their mental and moral sickness, after forcing themselves through the insensate butchery of the World War, may be said almost to have created an epoch in our literature. One by one they have recovered their tongues and stood up during these fifteen years, those stricken poets, and confessed that they were devastated and broken clear down and shattered by that forced discipline in the art of wholesale killing — those have who were not too shattered to speak. And their speech with the silence of the others is the true aftermath in poetry of the Great War — not the priggish trivialities of the Cult of Unintelligibility, not the cheap moral of decorum (that shallow cult so admirably exterminated root and branch by Ernest Hemingway in a paragraph of this book), not the new Bohemianism of the synthetic-gin period, not the poetry of the new scientific hope in Russia, for it has had no poetry — but the confession in language of blood and tears of the horror unendurable to vividly living nerves of the combination of civilized life with barbaric slaughter.

Will it be too much like a clinic if I point out that Ernest Hemingway is one of the most sensitive and vivid-living of these poets, one of the most passionately intolerant, too, of priggery and parlor triviality and old maids' morals and empty skulls hiding in unintelligibility? I am not strong for literary psychoanalysis, but I must record a guess rising toward the middle of his book and growing to conviction in the end, that 'Death in the Afternoon' belongs also among those confessions of horror which are the true poetry and the only great poetry of this generation. It does not matter much whether Ernest Hemingway knows this fact or not. We may hope he will find out, for a man cannot grow to his height without self-knowledge. But the important thing is for us to know.

We took this young man with his sensitive genius for experience, for living all the qualities of life and finding a balance among them — and with that too obvious fear in him of proving inadequate — and we shoved him into our pit of slaughter, and told him to be courageous about killing. And we thought he would come out weeping and jittering. Well, he came out roaring for blood, shouting to the skies the joy of killing, the 'religious ecstasy' of killing — and most pathetic, most pitiable, killing as a protest against death.