

# Hemingway Now Writes of Bull-Fighting as an Art

## Review of *Death In The Afternoon* in the *New York Times*, Sept 25, 1932.

THE emergence of Mr. Hemingway as an authority on bull-fighting should not be a surprise to any one who has read the passages in 'The Sun Also Rises' which touch upon that peculiarly Latin sport. That he is an authority may be conceded, even by those who have never seen a matador, not only from Mr. Hemingway's statement that he has seen fifteen hundred bulls killed on the field of honor and his acknowledgment of indebtedness to some 2,077 'books and pamphlets in Spanish dealing with or touching on tauromania', but from the internal evidence of the book itself.

One would say that Mr. Hemingway knows bull-fighting at least as well as the specialized sports writer in our own country knows baseball, football, racing or fighting. He knows it so well that on occasion only the introduction of an extremely singular old lady as the author's interlocutor, a few digressions on death, modern literature and sex life, joined with Mr. Hemingway's extremely masculine style of writing, save the reader from drowning in a flood of technicalities.

It may be asked why Mr. Hemingway should infer in American readers a sufficiently passionate interest in bull-fighting to induce them to buy and read a book of 517 pages on the subject. But this would be to put the cart before the horse — or letting the bull wave a red cloth at the matador instead of vice versa. Bull-fighting, one infers, became a hobby with Mr. Hemingway because of the light it throws on Spain, on human nature and on life and death. In a sense this book is Mr. Hemingway's book on 'Virgin Spain'. The reference is pertinent because, as he explains in an extremely candid bit of analysis, Mr. Hemingway does not particularly like that style of writing for which his most flattering epithet is 'bedside mysticism.' But the author's fundamental motive is perhaps this:

'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.'

In another passage Mr. Hemingway points out that one of the essentials if a country is to love bull-fights is 'that the people must have an interest in death.' The people of Castile, he finds, have such an interest in death, 'and when they can see it being given, avoided, refused and accepted in the afternoon for a nominal

price of admission they pay their money and go to the bull-ring.’ The English and French, on the other hand, ‘live for life’ and consequently don’t especially care for bull-fights. Here Mr. Hemingway seems to be getting mystical on his own account, but at least it is not ‘bedside mysticism.’

Bull-fighting always means death for the bull, for if he is not killed in the arena during the allotted time he is killed outside. It means death for horses — a death in which Mr. Hemingway says there is sometimes an element of the comic — if they are not protected by mattresses. It sometimes means death for the matador, it means in almost every case that he will sooner or later be grievously wounded, and if he is a good matador it means that he must go to the very brink of death every time he puts on a performance. Moreover, it means that a good matador must actually enjoy killing and that the spectators must be able to derive an emotional kick from the operation. As Mr. Hemingway puts it:

‘He [the matador] must have a spiritual enjoyment of the moment of killing. Killing cleanly and in a way which gives you esthetic pleasure and pride has always been one of the greatest enjoyments of a part of the human race.

Once you accept the rule of death thou shalt not kill is an easily and 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. These things are done in pride and pride, of course, is a Christian sin and a pagan virtue. But it is pride which makes the bull-fight and true enjoyment of killing which makes the great matador.’

The ‘true enjoyment’ of the fan or ‘aficionado’ is in the bravery or ‘nobility’ of the bull and in the skill and bravery of the matador. At least these are the points upon which Mr. Hemingway dwells. The ‘aficionado’ does not want to see a good matador killed, though he may be indifferent to the wounding of a bad matador, or even try to damage him a little by hurling bottles and other hard objects at him as he leaves the ring. But it is hard to believe that those to whom death is of profound interest may not sometimes hope that if a matador is to be killed by a bull they may be there to see it. And Mr. Hemingway does make it clear that the nearer the matador comes to the horns at the supreme moment the better liked his performance is.

The bull ring is not the place for skill without risk. As a confirmed bull-fight fan Mr. Hemingway is disgusted with a matador who kills by a trick stroke ‘bulls that he is supposed to expose his body to in killing with the sword’. If the finishing thrust is properly put in, the matador must always be in such a position that if a gust of wind comes at the wrong time or if the bull suddenly raises his head the man will be gored. If no part of the spectators feels any morbid expectation at such crises a Spanish assemblage is different from other gatherings.

But bull-fighting, though as Mr. Hemingway says, 'a decadent art in every way', is an art, indeed, 'if it were permanent it could be one of the major arts'. It does not seem absurd to Mr. Hemingway to compare it with sculpture and painting, or to set Joselito and Belmonte side by side with Velasquez and Goya, Cervantes and Lope de Vega, Shakespeare and Marlow. Even such refined elements as the line of the matador's body at the critical instant or the 'composition' of bull and man enter into the intelligent 'aficionado's' enjoyment. Bull-fighting is thus presented as an art heightened by the presence of death and, if the spectator can project himself into the matador's place, in the terror of death. For even the best matadors have their moments of fear — even their days and seasons of fear.

The book is thus not only a careful, even a meticulous explanation of the way bull-fighting is done, but is also a picturing of the spirit in which it is done and seen. One must add to this observation, however, that the book goes far beyond these relatively simple phases in being representative of an important literary movement as typified in Mr. Hemingway. It would be impossible to discuss it with complete adequacy without also discussing both Mr. Hemingway and his movement; that is to say, without asking, not only whether this book is good Hemingway but whether Mr. Hemingway himself is good.

It may be said flatly that the famous Hemingway style is neither so clear nor so forceful in most passages of 'Death in the Afternoon' as it is in his novels and short stories. In this book Mr. Hemingway is guilty of the grievous sin of writing sentences which have to be read two or three times before the meaning is clear. He enters, indeed, into a stylistic phase which corresponds, for his method, to the later stages of Henry James.

The fact that a sentence is usually good Anglo-Saxon, with anything but a shrinking from calling a spade a spade, does not make it a clear sentence if one cannot easily distinguish the subordinate verbs from the principal one. And when Mr. Hemingway throws into one chapter, in a kind of reminiscent emotional jag, all the things about Spain and bygone youth that he could not get into the rest of the book, the reader feels like a chameleon on a patchwork quilt. This is not art in the sense in which the final pages of 'A Farewell to Arms' were art— it is fireworks.

On certain passages which in former days would have been called vulgar or even obscene it is difficult to pass judgment. One does not know whether they are wholly sincere or whether, on the other hand, Mr. Hemingway is trying to startle the little handful of literates who are still capable of being startled. As to the root philosophy that only death and procreation, and subjects related to them, are 'simple' and 'fundamental', no one reviewer can contribute much to that problem. On the whole it may be said that Mr. Hemingway's reactions to most subjects, whether proscribed ones or not, are at least vigorous and healthy. He is no more vulgar than life and shows as much good taste as death.

The book will certainly find its place on the shelves of Hemingway addicts. One's guess is that it will be less successful than the novels in making new Hemingway addicts. Action and conversation, as the author himself suggests, are his best weapons. To the degree that he dilutes them with philosophy and exposition he weakens himself.