

## The Dangerous Summer

by Michiko Kakutani

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IT'S IMMEDIATELY clear why bullfighting exerted such a visceral hold on Ernest Hemingway's imagination. Bloody yet magisterial, the sport dramatized his own obsessions with violence and death, and it also struck him as one of the ultimate tests of a man's ability to sustain 'grace under pressure'. Like big game hunting, boxing and combat, bullfighting seemed to personify the aggressively masculine values that he'd championed in his fiction and his life, and he came to regard it as an art – the art of 'killing cleanly', with courage and with style.

'Any man can face death,' he wrote in 'The Dangerous Summer,' 'but to bring it as close as possible while performing certain classic movements and do this again and again and again and then deal it out yourself with a sword to an animal weighing half a ton which you love is more complicated than just facing death. It is facing your performance as a creative artist each day and your necessity to function as a skillful killer.'

Hemingway, of course, had already written a big, detailed chronicle of bullfighting, published back in 1932 as 'Death in the Afternoon,' and in 1959 Life magazine asked him to return to Spain, return to the scene of so many of his youthful exploits, and cover a spectacular *mano a mano* duel between two matadors – Antonio Ordóñez and his brother-in-law, Luis Miguel Dominguín. Although the assignment was for a 10,000-word article, Hemingway turned in a rough draft of 120,000 words – out of that sprawling manuscript were edited the Life piece and this current volume. According to an obtuse and oddly self-serving introduction by James Michener (who spends several pages reminiscing about how he once 'stuck his neck out' by vouching for the aging Hemingway's talent), the more technical passages about bullfighting were edited out, leaving 'an honest rendering of what was best in this massive affair'.

Mr. Michener himself admits to feeling that Hemingway 'tried to hang far too much on the slender, esoteric thread of one series of bullfights', and he strains to find reasons to justify this book: he quotes a punctuation-less passage that, he says, 'reminds us of the sparse way [Hemingway] worked and of his refusal to use commas,' and argues that 'these pages are instructive regarding a minor brouhaha that involved his friend A. E. Hotchner.' Certainly this discursive, flaccid volume offers the reader little else – except an unnecessary and unflattering portrait of Hemingway in decline, his masculine esthetic hardening into macho posturing; his fine, spare use of language dwindling into empty mannerism.

What Hemingway did in the 1920s was to invent a new style of writing, a style whose austerity and precision implied a moral outlook, a way of looking at the postwar world, as much as a narrative strategy. Unfortunately, however, as the author's own confidences were

shaken, as he became increasingly trapped within the armor of his public image – ‘Papa Hemingway,’ great white hunter, confidant of generals and darling of the gossip columns – only an attitude and the outward remnants of a technique remained. As a result, the writing began to sound synthetic – *Across the River and Into the Trees* reads like a parody of the early Hemingway; and *The Old Man and the Sea*, while deftly controlled, has a reductive, vestigial feel to it, as though the author were just going through the motions of writing something remembered dimly from long ago.

Although a few of the action sequences in *The Dangerous Summer* – particularly those describing the fierce, balletic contest that took place in Malaga – demonstrate Hemingway’s old gift for narrative, vast stretches of this book are laid down in painful pastiches of the writer’s famous style. ‘Mary had a really bad cold,’ he writes of his wife. ‘She tried to get rid of it but the *feria* had been too mixed up and the hours too crazy and the fights starting so late had given the small wind that comes down from the Sierras that they say will kill a man but not blow out a candle too many chances at her.’ He almost invariably describes the matadors as brave and good and courageous; the bulls, as either fast and fine, or slow and cowardly. There are endless descriptions of food and drink and the weather; and dashed-off sketches of the landscape that have none of the immediacy of similar passages in *Death in the Afternoon*.

Even more embarrassing are the sections where Hemingway gives vent to the bullying, bigoted side of his nature. He puts women in their place – ‘It’s a man’s fiesta and women at it make trouble.’ He makes demeaning ethnic cracks – ‘If you want to travel gaily, and I do, travel with good Italians.’ And he glamorizes dumb, dangerous games – ‘At the party Antonio held cigarettes in his mouth for me to shoot the ashes off.’

The objectivity that made Hemingway’s early writing so lucid is gone; indeed the narrative is thoroughly skewed by his wilful siding with Ordóñez over Dominguín. Apparently Hemingway himself worried that he’d been unfair to Dominguín – Carlos Baker notes in his biography that he ‘regretted having made ‘such a mess’ of the story – and he would have, undoubtedly, opposed publishing *The Dangerous Summer* as a book. Indeed the reader, too, must question the decision, on the part of his estate and his publishers, to issue a volume that does little but underline, again, the degree to which Hemingway’s talent and psyche had come unraveled.