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page 121

-the first of three pages-
Blood and Sand, and Art

DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON. By ERNEST HEMINGWAY. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1932. \$3.50.

THIS book will meet with three kinds of reviewers, those who dislike bullfighting, those who like it, and those who know nothing about it; and the reviews will be consequently conditioned. To expose the conditioning factors of the present review, let me say at the outset that I like bullfighting to the point of loving it when it is good, and that I know a little about it. I have seen Marcial Lalanda, "the most complete and masterly fighter in bullfighting today," during the seasons of 1929 and 1930, which Hemingway marks as the first of his great years; and Nicanor Villalta when he was at his best, or at least what I thought must be his best, and at his worst; and Chicuelo, when both cowardly and inspired; and Felix Rodriguez, before he became ill; and Nino de la Palma, and Cagancho, and Bejarano, and Manolo Bienvenida, and Algabeno; and Sidney Franklin, whose cape work struck me, even when I was only guessing at what Hemingway has now told me, as the perfection of classical restraint and beauty. And—with "Death in the Afternoon" before me to furnish reminders and hints on almost every page—I remember the individual performances of these men, their tricks of style and technique, their weakness and their strength, their successes and failures, as the amateur of symphony concerts remembers the performances of various conductors.

But, let me repeat, my practical experience has been very limited,—only a few men, killing a few bulls in a few ways; whereas Hemingway has, with technical knowledge increasing through the years, watched more than fifteen hundred bulls killed (and too many men killed also) in all the ways at the command of contemporary fighters. Besides, he has lived with bullfighters at work and at play, and watched them die in the infirmary; he has got at the thoughts behind the foreheads of managers, breeders, horse contractors, professional bullfight critics, and sword handlers; he has visited the great farms on which the fighting bulls are bred, seen them branded, watched them being tested at the age of two, witnessed their fights among themselves, and followed their progress in the ring; he has tried his hand at amateur fights, when the horns were padded, and discovered



ERNEST HEMINGWAY

that he "was too old, too heavy, and too awkward," and that his "figure was the wrong shape, being thick in all the places where it should be lithe." In short, his knowledge of the art has grown to match his instinctive love of it; and he has written a book in which technical explanations burn with emotion because of the passion that is mated with the science. And I, having read this book with close attention and continuous excitement, must testify that of the little I now know about bullfighting ten per cent is due to personal experience, and ninety per cent to "Death in the Afternoon," which has clarified the significance of that experience, and transformed into scientific and esthetic certainties many intuitions.

So I take it that, in one case at least, this book has precisely performed half of its intended function: to explain to the person who has seen bullfighting, without really knowing much about it, just what it is that he has seen. The other half, of course, is to prepare those who have never seen a bullfight for their first encounter with the art. This half is the more difficult; just how difficult Hemingway himself admits when he reaches his seventh chapter:

There are two sorts of guide books; those that are read before and those that are to be read after and the ones that are to be read after the fact are bound to be incomprehensible to a certain extent before; if the fact is of enough importance in itself. 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, or at least impossible to attempt

-the second of three pages-

to make more than one version of at a time on paper, it always being 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 we are talking about. So from now on it is inferred that you have been to the bullfight.

But, difficult or not, Hemingway has done his best to write a book that will prove at least intelligible to the reader who has not seen a bullfight, that will prepare him for the spectacle and properly orientate his thinking; a book that will truly serve as an emotional and technical introduction to its subject. And he has so written it that, if it is intelligible before, it is nothing less than a revelation afterward. He has written of the art in all its aspects, from every point of view; historical, critical, emotional, and esthetic. He has revealed its glory and its baseness; he has pointed to the heights which the art can reach, and uncovered the depths to which, because it is a commercial art, it descends. He has explained the ways in which bulls are bred and selected; the tricks of breeders who would breed their animals down in size, and length of horn, and courage, for the convenience of the fighters. He has exposed the wiles of the horse contractor bargaining with the picador, and the corruption of the peone who leads wounded horses from the ring, that they may be sewn up to fight again, instead of killing them when he should. He has explained the formal divisions of the bullfight, and the significance and importance of each: the first act with the picadors, the second act with the planting of the banderillas or darts, and the third act of death, which ends with the actual killing that the Spaniards call "the moment of truth." He has described all the customs, costumes, weapons, and living factors in the spectacle; he has told us how to distinguish the really brave bull from the pawing, snorting animal that only appears so; how to distinguish between true danger, and danger that is faked by the fighter for the benefit of his more ignorant public; how to tell when the picador (the man on horseback armed with the spiked pole) is doing his work well, and when he is doing it ill; how to estimate the work done by the banderillero (who places the darts); how to evaluate the work with the muleta (the scarlet cloth which the matador uses as a lure in the last act, and with which he

should dominate the bull, and place him in position for the kill), differentiating between the difficulty of its use in the right or the left hand; how to judge the final work with the sword, honest or faked, brilliant or merely competent or wretched. And these things he does in a book written entirely to his own liking (he is permitted to say things that no English or American publisher has let an author say before), stuffed with savage wit and enlivened by amusing digressions, and couched in a prose that must be called perfect because it states with absolute precision what it is meant to state, explains what it is meant to explain beyond possibility of misunderstanding, and communicates to the reader the emotion with which it is so heavily charged.

Perhaps a little parenthetical evidence direct from the text, should be presented at this point. From the fifty references I have jotted down, I choose one at random as an example of Hemingway's mastery of technical explanation:

The greatest pass with the muleta, the most dangerous to make and the most beautiful to see is the natural. In this the man faces the bull with the muleta held in his left hand, the sword in his right, the left arm hanging naturally at his side, the scarlet cloth dropping in a fold over the stick that supports it and which the man holds as you see in the picture. The man walks toward the bull and cites [challenges his attention to provoke a charge] with the muleta and as he charges the man simply sways with the charge, swinging his left arm ahead of the bull's horns, the man's body following the curve of the charge, the bull's horns opposite his body. the man's feet still, he slowly swings his arm holding the cloth ahead of the bull and pivots, making a turn of a quarter-circle with the bull. If the bull stops the man may cite him again and describe another quarter of a circle with him, and again, and again, and again. I have seen it done six successive times; the man seeming to hold the bull with the muleta as though by magic. If the bull instead of stopping with the charge, and what stops him is a final flick the man gives the lowest end of the cloth at the end of each pass, and the great twist that has been given his spinal column through the curve the matador has forced him to describe in bending him around, turns and recharges, the man may get rid of him by a *pase de pecho*, or pass past the chest. This is the reverse of the *pase natural*. Instead of the bull coming from in front and the man moving the muleta slowly before his charge, in the *pase de pecho* the bull, having turned, comes

-the last of three pages-

from behind or from the side, and the man swings the muleta forward, lets the bull go past the man's chest, and sends him away with the sweep of the folds of scarlet cloth. The chest pass is the most impressive when it completes a series of naturals or when it is forced by an unexpected return and charge of the bull and is used by the man to save himself rather than as a planned manoeuvre. The ability to execute a series of naturals and then to finish them off with the chest pass mark a real bull-fighter.

This, I submit, is very clear and very fine writing; and Hemingway describes every phase of the bullfight, from the first trailing of the first cape as the bull enters the arena to the final death thrust, in prose of the same quality. As for the emotion of which I have spoken, any reader who ruffles a few pages will encounter it; but if he is in a hurry for samples he may turn to the death of Gitanillo on page 218, or to the death of Todo on page 239.

Throughout this review I have spoken steadily of bullfighting as an art, and the passage quoted is that of an art critic writing of the technique of an art. This is the first point which must be driven home to the Anglo-Saxon reader: that bullfighting is not a contest, and only secondarily a sport, but an art. It is hard to persuade him of this, for the vulgar notion of bullfighting is that it is a contest between a man and a bull to see which will emerge from the ring alive, and that it is a very unfair contest because a Joselito kills fifteen hundred bulls, while it takes that number of bulls finally to kill one Joselito. And this vulgar notion is completely wrong. The man's object is not merely to kill the bull, but to kill him in a certain way, in a very beautiful way (sculpturally speaking) which has become formalized by tradition and convention, and in the most exciting way because it is precisely the way which compels the man to expose himself to the greatest danger. The perfect bullfight is the one which combines the maximum of daring, beauty, and danger on the man's part, with the maximum of bravery, endurance, speed, and directness on the bull's part. This ideal is seldom realized, and the difference between a good fight and a bad one is the difference between a masterpiece and a daub, but unless the bullfighter does his best to approximate this ideal he will be driven from the ring with shrieks and catcalls or pelted from it with cushions and other solid but throwable objects. All these things, however, are said perfectly, patiently, and at length

in Hemingway's book; and no reader can put down that book ignorant of the fact that bullfighting is a tragic art, operating upon the initiated spectators with the cathartic power of tragedy, a tragedy not only beautiful at its best, but one which communicates, at its highest moment, a sense of immortality in the very presence of death.

Of this book I have said only a fraction of what I wished to say, and said it less well than I would have liked. I have not mentioned the many remarkable photographs, admirably chosen, wisely grouped, and captioned with as much wit as expert knowledge; nor the very useful glossary of Spanish words and terms used in bullfighting, into which sardonic wit also enters; nor the exceedingly amusing group of case histories illustrating various initial reactions to bullfighting, which the author has compiled; nor a brief and just estimate of the American Sidney Franklin, as fighter and artist. Nor have I mentioned "The Old Lady," invented on page 64, and thrown out of the book (much to my regret) on page 190, with whom Hemingway conducts the most sprightly, various, informative, and scandalous conversations. Nor have I referred to his startling frankness in treating the personalities, and professional characteristics, of living bullfighters. Indeed, looking back, I see that I have barely hinted at the fun which "Death in the Afternoon" affords. It was probably a mistake. But the fun is incidental to the serious work of a serious literary artist; it is the comic relief to a genuine work of artistic criticism; the froth on the surface of a book that will confirm many readers in their belief that Ernest Hemingway, in the handling of words as an interpretation of life, is not a brilliant and ephemeral novillero, but a matador possessed of solid and even classic virtues.

