

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ruination of the Bulls?

George Wead · Thursday, September 29th, 2011

Barcelona ran its last bullfight the other day, and a shadow crept across my confidence. Does this mean bullfights won't last forever?

Let me explain. When I went to college in Texas, Ernest Hemingway was my god. He was alive then, and I had yet to learn that many Spaniards considered him a blowhard. What counted for me was that he wrote *Death in the Afternoon*, that 1932 testament to the *corrida de toros*. It was a revelation. I lived less than three hours from Mexico, so at every opportunity I went to use the tools I learned from Hemingway to study live bullfighting, not simply as spectacle, but as tragic art, where a human tries to create something beautiful out of truly raw, and deadly, material. I bored hell out of my friends.

I never lost my devotion to the bullfight, and since then I've spent time in Spanish arenas at far more impressive *corridas* than those border events. But I've never tried to convert anyone to my passion. After all, I have little interest in boxing, auto racing or bungee-jumping, so how can I expect anyone to find beauty in what looks like animal cruelty? I accepted the fact that spectators grasp a bullfight right away or never. And there was no shame in either position.

This philosophical approach was fine until bullfighting was banned in Barcelona. Animal-rights activists have swayed the Catalanian government and may win over all of Spain. Bullfighting could be mortally wounded.

Although Barcelona is not typical of the country, and politics always change, the bullfight that Hemingway extolled has long been compromised. Aficionados decry poorer bulls and horns shaved tender to make attacks less aggressive. Franco's fascist delight in the bullfight soured its reputation and perhaps fanned the post-Franco outcries that torture is not art. So should we imitate Basques and even some Californians, who stage bloodless *corridas*—right down to *velcro banderillas*?

All that misses the point of my dismay.

The Spanish activists seem to be lumping fighting bulls with the likes of sheep, goats and dairy cattle. That's cultural myopia. It's downright un-Spanish. A fighting bull is the epitome of natural power and beauty, bred to take on humans with all the single-mindedness of a tornado. What often baffles outsiders is that Spaniards treat this animal with adulation, even as they set up its destruction. This is cruel truth, and it shouldn't be dismissed as inhuman. There is something at

work here that easy labels can't clarify.

The bullfight has a cruel aesthetic purity. It reduces the wonder of all performance to an awful, primal simplicity. Every singer knows what it is like to confront melodic challenge armed only with two vibrating strips of skin. (My wife is a singer, and when she saw her first *corrida* she cried, "It's wonderful! It's a goddamned opera!") Comedians die when their sword-thrusts of wit miss disastrously. Dancers face inexorable space and gravity with fragile bones and sinews. All artists face little deaths to make beauty.

Prehistoric Iberia found a peculiar way to express humankind's mad grapples with an inexplicable world: a ritual left by worshippers of the sun and gladiators in coliseums. A man steps into a ring to face 1500 pounds of pure rage. The bull must be a worthy opponent. The man must not back away. Death stands between them to ennoble both. Real death. No metaphor, no aesthetic distance, no animated computer splash demolishing another.

Maybe that ritual has seen its day. Maybe we will ban its powerful intensity. But I wouldn't bet on it, anymore than I would dissuade anyone from abhorring the *corrida*. Those bulls have been running for a long time.

George Wead is a retired history professor.

Photo by Garner Simmons.

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 29th, 2011 at 4:33 am and is filed under [Fiction](#), [Discourse](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.