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## Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* and the Fear of Death in War

### **Introduction: *Death in the Afternoon* as Literary Education'**

For readers who have never gone to war and who were not raised on first-hand accounts of war, a literary Virgil can be a useful guide to the difficult questions posed by war. Borrowing from psychoanalysis, sociology, political theory, and other disciplines, a scholarly literature has sprung up to frame and analyze our experiences of war, mortality, trauma, and responsibility (e.g., Wyschogrod 1985; Confino, Betts, and Schumann 2008; Roper 2009).<sup>2</sup> Much of this literature follows a common assumption that we need new strategies to deal with a world of war and suffering that is radically new and unprecedented in scale and duration (Marwick and Emsley 2001). In response to accounts of total war and the “death-world” of the concentration camps of the Second World War, for instance, Edith Wyschogrod has called for a thoroughgoing re-interpretation of our basic concepts of self, temporality, and language. For Wyschogrod, it is the very formlessness of man-made mass-death that requires us to think differently about death in war. The change fundamentally disrupts the “authenticity paradigm” of the Western literary canon’s representation of death. In the old paradigm, a good man dies well, and the value of his individual life is shown in his glorious and honorable death (1985, 2-3). Lacking these guidelines, we must now “redraw” the boundary protecting the individual from a world of anonymized, mass-death (15).

Below, I argue that the world of mass death is not a new one, that Ernest Hemingway’s writings help us to understand the massively important human experience of the fear of dying and violent death, and that his non-fiction book, *Death in the Afternoon*, has a central place in carrying out this task. However, using

Hemingway's book in this way requires a radical reorientation of the scholarly reception of the text. Even sympathetic Hemingway scholars view *Death in the Afternoon* as a non-serious text. Experts on the bullfight like John McCormick and amateur critics like A.L. Kennedy take Hemingway to task for romanticizing the bullfight (McCormick 1998, xii, 240, 257; Kennedy 1999, 9). Others charge that Hemingway does not truly or authentically know the culture, language, and rituals that he lionizes (Herlihy-Mera 2012). Even or especially the most important literary critics of Hemingway's writings quickly distance themselves from the bullfight, which they characterize as a "blood-drunken" or "hysterical" celebration of violence (Baker 1963, 143; Young 1966, 97; also West 1944; Kinnamon 1959, 55).

While the recent essays collected in Miriam Mandel's *A Companion to Hemingway's Death in the Afternoon* do much to dispel the loosest among these criticisms, there is a factual basis to the criticism of the bullfight's cruelty—on first and perhaps second glance, it *is* a cruel display where as many as five horses can be killed in an afternoon—for mere sport, as Hemingway has a café waiter remark in *The Sun Also Rises* (1954, 201).<sup>3</sup> The aim of this essay is to recapture *Death in the Afternoon's* place in the movement from the experience to the understanding of violent death, and to explain why Hemingway views the bullfight as an educative ritual. More broadly, the essay shows how self-understanding can be achieved by restaging our experiences so as to create critical distance and space for reflection. It is offered to the reader, and especially to the veteran, in a spirit of intellectual modesty: the scholar's role is not to tell anyone what their experience was or what it means, but instead to show that Hemingway was preoccupied with questions about the authenticity paradigm and that he found a solution that is, in the reading adopted in this paper, as compelling or even more compelling than the one that he developed in his novels.

### **The Bullfight in Overview**

*Death in the Afternoon* invites the reader to "look at the bull and the bullfighter" (Brand, quoted in Sanders 2010, 79). What does the informed critics see when he watches a bullfight? When placed within diachronic context, one sees the birth of the bullfight as an aristocratic pastime: the *rejoneo* of the mounted man who fights a bull with a lance (Thompson 2010). One sees the transformation of this sport into a populist encounter between a bull and a man on foot—a "natural aristocrat" who is likely born poor and without education, but who can achieve fame and wealth by risking his life each Sunday (McCormick 1998, 192-9). As a commercial spectacle one can find all the failings of modern, capitalist society (Shubert 2010). As a cultural spectacle, one sees men whose sense of honor is either profound or exaggerated to the point of absurdity (Michener 1968, 61-2). The observer also finds woven into the fabric of the bullfight the Catholic Church, the remains

of feudalism, the cultural absence of revolution and enlightenment among the Spanish peasantry, and the absence of a middle class. It is within this dense context, Hemingway argues, that one sees the most important thing: death “given, avoided, refused, and accepted” within a tragic ritual that affirms human superiority to the given fact of our finitude.<sup>4</sup>

In no way should the following characterization of Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* diminish his admiration of bullfighting or impugn his literary reflections on courage. Far from joining the “academic victimization” of veterans of the Great War, the stance taken here is that Hemingway’s writings about the fear of death are humanizing and insightful rather than a flaw of character.<sup>5</sup> At the end of *Death in the Afternoon*, one has learned something real about death, and, if this interpretation is correct, reflected on war in ways that Hemingway could not while serving in it.

### **War and the Bullfight**

In his own judgment, Hemingway wrote stories that deal with war without directly mentioning it (Zuckert 1990, 176-7).<sup>6</sup> *Death in the Afternoon* itself, for instance, directly mentions war less than a dozen times, and then only in passing. Hemingway’s own experience of war was shaped as an ambulance driver in World War One, and by his wounding at Fossalta di Piave in Northern Italy. One can reconstruct through his personal letters the *type* of question that this wounding raised for Hemingway as a young man:

In first war (alleged World War) was really scared after wounded and very devout at the end. Fear of death. Belief in personal salvation or maybe just preservation through prayers for intercession of Our Lady and various saints that prayed to with almost tribal faith (Hemingway 1981, 592).

He confirms this impression in a letter of 23 March 1939: “In the war in Italy when I was a boy I had much fear. In Spain I had no fear after a couple of weeks and was very happy” (Hemingway 1981, 480). Part of this fear is simply fear of the pain of dying, as, for example, Hemingway has Harry say in the *Snows of Kilimanjaro*: he fears pain and hopes that the Lord will not send something he can’t bear (1995, 73). Another aspect of experiencing the fear of dying is the wrenching recognition of one’s own mortality. Thus, in his introduction to *Men at War*, discussed at length below, Hemingway reports that during the war he lost the “great illusion of immortality” that is characteristic of youth (1982, xiii-xiv), and gained recognition into human mortality, an insight that is repeated and underlined in his later fiction.<sup>7</sup>

The aim in bringing up remarks from private letters is to give examples of what I take to be a universal experience of struggling to reconcile ourselves with the experience of death. The book of short stories, *In Our Time*, is a nihilistic grouping of stories interspersed with vignettes of terrible war-time violence. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the Great War is presented as a source of physical and spiritual mutilation; the incapacity to love, both physically, as a result of Jake Barnes's war wound, and because of the death of Brett's true love during the war, sends all the protagonists into what is repeatedly called "hell," a condition bearing more resemblance to spiritual suffering than to one of physical discomfort (Hemingway 1954, 34-5, 38-9, 226; Schmigalle 2005). Despite Jake Barnes's desire to know how to live in it [life] (Hemingway 1954, 152), *The Sun Also Rises* argues that nobody ever knows anything (34-35)—except, notably, for the young bullfighter who "knows too damned much" to be scared (172). After having lived through the intensity of the war, nobody can feel that any action has any consequences, and Hemingway opines that this is true of any "action" (158), probably using the word "action" to imply a parallel with war-time action. The whole fiesta, he writes, is meaningless (228).

*Death in the Afternoon* is the first step towards a reflective rejection of the meaningless or absurdity of life and an attempt to re-establish moral order under the authenticity paradigm. The aim of the book is to establish rules of taste and judgment through which we can know "what is good and what is bad" (Hemingway 1960, 162). It accomplishes its aim by stimulating what art critic John Berger calls "ways of seeing." This new way of seeing is aided by seeing a bullfight under the correct conditions (a sunny day; an "average" fight or a *novillada* (novice's bullfight); an "undistinguished, honest performance" from seats half-way up the amphitheater) in order to see death up close and to come to an evaluation of the "meaning and end of the whole thing" (1960, 11, 18). The whole aim of *Death in the Afternoon* is to see the bullfight as an "integral whole" in which both suffering and killing comes to be accepted (278). Hemingway presents the progressive clarification of the meaning of violent death as a writer practicing how to observe and record. He writes that he wants to see up close "the actual things...that produced the emotion" (1). In the bullfight, he finds an encounter that isolates the phenomenon of violent death—"one of the simplest things of all and the most fundamental" (2). By starting with the experience of violence unclouded by one's own immersive participation in the action, and with one's sympathy partially displaced by watching a spectacle where the primary victims are animals, Hemingway begins the therapeutic process of dealing with his war injuries by *seeing* death, which he calls "the unescapable reality, the one thing any man may be sure of" (256). In the reading offered here, Hemingway's method can also be used to deal with any trauma that depends on reconsidering unexplained and misunderstood experience.

The therapeutic or philosophical value of seeing death up close and personal does not, of course, justify causing death and suffering. As Hemingway says at the beginning of *Death in the Afternoon*, he changed his appraisal of the bullfight from first thinking it was “simple and barbarous and cruel” to conclude that it is actually “very moral” (2). How this change occurs, and whether Hemingway was right to change his mind, is the misunderstood puzzle of *Death in the Afternoon*. It requires Hemingway to clear the ground of a few preconceptions concerning the bullfight. First of all, Hemingway argues that the bullfight is not a sport or game. “You,” Hemingway says, addressing the reader directly, assume that bullfighting is a sport and spectacle, but it is in fact a tragedy (1960, 22). Mere games, in contradistinction to tragedy, concern the lower stakes of victory and defeat, and for the players “the avoidance of death is replaced by the avoidance of defeat” (22). Games are also fair: part of the spirit of a game is that it is played on a level playing field, whereas the bull is not given a fair chance in the ritual. Games are less serious than war or bullfighting; however, even Hemingway hesitates directly to compare battle with a bullfight because the latter is a mere “commercial spectacle” (1154). But, despite the commercial elements of the bullfight explored by Hemingway and in the secondary literature (Shubert 1999), the greater part of Hemingway’s argument characterizes the bullfight as something greater than that—as a tragedy.

Second, by characterizing the bullfight as a tragedy, Hemingway implies that the bullfight observes rule of plot and character similar to classical or traditional tragedies. Not unlike Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* is an account of how a specific art-form (in this case, a particular sort of performed tragedy) elicits a unique emotional response. For Aristotle, the tragic drama is a highly-structured performance with a beginning, middle, and an end. Hemingway’s bullfight is a drama played in three parts that is so “well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual” that one can feel only the things that are at the core of the narrative (Kennedy 1999, 107-115; Hemingway 1960, 97ff). Tragedy, according to Aristotle, is ethical in that it has to do with characters that are good enough to elicit our fear and pity, and who gain tragic wisdom about the fragility of the human condition through their errors. The bullfighter can’t run away or admit to fear without being a figure of ridicule instead of a figure of tragedy (10). Hemingway also controversially describes the disembowelment of the horses as a comedy (Hemingway 1960, 6, 98; 1954, 170). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes tragedy from comedy because comedy concerns “inferior people” and “the certain sort of failure that is ridiculous and shameful” and “painless and not destructive” (1449a32). Tragedy, in sum, is the “imitation of an action that is serious and complete and has a [certain] magnitude” (Aristotle 1927, 1449b26-31). The aficionado is said to have a “sense of the tragedy and the ritual of the fight so that the minor aspects

are not important except as they relate to the whole" (1960, 9). The bullfight, then, far from being "hysterical" or "blood-drunken," is presented as a tragic ritual.

Third, Hemingway rediscovers the therapeutic appeal of tragedy for men at war. As Jonathan Shays argues about the Greeks, "The distinctive character of Athenian theater came from the requirements of a democratic polity made up entirely of present or former soldiers to provide communalization for combat veterans" (Shay 1994, 229-30).<sup>8</sup> The absence of such a community is the theme of the Nick Adams stories, especially apparent in the failure of Nick's father to live up to Nick's conception of bravery.<sup>9</sup> Lacking a ready-made community, one must find it elsewhere, and Hemingway's early works can be read as an attempt to discover or to construct such a community. He seems to find it among the Spanish, who do not merely "live for life" as the English and French do (1960, 256). Thus, whereas in *In Our Time*, Hemingway presents a nihilistic view of both the civilized and the savage (or "natural"), in *The Sun Also Rises* he replaces a "fragmented" American civil society that has lost touch with its roots (Diamond 2004, 124, 131), first with the Paris of the Lost Generation, and then with the manly, Catholic Spain of the bullfight (Hemingway 1954, 18, 237; Messent 2004, 131; Baldwin 1997, 12, 49-51). In the France of *The Sun Also Rises*, for instance, there is a simple, farcical exchange of goods (Hemingway 1954, 78). The landlady of Jake Barnes's residence "sees" Brett's gentility, which has been made visible because the Count's money (a bribe) substitutes for breeding. In the key passage distinguishing France from Spain in *The Sun Also Rises*, everything is said to be on a "sound" basis in France, meaning one of pecuniary exchange; in Spain, there still exists the possibility of friendship and community for "obscure reasons" (237). Despite his apparent rejection of Spain in the last third of *The Sun Also Rises* (Herlihy-Mera 2012), Jake Barnes has learned from the aficionados of the bullfight the importance of operating on this obscure but, the reader is invited to think, more profound basis (Hemingway 1954, 136-7).<sup>10</sup> In *The Sun Also Rises*, recapitulating his own transformed judgment about the bullfight later reported in *Death in the Afternoon*, his protagonist tries to present to his friends this insight into the profundity of Spain's most obscure ritual so that the bullfight would become "more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors" (1954, 171).

### **The Rules of the Bullfight**

Although, as noted above, serious Hemingway readers such as Carlos Baker and Philip Young have misunderstood *Death in the Afternoon* as a text celebrating violence, the entire rhetorical strategy of the book turns upon acknowledging the reader's sober "horror and disgust" at unjustified suffering. Hemingway returns several times in his writings to the image of baggage animals, their forelegs broken by a retreating Greek army and their bodies dumped into the shallows at Smyrna.<sup>11</sup>

In *Death in the Afternoon*, this image is introduced on the first page. How the suffering of animals can be defended as a part of a just and orderly whole rather than as an “unexplained horror” is clarified, for Hemingway, by observing the suffering of horses during the bullfight. Hemingway himself says that he was initially struck by the violence done to the horses. As a naturalist trained in the mode of Agassiz (Stoltzfus 2005, 224; Buske 2002, 72-3), Hemingway argues that the type of injury to an animal that would immediately cause him to stop and to help if he was passing it on the street is nonetheless defensible when considered as a part of the integral whole of the bullfight. After pungently describing the comedy of the disemboweled horses running wildly around in the ring, he claims that the true aficionado is actually indifferent to the horses’ suffering (Hemingway 1960, 6, 98; 1954, 170).

Hemingway’s interpretation of the bullfight requires him to double down on his steely insensitivity concerning the participants in the ritual. He likens the bull to a canvas for a painter, a block of marble for a sculptor, or even dry powdered snow for a skier (Hemingway 1960, 15). Within the context of the bullfight, a good bull is created by punishment.<sup>12</sup> The bull that does not charge straight can, in Hemingway’s interpretation, be “corrected” by skillfully placed banderillas. The light, lofty (*levantado*) bull is slowed (*parado*), first by the picadors, then by cape work, until he is finally exposed and heavy (*aplomado*), his head having been lowered and his energy sapped (147). Although these observations are off-putting, they are not limited to the animals. Hemingway explores how spectators impose rules on matadors by “punishing” them. The spectators’ role with respect to the matadors is to “impose the rules, keep up the standards, prevent abuses and pay for the fights” (164). A good matador kept within the rules of the ritual will be frightened by the action, but will bravely and temporarily ignore the consequence (death) that may follow from his working within the terrain of the bull. For their part, writers and critics also attempt to impose the correct way of seeing upon the audience. In turn, authors and critics can for different reasons fail to impose the right rules, leaving themselves open to the punishments of public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Purpose and the Rules of the Bullfight**

Adopting the tragic stance requires seeing the purpose and rules of the ritual. For Hemingway, the concrete aim of the bullfight is the ritual death of the bull. When this is accomplished, the spectator feels a sense of ecstasy—a “feeling of immortality” that “becomes yours” as the bullfighter brings death closer (Hemingway 1960, 206). It is “as profound as any religious ecstasy” (213). Agreeing with Hemingway at least on the nature of the bullfight, author A.L. Kennedy writes in her own recent autobiographical account that the bullfight captures both “Christian and pre-

Christian urges to understand the termination of life and to celebrate survival”; it is not sport or art, but “religious ritual” (1999, 81-2).

Hemingway carefully accounts for each of the three parts of the bullfight (Kennedy 1999, 107-115; Hemingway 1960, 97ff) in their relation to the ultimate end of executing the bull, which, again, is the “definite end” of the whole “action” (96-99, 454). A judicial metaphor—trial, sentencing, and execution—is used to characterize the action (96). The trial portion contains the Act of the Spears (*Suerte de Varas*) in which the mounted picadors test and tire the bull: this is the time when the horse are injured. This is also the stage of the fight where, as Hemingway beautifully remarks, the bull is at his apogee, seemingly “winning” by clearing the ring of humans by its end. This false victory sets up what could be described, in Aristotelian terms, as the tragic reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) of the next two acts, where the spectator recognizes that the bull’s victory was fleeting and his defeat foreordained. The sentencing describes the stage where the *banderillas* are placed (*Suerte de Banderillas*). Finally, the bullfight ends with the execution of the bull (*Suerte de Matar*): here, the bull is faced by “only one man who must, alone, dominate him” (98).

By focusing on the rules of the bullfight, Hemingway encourages his reader to think about social rules and the importance of keeping or breaking them. Rules, as noted, are imposed upon all the actors in the bullfight. As Hemingway scholar and aficionado Miriam Mandel gracefully writes in one of the most insightful summaries of Hemingway’s bullfight, the bullfight has “a circle to contain it, a president to control it, an informed public to curb it, skillful performers who will come to each other’s aid, and facilities to aid the injured. It is only in such a civilized world that the drama can be played out and catharsis achieved” (Mandel 2004). No one escapes from inclusion within these rules, and that includes even the matador and the spectator.

Of course, rules are broken. Shaving bulls’ horns to make them safer for the matadors, drugging bulls, “destroying” the bulls with the pics in the *Suerte de Varas*, or accentuating the appearance of danger while minimizing its actuality—the vested interests of each participant in the bullfight leads them to employ certain tricks (*trucos*) to deceive the others. One might conclude that the entire bullfight is an optical illusion, perpetrated on bulls knowingly and unfairly kept on farms (*ganaderias*) specifically to keep them ignorant of their human antagonists. Why is this “trick” just and defensible while others are not? A requirement of Hemingway’s therapeutics is that the person meeting challenges does so not in ignorance, but after experiencing trauma and accepting the pains and risks involved. For example, the unanswered question in *The Sun Also Rises* is whether the young matador Pedro Romero will continue to accept the rules of the game and to perform well under them after his first goring (*cogida*). The bullfight elicits an inward emotion in the

spectator that arises from seeing an action that is so “well ordered and so strongly disciplined by ritual” that you can get a sense of the “meaning and end of the whole thing” that you would not even from actual experience. If the rules of the action give this sort of affective insight into the meaning of the whole, one can move from “unexplained suffering” to suffering properly understood. The premise is that life must be seen through the lens of violence and death (the tragic view), but if you accept this premise, then Hemingway’s account of the importance of the ritual in interpreting the world is powerful.

### **The Human Character at the Center of the Bullfight**

Outside of the suffering of the horses, perhaps the most controversial feature of the bullfight is the quality of the human character at its center—the matador. Hemingway, it is often imagined, simply champions a macho simpleton who is too self-absorbed or unintelligent to value life properly. His matador is the sort of character that one would expect in a culture with an outsized sense of honor, and this type of honor has nothing to do with service to country, and with the type of self-sacrifice and valor that men exhibit in times of war. Such a criticism requires the reader to rethink Hemingway’s concept of virtue and how it differs from our concept of virtue.

The composite term under which Hemingway discusses the particular human virtue that flourishes in the bullfight is *pundonor*. This complex virtue is “honor, probity, courage, self-respect and pride in one word” (Hemingway 1960, 91). Honor dictates how closely the matador will work to the bull, and whether he will use or avoid tricks in doing so (178). Honor can be lost in different ways; for instance, by relying on tricks, by refusing to work in the terrain of the bull, or even by a courageous matador who performs well in front of an ignorant or vicious audience. Sensitive to the different valences of honor, which do not always track what is truly valuable in human character, Hemingway argues that *pundonor*, as a spiritual quality, is superior to our notion of honor because it can be retained even when a matador’s courage, self-respect, or honesty temporarily fails (157, 9). The spiritual quality undergirding true honor is called passion (*afición*), and, in the key thought of the text, it is possessed by anyone who *understands*, through knowledge and science, how man dominates nature (21; Hemingway 1954, 136-7). Although the connection between *afición* and *pundonor*, passion and honor, is never fully explained, *afición* does not have the same fragility as honor, the same possibility of being destroyed by the deceit of others or a crowd’s ignorance, or even through a chance flutter of cloth in the wind that causes an otherwise dominated bull to charge. For Hemingway, even if one is gored or feels fear, there is an objective standard of intelligent understanding of risk-taking and mortality, one which cannot be “destroyed” even in defeat.

Other authors have focused on the relational side of *pundonor* (*punta de honor*) and are for this reason much more critical of it than Hemingway.<sup>14</sup> McCormick (1998) emphasizes its exaggerated side as well as its inherited connection with the aristocratic attitude of noblesse oblige and its interpretation as duty to oneself (45, 264). Michener, following a similar tack, underlines the possessor's comic, distorted reliance upon the good opinion of others (Michener 1968, 61-2, 373). In contrast, Hemingway seeks to identify and honor praiseworthy action that is other-directed but primarily done for oneself (Hemingway 1954, 220). About "Pedro Romero" in *The Sun Also Rises*, the only character in that novel who exhibits this sort of courageous self-possession, Hemingway writes of his comportment in the ring:

Never once did he look up. He made it stronger that way, and did it for himself, too, as well as for her. Because he did not look up to ask if it pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her, too. But he did not do it for her at any loss to himself (Hemingway 1960, 220).

Combining the approval of others with self-directed action in a stable, reasonable manner is, if the account of Pedro Romero is taken seriously, one of the discoveries that Hemingway makes through the bullfight. Thus, in an important but overlooked passage from *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway says that there is another sort of bravery, exhilarated bravery, where one permanently rejects thinking about the consequences of one's actions (58). This sort of bravery is unreflective and criticized by Hemingway for that reason. It is "easier to be stupid and naturally brave than to be exceedingly intelligent and still completely brave" (94).

In *Death in the Afternoon*, the essential difference between a good and a bad matador—the subject of *Death in the Afternoon*'s Chapter Fifteen—lies in how he deals with the definite end of the ritual; that is, with how he kills (178). Somewhat murkily, Hemingway tries to justify the necessity of killing by characterizing killing as a "pagan" "rebellion against death" (233, 213). Although in the context it is fairly clear that Hemingway means by "pagan" an alternative to Christian morality, *how* killing can be understood as a "rebellion against death" is left unclear.<sup>15</sup> His assertion is especially problematic in light of the thesis adopted in this paper, which is that the bullfight clarifies our relation to our finitude and does not deny it. I reconstruct Hemingway's solution as follows: If one accepts what Hemingway calls the "rule of death"—we all die sometime, but for the time being not yet (Heidegger 1996, 236-7)—it is an easy leap to the commandment not to murder. If this commandment were simply true, then Hemingway and all other combatants and quasi-combatants would sin—or get away with murder—when they engaged in or supported warfare.<sup>16</sup> It may be going too far into the realm of speculation to call

the bullfight a schismatic, Spanish modification of Hemingway's own Catholicism, but his attempt to defend the "rebellion" against death in terms of the necessity of killing points to a problematic aspect of Christian morality's rejection of killing: what if your country asks you to kill, or if this killing is a consensual mercy-killing, or if the circumstances demand it (Luper 2009, 143-70)?<sup>17</sup> Alexandre Kojève expresses the thought that may be behind Hemingway's judgment concerning the morality of killing: it is "not the will to kill, but that of exposing oneself to the danger of death without any necessity, without being forced to it as an animal" that is humanizing and separates us from the given world (Kojève 1973, 151-2).

Hemingway's analysis of the "moment of truth," which translates the Spanish *momento de la verdad*, further clarifies the "whole end of the bullfight" (1960 68, 174). As against the decadent emphasis on the type of passes (and tricks) popularized by the showy matador Manolete, or even El Gallo's great cape work (a great artist but not a great killer), the matador must fulfill his function as a killer. Such a man has grace, which is an indescribable quality activated "in the presence of the danger of death" (51). The matador's over-emphasis on grace is criticized in Hemingway's account of the gypsy matador, Rafael El Gallo. "There is a whole school of bullfighting in which grace is developed until it is the one essential and the passing of the horn past the man's belly eliminated as far as possible" (212). Missing from this school of bullfighting are the "spiritual qualities" of the "simpler man" for whom killing and risking death are the core of the bullfight (232-3). In fact, El Gallo corrupts the bullfight by being the first matador unapologetically to show fear: to run, to drop the muleta and sword and jump over the barrera (157, 159). When this is done without *afición*, the result is "pure spectacle." As Hemingway wryly remarks, "There was no tragedy in it, but no tragedy could replace it" (213). If this pessimistic statement were true, then the entire point of Hemingway's work would be completely undermined. Bullfighting would rely on the judgment of the crowd, who, like El Gallo, misjudges the meaning of the art and its relation to killing and death as tragedy.

### **A Natural History of Death**

The vignette at the exact center of *Death in the Afternoon*, "A Natural History of Death," may clarify the connection between the aim of the bullfight and the experience of death in war. Here, Hemingway turns the power of observation and reflection directly upon war deaths—vindicating the claim made above that *Death in the Afternoon* is primarily, if indirectly, about war-time trauma.<sup>18</sup> Earlier, we were confronted by a question prompted by the suffering of the horses: Can the brute fact of animal death be justified? In the "Natural History," Hemingway invites the "naturalist" to observe the facts of human death in war to and compare these deaths to "natural deaths," such as death from Spanish Influenza (Wagner-

Martin 2004, 66). While the deaths in war are harsh and painful, the “natural” deaths Hemingway describes are also extremely “indecorous” and painful (1960, 139). Hemingway contrasts the tragic viewpoint of the war-naturalist who observes these terrible scenes of suffering with the view of the humanist, who holds that by studying natural history we increase “faith, love, and hope.” Observing the order and beauty of nature, the humanist affirms that a Being who planted, watered, and perfected a little moss-flower cannot “look with unconcern upon the situation and suffering of creatures formed after His own image” (Hemingway 1960, 134). In this vignette, Hemingway invites us to consider who has the better part of the argument, the humanist or the naturalist. The conclusion he draws is that the naturalist is more enlightened about the world: implicitly rejecting the thesis that modern war presents a novel problem for the soldier, Hemingway argues that *all* human death is “indecorous.”<sup>9</sup>

This thought is driven home in the last portion of the “Natural History,” where Hemingway stages an argument between an enlightened doctor and an army officer who wants to use morphine to kill a severely wounded man. Hemingway’s officer argues for euthanizing the man and seems to have the better part of the exchange. Because we fail to understand the true nature of our animal mortality, we often try to prolong life, seeing death as terrible and thinking that anything that we can do to prolong life is justifiable. In another part of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway says in his own voice that concern for the soul is mistaken if and when this sort of care for human life is the cause of unnecessary suffering (220). For Hemingway, our human awareness of death sometimes causes us to deny death and to live only for life. When we see life tightly structured by the rule of death, though, we may allow ourselves to accept our own deaths as natural and unavoidable rather than the crowning moment of a “spectacle with unexplained horrors.”

As philosophers remind us, human death is always “in some sense premature and violent” (Kojève 1973, 137). “A Natural History of Death” registers Hemingway’s deep regret that “most men die like animals, not men” (1960, 83). Here, Hemingway clearly does not write as the romantic naturalist interpreting higher, human things like “family, church, and polity” in light of the spontaneous, natural things of our animal lives (Zuckert 1990, 184; Messent 2004, 133). Instead, his focus is on human liberty. The danger of death to the *human* matador is “created at will” (1960, 16, 21). Likewise, death is “given” voluntarily as well, and it is the necessity of *voluntarily* accepting death that seems to transform the giving and receiving of death from suffering into tragedy (12). This is the concrete point to be learned from reflecting upon the “definite end” of the bullfight: to learn to see up close how death is “given, avoided, refused, and accepted” (256).

The favorite saying (the “double dicho”) of Hemingway—“Man can be destroyed but not defeated” and “Man can be defeated but not destroyed”—clarifies this thought. A.E. Hotchner reports that Hemingway “preferred to believe that man is undefeated,” presumably meaning that a man can, like a matador who takes an intelligent interest in death, suffer injury and bodily death while retaining the mystical or composite virtue of *pundonor* (Hotchner 2005, 73). It is the seeing of the moral whole as a tragic unity that justifies Hemingway’s hopes in the undefeated human spirit. Is the whole defensible? Reading *Death in the Afternoon* in light of what we know about Hemingway as a war survivor, questioning his own courage, conflicted about mortality, his silence about faith speaking eloquently about his doubts concerning the tension between religious salvation and this-worldly preservation—all these insights may make his interest in the bullfight more intelligible. In contrast with the more enlightened parts of Europe, the Spanish have concluded that risking death in a village square on a weekend is defensible—not for the entertainment value or for the machismo of the comic type recorded in Hemingway’s short story, “The Capital of the World,” but, perhaps, because of the inevitability of one’s death and because of the untradeable prize of self-consciousness that is nourished by insight into death. Hemingway’s preference for Spain may thus reflect a real insight rather than a vulgar taste for the cruel and colorful: the Spanish culture may appropriately combine religion, ritual, and manliness together to make sense of suffering and mortality.

### **Dealing therapeutically with war and death**

If this interpretation of *Death in the Afternoon* is correct, and Hemingway does use the bullfight as a vehicle for self-knowledge related to the fear of death in war, Hemingway’s later writing on the theme of death in war should be informed by the therapeutic knowledge he gained from the bullfight. Hemingway returns to the themes discussed above in *Men at War*, an edited collection of war stories published in 1942 as part of Hemingway’s contribution to the war effort. In the introduction to that volume, he presents an explicit therapeutics for our fear of suffering and death: the book, he writes, “will not tell you how to die,” but it can serve both to “prepare for and supplement experience” and to “serve as a corrective after experience” (Hemingway 1982, xxvii). In this book, Hemingway writes that after his own wounding at Fossalta he regained his courage by telling himself: “Whatever I had to do men had always done. If they had done it then I could do it too.” However, the fact that men have always gone to war does not mean that they should do so, and Hemingway’s thought requires further explanation.

One key lesson of reading Hemingway on war trauma is that he himself is a reader, as the stories from *Men at War* show. According to Hemingway, “probably the best thing that is written in this book” (*Men at War*) are the following lines from Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*:

By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once: we  
owe God a death: I'll ne'er bear a base mind:  
an't be my destiny, so; an't be not, so: no man is  
too good to serve's prince; and let it go which way  
it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next (III.ii.234-8).

These lines, delivered as Shakespearian comedy in *2 Henry IV* but taken very seriously by Hemingway, showed him “what all the other men that we are part of had gone through and how it had been with them” (Hemingway 1982, xiv). In psychoanalytical language, this poetry may offer a “counter-suggestion” in the effort to overcome trauma. It is not, however, enough to say that we owe God a death. Hemingway writes in 1942 that he “hates war” and refuses to justify it, but he does say that it is necessary to win the ones that you fight. The implications of Hemingway’s conflicted feelings about war are more explicit in Hemingway’s earlier dispatches from republican Spain, in which, for example, he holds that there is a great difference between dying and dying while fighting to preserve a republican form of government (Hemingway 2012, 238). In other words, while we may owe God a death, it is more just to pay that debt defending a republic than by defending a fascist government. Moreover, as was shown above, there are important differences within the authenticity paradigm that are elided when we simply exhort young men to do what others have done before them. What *Death in the Afternoon* argues, after all, was that there is a way of living intelligently with one’s death, even or especially after one attains familiarity with death through the near experience of it during war.

These reflections on the inescapability of political morality imply that there are limits to the therapy offered by *Death in the Afternoon*. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway examines the simplest things, especially violent death. This tells us much about our relation to our own death; one could even argue that the relation that we have to ourselves *mediated* by our own finitude is the most profound insight that we can have. But life is not only our relation to death. This tragic view of life must be enlarged and criticized in light of other commitments—our political aspirations to be citizens within a just and democratic regime, for instance, and our commitments as religious believers and as family members and lovers. It may even be that we do not understand ourselves correctly when we think of ourselves as, first, beings-toward-death, and then somehow add our political, religious, and familial commitments onto this understanding. However, as a way of emerging from unreflective trauma, seeing violent death and observing it carefully is an important step, even if it is not the first or only or last step to take. But that is the misery of war—it is untimely. Sons are buried by fathers, and the order of psychological and

spiritual development is disrupted. To paraphrase Kipling, through war we come to know the worst too young.

## Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I explored how Hemingway presents an indirect therapy for the fear of death through his observations of the bullfight. The elucidation of the fear of death may originate in a biographical accident, namely Hemingway's service during World War I as an ambulance driver, but the encounter with violent death serves to teach the readers of *Death in the Afternoon* about mortality beyond the battlefield—or the bullring. For Hemingway, seeing the world through the lens of tragedy allows us to see how art can force us to confront repellant necessities, such as our own deaths, in a manner that permits reflection upon how to live well. The bullfight cannot, in the reading presented above, become a grand metaphor for reality, explaining in full the economy or sociology or politics of Hemingway's world, but it does present the observer with a way of learning how to see skeptically into suffering. Its power as a ritual is in its being about the most important things, like death, and in presenting, at first glance, the same sense of unexplained suffering that Hemingway may have experienced in the war—the “why me?” thought. Its appropriateness as an analog for war and the human experience of mortality depends upon our gut aversion to the bullfight, and in particular to the suffering of the most obvious victims, the horses. Like the bullfight itself, *Death in the Afternoon* is first about animal suffering and then later, upon reflection, it is about human culture and about accepting the fact that our deaths are always violent, disruptive potentialities that we loathe and fear but must nonetheless confront. In this way, it is about letting go of our fears precisely by facing up to them, and it is about war because the experience of death and killing in war is one of the oldest and most powerful ways of training up an unsuperstitious familiarity with death.

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## Notes

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2. The literature noted has World War One as its fulcrum. For more general accounts of the ethics of mortality and killing, see Metzger (1973), Scarre (2007), and Luper (2009).
3. The statistic refers to the bullfight prior to the required use of the *peto* (the padded blanket that protected the horses' flank from goring) in 1928. I use it because Hemingway does not consider the *peto* a humane improvement, given the likelihood that the horses will suffer internal injuries from the impact (McCormick 1998, 35; Kennedy 1999, 108).
4. Critics agree with Hemingway that bullfighting is "an art given form and meaning through ritual" (McCormick 1998, 266).
5. The phrase "academic victimization" comes courtesy of Edward Madigan, Resident Historian at the Commonwealth Graves Commission.
6. Writing about Hemingway's first novel, Nina Schwartz argues that Hemingway exerts his power over the reader by "producing a gap in the reader's knowledge, inscribing the reader as impotent slave to the master author" (Schwartz 1984, 52). In another elaboration of this hermeneutical approach, Hemingway is said to have killed the father-figure but not the author-figure in his novels (Dragunoiu 2000). Hemingway himself abets the aforementioned critical stance by boldly stating his famous iceberg theory (in *Death in the Afternoon*, pp. 191-2), and by explicitly advocating a theory of omission that allows the audience to "feel but not understand." Despite these criticisms, which are valid in part, this paper argues that *Death in the Afternoon* is intended as a teaching-text.
7. For example, overcoming the fear of death makes Francis Macomber into a man: it represents "[m]ore of a change than any loss of virginity" (Hemingway 1995, 33).
8. An attempt to recapture the sense that drama can speak helpfully to soldiers has just recently been made by the theater group Theater of War, who perform Greek tragedies for veterans.
9. Catherine Zuckert (1990) is particularly effective in explaining how Hemingway's war experienced is restaged in the Nick Adams stories. In *Death in the Afternoon*, the contrast between bravery in the ring and suicide is explicit (1960, 11). Clarence, Hemingway's father, committed suicide in 1928.
10. As a mimetic art, bullfighting offers real knowledge about how to live in the world (Josipovici 2001, 67). In this sense, the bullfight isn't romantic, as some have argued.
11. Instances include: "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," "On the Quai at Smyrna," and two occasions in *Death in the Afternoon*.

12. A *noble* is a bull that is “frank in its charges, frank, simple, and easily deceived” (Hemingway 1960, 426; see also “Franco” in the book’s glossary).
13. In *A Dangerous Summer*, an account of the 1959 bullfighting season, Hemingway offended his reading public through his insistence upon the decadence of Dominguín, imposing upon them what was seen to be a flawed, partial judgment of that matador.
14. My thanks to Catherine Zuckert for suggesting the basis of this point.
15. He substantiates by showing that in 1567 Pope Pius V banned the bullfight from all Christian nations except Spain on pain of excommunication, thus underlining the tension between mainstream Christianity and the bullfight (Hemingway 1960, 12).
16. In Joanna Bourke’s *An Intimate History of Killing*, she notes how some combatants feel that they are getting away with murder when they kill on the battlefield, insofar as they commit the most heinous act but are secure that they will not be persecuted for it (1999, xix, 20). Bourke’s reviewers, including Jean Bethke Elshtain, have taken her to task for defending or celebrating bloodlust. For further context, see Confino, Betts, and Schumann (2008) and Roper (2009). It is worth noting that the feeling of liberation (getting away with murder) requires the *prior acceptance* of the commandment not to kill.
17. The tension between Hemingway’s existentialism and Catholicism has been noted by many critics. H.R. Stoneback (2003) and J.C. Pratt (2001) consistently read his basic thought as religious. Killinger (1960), Stoltzfus (2005), Sanders (2007), and Muller (2010) read it as existentialist.
18. The centrality of “A Natural History of Death” is pointed out by Thurston, who also has a useful discussion of this vignette (2004, 66; 47-8).
19. Perhaps he dwells on what is decorous in response to the Horatian commonplace, criticized by Wilfred Owen, concerning the decorum of patriotic death.



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