

Winter can be long and desolate or short and brutal

in this inconstant and variable climate, when the snows set in on Mont Ste-Victoire or Mont Aigoual it can drag on like the end of the world.

But finally things begin to clear, the river-beds to expel their ice, and the world seems to turn its sleeping cheek towards an invisible but beckoning spring. But the real chronological mark which records it comes with the Pentecostal fires of June, the prolonged holiday with its famous FERIA which brings the bull-mania of the extreme south to Arles and Nîmes. The *corridas* cater for both sorts of bullfight, the Spanish and the French, while opera, classical music and jazz are all honoured in the settings they deserve—the giant golden arenas of Nîmes and Arles. It is a real spring rite on pagan lines, this first formal acknowledgement to spring, still today a wonderful prolonged orgy of festal music and drama and games, for all Paris comes down to be present for the early sunlight of the year—either as spectator or performer. Moreover, all Spain puts in an appearance too: for some weeks

now the southern roads are full of lorries bringing up the huge Iberian bulls for the sacrificial *corrida*, and bull-magic, bull-worship, is in the air. Arles is full of gypsies, Nîmes full of guitar-playing ensembles of various persuasions and provenances—Africa, Hawaii, Reunion, Brooklyn Polynesia... And everything lasts all night through! Music and blood strike a chord which somehow embodies the first cherries and apricots, and the villages fill up with swarthy visitors—casual labour for the harvests as yet to be gathered: asparagus, medlars, mulberries. Not to mention poets, even American poets: critics of civilization whose Michelangelo is Andy Warhol. Never mind, the fiesta is Roman in its comprehensiveness and admits all conditions of men.

*Limpid is as limpid seems,
Our confusions are in dreams!*

Not least the transcendental and clairvoyant elements in African palmists and soothsayers and Tarot-tellers!

Feria: Nîmes

*Feria; cloaked trigonometry of hooves
The plane trees know, shiver with apprehension;
They plead as the archons of the blue steel must
These prayers, refining murder by a breath,
Turn self-deception to an absolution -
Two coloured pawns uniting in the rites of death.*

*Brocade still stiff with bloody hair he kneels
While the mithraic sun sinks in a surf
Of bloody bubbles; leaks from the huge pizzle
The holy urine smoking in the dust.
He reels into a darkness which he dazzles.*

*Tall doors fall as the axes must,
And the great sideboard of the bull is there,
A landslide in the ordinary heart*

*A feast for gods within a coat of hair,
His thunder like a belfry and his roars
The minotaur of man's perfected lust,
His birth-pangs offered to the steel's applause.*

When you first come to live here, the ever-present bull-worship of the land seems a somewhat aberrant predisposition, but it does not take very long before this archetypal form stakes a claim on your sympathy by its beauty and its vivid partnership in the activities of man. It has cast the spell of its taurine mystique over human life in unmistakeable fashion, whether one is speaking of the giant Iberian bulls which come to be killed in the Spanish-style ritual or of the spry little Camargue animals so famous for their gallantry and cunning, who are not killed but only despoiled of their cockades and strings by the youthful white-clad gladiators called *razeteurs*, whose only weapon is a sort of metal comb, a *razet*. These tiny animals are full of personality. You see them in winter drifting about the fields with a disconsolate, out-of-work look; but the minute the good weather returns and the season promises to open, they become more animated and willing to exchange a few harsh words with any youth brave enough to bull-bait them. In any way at all: sometimes a mischievous dog takes it into his head to mock up a pretend attack and the bull joyfully joins in the game. Or a slightly tipsy villager might propel a wine barrel into the arena with a kick and tease the bull by forcing it to play an impromptu game of football. But when not herded for the bull-game these beautiful creatures drift about like Stone Age messages—as if they had just materialized from the cave drawings of Aurignacian man and reincarnated themselves for the season's sport. Clouds of saffron and brown and charcoal animals people the Languedoc's deserted spaces with an echo of poetry which sends one beyond, into ages of stone, ages of iron. Bull-worship has an almost religious rite, to its credit thought of as a game, yes, but somehow a sacred game with its roots deep in the smiling piety of the French Midi. Our own attraction to it stems from who knows what ancient source within ourselves.

The bull was once a sacrificial cult animal. I suspect that after being sacrificed to the requisite god or goddess he was ceremonially cut up, and the whole village fell to with a will and ate him with appropriate libations.

The whole history of the bull and the countries of bull-worship merits a more extended study than these notes, though they will serve me to draw attention to one of the critical pulses of the land. Nobody seems able to decide on the origins of the cult and its close connection with the history of animal sacrifice, though the subject does not lack for fruitful documentation. Yes, the bull is a venerable symbol for the animist and the alchemist, his situation in the zodiac falls between 20 April and 21 May. And one is reminded that in the Middle East one has often seen him harnessed to the plough, and not always castrated. It is a moot point whether the modern bullfight is not a survival which has grafted itself on to some ancient form of blood-worship in which the bull was sacrificed and devoured by a primitive community driven to sheer survival tactics, elaborated into a ritual of worship after its contact with primitive Christianity. But wait! Originally was not the bull coeval with Zeus, and the prime patron of Mithraism? The spread and implantation of this primitive religion is one of the unusual historical factors about old Provence; the Roman army brought it into favour and established it, so much so that it was touch and go whether Mithraism would not prevail over Christianity.

It is odd that despite the history of this double attachment to the bull-game (either the Spanish *corrida* or the so-called *course libre*) we come upon areas of blank, unmapped ignorance about so much of it. The Spanish version of the game is deeply respected and piously played out in gigantic Roman arenas which are ideal on account of size. The distribution of the Spanish style of bullfighting has also varied greatly, at times shrinking to include only the walled mediaeval towns big enough to offer floor-space to the whole elaborate spectacle. The records show that it flowered for a while in unusual sites—Besançon, Macon—and then faded out for a season or two. The Spanish style of bullfight is also

encouraged, and its baroque ritualized murder of the great Andalusian bulls is among the more gripping spectacles the Midi has to offer.

But few of the bullrings are large enough to allow this elaborate spectacle all the space it needs. The best of the big arenas after Arles is Nîmes, which has always patronized the *mise à mort*; its professionalism has won the approval of the Spanish public as well, and the modern toreador of reputation thinks nothing of crossing the frontier to 'play' Nîmes. Nowadays he will gain and not lose face, by it. For the *course libre*, which depends upon a free-running bull and a racing man, the Roman arenas are a tiny bit too large and tend to give the bull too much advantage over the racing, white-clad gladiator of the *razet*; for the youth, after making his soaring, plunging snatch at the cockade or slash at the strings tied to the horns, must perforce turn and race for safety from the bull. It is always a narrow shave. His fast flying leap over the barricade and into the very sky—so it seems—is thrilling indeed; for while he hangs like a nest-fallen bird on to the surrounding rails of the arena, the discomfited bull lowers his horns and starts to devastate the arena, sending the planks which line the dusty theatre of the action flying in a glorious clattering cascade. 'Aha!' shouts the exultant crowd, 'bad temper, eh?' and to salute the animal's mettle the band gives him an extra toot of music through the loudspeakers in the surrounding trees, and the raucous voice of the master of ceremonies announces that the price of the cockade has gone up, thus paying tribute to the extra danger run by the man. Of late years the profession of the *razeteur* has stabilized itself so that you can really make a living in this way. The game has become organized and the quality of the bull-play has correspondingly improved and become more stylish. It is open to anyone who cares to register. (The poet Roy Campbell spent several years in Provence as a *razeteur* and has left us some fine, muscular poetry about the game and a spirited prose book, *Taurine Provence*, which still has flavour and zest, though it is somewhat out of date.)

The humbler world of the *course libre* is close to the

heart of Provence—a true test of youthful agility and strength, and a game full of dangers for the unwary. For though the black fighting bulls of the Camargue are small, they wear a large and deadly crown of horns. Moreover, they have seen the man and studied his ways on the range long before they find themselves face to face with him in the ring. And they are cunning as dogs. For the big Spanish bull of the killing fights it is quite another matter, for the first man he sees is the cloak-draped toreador who is sent in to dispatch him. He has no experience of man in battle. But the little Camargue bull lives free on the range with the guardians, and after every fight is decanted back on to the range. In a very short space of time a valiant small bull, realizing that it is not going to be killed but simply played for its cockade, will become a seasoned and cunning adversary. And as he bears a name of his own he steadily forges a career for himself in the world of sport. Several such bulls have shown such bravery, energy and imagination that after their death they have been immortalized by having their statue set up in the village square—like ‘Sanglier’, who gazes benignly across the fields at Villevieille. The Spanish fight with its cumbersome bulls and solemn liturgical ritual belongs to one sort of mood, while the *course libre* breathes all the poetry and energy of youth, springing as it does directly from the land. Together with the tranquil game of *boules*, whose clicking metal balls people the shady forest walks and the esplanades, the cockade fight is the most characteristic activity to be studied in modern Provence, the happiest of open-air sports, glowing with all the ardour of bull-worship. But by and large the two distinct styles have coexisted without prejudice and there is a faithful audience for both.

Yes, the bull-game as patented in the Camargue is fast and somewhat perilous for the man, but in some curious way it feels good-tempered and sporting—even the bull seems to enter into the spirit of the thing, and while there is sometimes an accident, even perhaps a death, the whole poetry of the *course libre* feels human in village terms. It is a sport, while the Spanish style of play is a ritual, a profound and often blood-chilling experience. Perhaps one might compare it with village

cricket which has its own time-tested mystique—though one has to see it being played in foreign parts to appreciate its mythological scale of reference and peculiar beauties—like a ballet of the Raj transplanted to Cairo or Corfu.

Though both forms of bull-play are treated with respect, there have always been, will always be, those who find the Spanish *mise à mort*, with its fearsome sword-play and macabre poetry, too much for them simply in terms of blood shed. Others affect to believe that the bull feels very little if he is correctly played by a fine matador with full respect for the science of the kill. It is impossible to judge. Aldo has a tendency to defend the rich Spanish style of bullfight by saying: 'Let he who has never asked for his beefsteak to be brought to the table *bien saignant* throw the first stone!' and of course there is hardly anyone who can accept such a challenge.

What is certainly as grisly as it is revealing is the bloodthirsty note of audience participation one gets in Spain to the Spanish type of killings. This kind of hysteric throbbing, sobbing reaction to bull-play seems to stem from some innate avenging lust of the public's super-ego which makes an imaginative psychic link between the savagery and the poetry of the matter—as if mentally feasting on the moral wounds and pouring blood of the great Iberian bulls. For down they go like sinking suns into the ocean of mortal suspense which precedes the killing stroke. Lurching, subsiding, they allow themselves to be demolished like old cathedrals picked to pieces by earthquakes, sinking into the ground like great black concert-grands sinking into a lake of blood and darkness. They seldom roar, though sometimes they offer a groan or sob of reproach to the precise steel of the tricornered gladiator who circles and swerves in his orbit around them, keeping just out of reach, his cloak fluttering like a winnowing fan. The whole of this provisional cloak-play, and the careful planting of the cruel spikes of the fluttering *banderillas* in certain chosen muscle-schemes of the bull's shoulders, has for objective not only to tire him but to force him through fatigue to lower his great crowned head. Finally he will begin to let his head sag down and this opens a vital hinge of bone in the powerful vertebrae

of the animal whose strength is by now half-quenched. (Aldo puts his two fists together and opens a space between knuckles to illustrate.) Thus the way to the heart is open and if the stroke is pure, as they say, and correctly executed, the steel passes through this hinge directly into the heart of the bull and it falls dead as if shot. This is also the famous 'moment of truth', for to execute it the matador has to lean forward in a position which for a few seconds renders him vulnerable to a sudden wild lunge from an exhausted but game bull. He may die by an accident: but for the great chimerical animal there is no appeal. There is something ignominious and sad in the way that his body, and that of any horse he has managed to disembowel during the action, are hooked up and dragged away through the dust by the two picadors who are appointed to this task. In defeat he has diminished into a classical hump, a chunk of deflated meat. They slice off his huge advantages according to rule; only occasionally do they slice off his great smoking pizzle if he has hurt or killed one of his adversaries. Usually just the ears and the tail.

Enough! I am reminded that if anyone expresses any sentiments which suggest distaste for the Spanish style in bullfighting, Aldo takes on an alarmed air, for this is clearly social heresy and out of place in Provence. He places his finger to his lips to admonish the solecism and then waves an arm in the direction of the fireplace over which hangs the magnificent lithograph by the painter Zoravis (once as famous as Picasso) called *Ultimate Truth*, and which depicts the death of a bull in a Spanish *mise à mort*. It seems to be conceived in concentric whorls of the animal's blood. It is full of a noble yet heartrending joy and when the subject comes up Aldo kisses his hand to it, though whether he is praising the artist's excellence or the subject matter of the work I have yet to find out. As for Zoravis, he was eloquent on the beauty of the game and said that it was all mingled up with the image of sacramental blood, the father image and the destruction of the father. A whole galaxy of Freudian images were called to mind by the bull's death; a whole glossary of symbols concerned with sexual power (the blood rite) and the demolition of the

father's authority by the son. There was also, by association, the biblical reference concerned with water being turned into wine.

Long ago the painter spent his summers chez Aldo, hence the fine collection of lithographs owned by my friend. Zoravis paid for his keep with them. As for water and wine he was no stranger to the latter and I have seen him sometimes quite incapable with drink at the old 'Sabre' in Montparnasse, the only bistro except perhaps 'La Coupole' which boasted that it could respond to any request, no matter how reconдите. The request of Zoravis during his residence in Paris was for a beaker of bull's blood to quaff and this was duly provided by the management around ten o'clock. Zoravis himself was rather a striking-looking old man, not raffish or bohemian at all: more like a respectable diamond broker from Smyrna, say. Nor was he a noisy customer: on the contrary, he drank with thoughtful silence until the hour approached. Then he raised his finger and the old maître d'hotel, who had already betrayed some anxiety, called out in his hoarse voice, 'Eh bien, où est le sang du maître?' He would sally out on to the pavement to scan the horizon, gazing up and down with manifest anxiousness. Then at last it hove in sight, the beaker of the *cher maître*. A leather-coated motor-cyclist drew up in front of the café and from his saddlebags produced a tall litre measure—a thermos flask full of dark warm blood. It was wrapped in a spotless napkin and was conveyed thus to the table of the painter who responded with thanks and a banknote which obviously included a tip for the young cyclist, who for his part uttered profound thanks before replacing his goggles and glasses and melting away. Zoravis drank his beaker of blood thoughtfully, judiciously, under the admiring gaze of the young painters-to-be of Montparnasse. This, they felt, was how true greatness should behave! No wonder he had such a reputation for virility!

But of course the real virility was very much there in the great dossier of lithographs drawn from the life at the FERIA of Arles over several years, and duly posted up in the high-ceilinged music room and along the broad carpeted galleries

leading to it: all the thrilling orchestration of the routine *paseos* touched in with alchemy, the customary eloquence and spareness of the great painter. There is a whiff of the satanic about the execution, due perhaps to the fact that the two leading horsemen are dressed in the grim minatory black of the secret police of Philip II. These are the so-called *alguaciles*: they open the proceedings with an icy formality. Behind them comes the line of the three matadors followed by their assistants with their cloaks and dirks—the *cuadrillas* of *peones*. Lastly, on mettlesome but carefully padded horses, come the picadors with their lances—the spiked *banderillas*—together with those delegated to hitch up and drag off the corpse of the fallen bull or disembowelled horse. These are grim echoes for an afternoon of brilliant Mediterranean sunlight, and the theatrical formality and exactitude make it clear that we are assisting at a ritual and not a mere game, a mere diversion. Death is in the air. The only concession to colour in this grave funereal grouping of professional executioners is in the strips of coloured cloth hanging from the picador's lance. Formally they pause and salute and wheel before the presidential box to make their greeting. The band plays enthusiastically. Solemnly the two leaders advance to receive from the presidential hands the great key of the *cagones* where the bulls are penned; they are waiting to be called into battle. The crowd cheers with an ever-sharpening impatience, but routine is routine and must be fully respected, so the performers take up their positions in line ahead and make a preliminary circuit to solicit the sympathy and approval of the crowd. At last the word goes forth and with a dry clang the pen flies open, and the nearest bull to see the daylight outside plunges from the darkness like a rocket and swerves into the ring: only to brake sharply, half-blinded from the daylight, and take up a somewhat hesitant position centre stage, but stamping and careening with anticipation for he knows not what. Softly, coaxingly the matadors station themselves and tenderly begin to position their prey. But lazily, as if they had all the time in the world. It is puzzling to the bull, their soft tenderness and amity. He stamps. He smokes!

He cavorts a little, but somewhat shyly, as if he were not really sure of himself. He is being keenly assessed, judged for possible weight and stamina: also for any particularities of deportment. Does he throw to left or right when he charges? He does not find the general atmosphere reassuring, but for the moment there seems no real menace, so he does a preliminary whirl around the ring, putting up a whirligig of reddish dust, acrid and sour. While he is thus preoccupied the silent circle of matadors slowly gathers together, closes the ring on him without losing the animal tenderness, the feeling of coaxing, and inciting him into the correct position for a first assault on his shoulders. The deltoids are the initial target, his fatigue the first objective. At last it comes: the picadors gallop deftly into the centre and, leaning from the saddle, plant their weapons securely in his massive back. He rears back with the psychological shock of realization and the physical pain of the onslaught. Battle is joined. The whole matter takes on a weight and gravity unforeseen as the blood begins to roll down that target of a back and into the dust. He swells with rage, his pride is wounded—and this is of course what they want. The whole mechanism of the kill begins to unwind itself...

Why wait?

*Primaeval Camargue horses under sail,
Stealthy as wishes or as secret agents
Curve under Roman monuments, vibrate,
Appropriate to sky as water, sympathetic
As ruins which insist in their serenity
All time could be compressed
Into one pellet of ample duration because
The first step towards creation is to lose
Complete confidence in oneself and sort of die.
I know... I see you smile. Accelerate loving.
Remit the old codger's deathbed flutter. Try!*

*Somehow copy the sweet conduct of these
Young olives in the spring mistral a-quiver
Silverside up with such panache and*

*Colloquial astonishment in sunset poses.
Join the great coven of real lovers, the
Conspiracy of lovelorns forged in debonnaire
Realized couples like perfected machines
Guided by love-placebos from the wise
Only realize! Go on! Be wise!
Yes but how?*

*They are caressed by oncoming night
With all their nightingales in lovely voice.
And this superb Roman lady asleep
Has the whole pedigree of pure happiness
Delicate as young olives, their pigments,
Loose-leaf in slumber in her smiles.
One becomes sorry to become so soon
luggage left like lumber,
lust after-thoughts of inexcusable grace
Posted up by a love-god's outlandish looks,
A love-seraphic smiling face.
Did not the proverb say explicitly
'Never try to whitewash a silk elephant?'
And (beyond all where or why):
'In yoga harness a whole reality with one soft sigh.'
A vessel in full sail
With a weird mystical rig
Will tell you once and for all
What the Greek proverb says is true:
'Happiness is just a little scented pig.'
It's not enough but it will have to do.*