

## Picasso's Corrida

Allen S. Weiss

*For us Spaniards, it's Mass in the morning, the corrido in the afternoon, and the whorehouse in the evening. Where do they all converge? In sadness.*

— *Picasso to Malraux, La tête d'obsidienne*

Nietzsche insists that "In the Dionysian dithyramb man is incited to the greatest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties. The essence of nature is to be symbolically expressed: we need a new world of symbols, where the entire symbolism of the body is called into play." Here, the heart of nature bursts forth from that bliss born of pain, in a sordid sacrifice of sublime proportion – for humanity always betrays its gods, often to the point of slaughter.

The bull has always been a mask of god. The people of ancient Corinth celebrated the apparition of Dionysus in his full duality by presenting, in the agora, two absolutely identical statues of gilded wood decorated with vermilion, distinguished only by their names: *Dionysus Baccheios* and *Dionysus Katharsios*, the former bringing misunderstanding, drunkenness, madness, and murder, the latter offering benevolent catharsis. To neglect the expiatory effects of the latter is to portend the worst.



Picasso could not forget the tale related by Hemingway in *Death in the Afternoon*, of a bull in Valencia which had killed sixteen men and wounded countless others in amateur events. One of those killed was a young gypsy, whose brother and sister followed the bull from town to town in the hope of assassinating it in revenge, but they never had the chance. Finally, the owner of the bull decided to have it slaughtered, both because of its age and because of the attempt to suppress such amateur events. The two gypsies were at the slaughter-house and the young man asked permission, since the bull had killed his brother,

to kill the bull. This was granted and he started by digging out both the bull's eyes while the bull was in his cage, and spitting carefully into the sockets, then after killing him by severing the spinal marrow between the neck vertebrae with a dagger, he experienced some difficulty in this, he asked permission to cut off the bull's testicles, which being granted, he and his sister built a small fire at the edge of the dusty street outside the slaughter-house and roasted the two glands on sticks and when they were done, ate them. They then turned their backs on the slaughter-house and went away along the road and out of town.

The arena, for Picasso, is a desert under the blinding sun, where every gesture is concentrated into an eternal symbol; a labyrinth, where the incalculable, intersecting lines of the bull's fatal trajectories establish an ephemeral spiritual deformation; a bed, where passionate embraces, in eternal repetition, perpetually redesign the book of the libido, as the erotic dance of the torero and bull culminates in a terrifying, exhilarating inversion of roles; a canvas, where the palimpsest of sun and shade, blood and sand, steel and flesh, orders an endless zenith of passion. It was thus that Picasso loved the *corrida*, with its intrinsic beauty and its intimation of immortality in the face of death. He loved the *corrida* just as he did his paintings, for both arena and canvas are sites of assignation and perfection, risk and destiny.

And they are also places of light! Andalusian light, Basque light, Madrilenian light, Catalonian light, Provençal light! For the bull never dies at night. As Picasso's friend Michel Leiris loved to explain, the *corrida* is a place "where all is essentially founded upon perversity: seduction of the bull by the shimmer of the cloth, temptation of the matador who edges closer to the fall – a sort of ripening of evil in a pointed and artful web, under a great sun of luciferean beauty." The sun of the *corrida* exists at the midpoint between noon and midnight, advancing in its equivocal moment, as if its light itself marked eternity. Such is the sun which so horrifyingly illuminated the death of the matador Granero, unforgettable to all, killed in the year 1922, his eyes horrifyingly gouged out as his skull was crushed, as described by Bataille in *Histoire de l'oeil*: "It all took place under the torrid sky of Spain, not hard and coloured as one may imagine, but solar and with a bursting, soft and troubling luminosity which often seems unreal, so much does the burst of the light and the intensity of the heat evoke the freedom of the senses, quite precisely the soft dampness of the flesh." The world shimmering in the heat, doubled by the trembling of bodies – torero and spectator, male and female alike – serves as background for the moment of truth, melting all the passions of the soul.

It is the sun that verifies the various sublime, mathematical and corporeal relations that obtain in the *corrida* between the matador, ephemeral incarnation of the sun, white

light decomposed into the brilliant colours of the rainbow by the prism of the sequined costume, and the bull, eternal and inexorable shade. In the corrida, man and monster are bound by the extreme limits of ritual gesture, intensified and exacerbated to the breaking point of chaos. In the corrida, intoxicating swiftness is transformed into slow dance, as if time itself could be conquered by the reduction of speed and the displacement of mass . . . Yet there is one blind spot in this panoptical geometry of death: once enwrapped in the muleta – at that point of crimson mortality where the already spilt blood of the bull can but enhance the colour of the cloth, and where the hidden recesses of the matador's mortal flesh are revealed by the virtual penetration of the horn – we don't know whether the bull, more opaque than the Spanish night, blacker than Manet's black, more impenetrable than the devil's excrement, closes its eyes. Indeed, thought Picasso, . . . *the inner mechanism at the most profound centre of my body prepared itself for all the most disagreeable surprises capable of making you die of laughter in the greatest happiness for in the eye of the bull everything is explained by numbers and nothing is clear at the bottom of the bullish lake and only the odour sung by the wound can mathematically describe the serpentine road traversed by the sword.* At the moment of truth, there exists a nameless, perverse, violent god born under a rotten sun, a god whose abode is that ever mobile, fleeting point where horn grazes muleta, sword pierces flesh, or, in the demonic reversal of the myth, the deadly tangent where the nocturnal horn rips through the solar protection of the matador to enter his hastily and inadequately blessed flesh.

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It was precisely this god that Picasso sought, precisely this god with whom he identified, precisely this god, *deus absconditus*, perpetually hidden behind cape and muleta, who never deigned to appear in the arena. Picasso sought a solution, as his hand traced so many veronicas and *naturelles* on the engraving block, as the silent, inner muscular postures of his body assumed the tension of the torero offering his veil, the banderillero in flight with his beribboned spears, and especially the picador, who, one with his mount, meets the bull force against force, shedding first blood. Contrary to the rite of the corrida, it is the bull, solitary prince of darkness, who would triumph in his paintings, the great bulls such as Primoroso, Camisero, Destenido, Compuesto, Regatillo, who are his heroes. These were the gods he sought in their archetypal form and all their tragic force, in works such as *La dépouille de Minotaure en costume d'arlequin*, *Minotaure violant une femme*. From the perennial confrontation of bison and horse at Lascaux to the most studied gestures of Juan Belmonte, the torero who transformed the modern corrida, no exorcism was ever possible,





no dénouement définitive – the corrida remains a monument to the *terribilità* of the irrational fugacity of life, to the struggle between light and darkness, to the appendage of death that lurks behind all eroticism, to the power and mystery of all gestures desirous of transforming time into eternity. The corrida was the double of Picasso's art.

Picasso hated for a Sunday to go by without having attended a corrida, yet, regardless of the brilliance of an event, something always escaped him. In March 1935, Picasso began to engrave his *Minotauromachie*, where everything was impossible, where everything was essential, where everything had to be condensed into a single eternal moment. He wanted to give this work the fragility of a dream, where the pure flame of a candle would not be a metaphoric double of the sun, but rather, paradoxically, the very condensation of everything earthly, everything of the flesh. He wanted to achieve the same tone proffered by Theodore de Banville's anecdote, in his *Contes bourgeois*, of the poet Camoens: while writing one night, his candle was extinguished by a sudden gust of wind, yet he managed to complete his poem by the glow emanating from the eyes of his cat! Little did it matter that certain elements were missing, that certain features were transformed – all the better! The terrible sun of the corrida would be transmuted into a point of flame, almost cold; the incredibly false lightness of time in the corrida would take on an oneiric heaviness; antithetical figures, man and bull, horse and woman, would merge in the conflicting images of Picasso and Marie-Thérèse themselves. Picasso would, finally, become all the active figures: he was the music which announced the event; he was the *puntilla* which penetrated the neck of the bull who refused to die; he was the mule who dragged the ignoble carcass from the arena; he was the storm itself on the horizon!



True love transforms the lover into an object, a sign, a symbol. In the erotic geometry of the passions, the bed is an arena upon which every contact, every pressure, every position traces a *suerte* of the passions, creating a secret pornographic tableau. Here, all trembles as candlelight flickering in an immanent wind. As Goethe wrote in *The Divan*:

A strange feeling seizes you  
 As the silent torch glows  
 No longer you remain  
 In gloomy shadows enclosed  
 And a new desire leads you on  
 Towards a greater nuptial rite.

And beyond, and again? Like that Provençal matador Pouly who, during his somnambulistic crises, would, with his sword, pierce through the gaping emptiness of his bedroom window to wound the infinite shadow of the night, the Minotaur advances, slowly, like the blind, like the impassioned, like the possessed, transforming the entire destiny of the corrida.



The bloodied libertinage of the muleta disappeared. That night, Picasso dreamt of the combat between a unicorn and a bull.