Blond girls from the United States hawking American ice cream at a bullfight, and in Las Ventas, Madrid, once revered as the "cathedral" of bullfighting? It was blasphemy, and worse was to follow. After long abstinence, I was in Madrid for the six corridas of the annual autumn fair, which mark the end of the major bullfights of the year. It proved to be a mixed pleasure, not for lack of ability on the part of the toreadors but because the bulls had been bred down and were overfed and deficient in the qualities rigorously selected by breeders in the past. The Spanish used to say, "Sin toros, no hay toreadors" (Without bulls, you cannot have bullfighters).

Whether one regards bullfighting as being on a moral level with cock-fighting or French dwarf-throwing, as does the Animal Rights Party, or with the conviction that it is an artform unappreciated in the United States and Britain, it remains just to consider that bullfighting offers a far more accurate gauge of the state of Spanish society than graphs, statistics, or sociological studies can provide. With roots in prehistory, in religion, in both the aristocracy and the peasantry, bullfighting (torero) cannot be equated with mere sport, as foreigners tend to think. Mediterranean folklore depicts the bull as symbol of power, fertility, and even godhood, but in no country other than Spain has the blood sacrifice of the bull retained its ancient, deeply rooted meaning and evolved into a ritual death to the animal involving mortal danger to the toreadors, whose every movement in the plaza derives from long tradition as well as individual style. At its rare best, bullfighting is elegant, formal, and efficient. It combines all the elements of tragedy, it is intensely real, and it can be beautiful. Like the other arts, it can be corrupted and often is. Serious but also joyful, the corrida de toros juxtaposes fatality and festivity to form a uniquely Spanish combination.

Francisco Franco's death in 1975, the restoration of the monarchy under Juan Carlos, and the adoption of a new constitution in 1978 led to distinct and profound changes in Spanish society, changes that all too soon were reflected in bullfighting. Unparalleled prosperity had its usual effect of depopulating the countryside, as people flocked to the cities to work in banks and offices: Madrid now boasts that it has more banks than any city in the world. Once passports became freely obtainable, for the first time in memory, many Spaniards could learn how other people lived and thought; Spain became in part Europeanized, in part Americanized. Prosperity is fickle, however, for with it came inflation, affecting every area in national life.

All this and more was in my mind as I took my place in the plaza, comparing the scene of forty and more years ago with the problematic present. By preference I sat high above the ring in the cheap seats, where until the recent past, the company was almost entirely male and working class, salty of speech and generous with wine, cigarettes, and chorizo. Such men had sometimes had a try at the bulls themselves in village festivals and knew firsthand what it is like to
see the animal come through the gate into the ring like a locomotive. Years of studying the events in the plaza, if only through a drunken haze, had taught them to distinguish the modish cheat from the subtle, authentic, but sometimes dry work of the genuine artist. When the prosperous but less knowledgeable in the barreras (seats adjoining the ring) applauded the matador who flourished the muleta (small cape) after the horn had passed, my neighbors could sit in ominous silence or growl curses at the sinverguenza (shameless one). To a man, they were toristas, who would go out of their way to see toros that they could hope from bloodlines and from recent performance would challenge the matador to exert all his professionalism, all his resources. The torerista, by contrast, followed toreros, as the young follow rock stars, tending not to discriminate the difficult, demanding bull from the bred-down, relatively easy animal favored by all but a precious few matadors, the rare, genuine artists.

The first three days of the autumn fair were passable but disappointing. Five-hundred-kilo animals, some fifty to a hundred kilos over their proper weight, were weak and often collapsed, depriving the toreros' work of either dignity or finesses. The animals were poorly matched, as tradition demanded they should be, while several bulls showed signs of horn clipping, a criminal practice designed to make the animal safer for the torero by altering the natural, precise use of its horns. As day succeeded day, it became painfully obvious that all was not well in the world of the bulls. The spectacle of indiscriminate breeding and profit from such animals led me to pay more attention to my present-day companions in the once-cheap seats than to the often boring ritual being enacted in the ring.

Gone were the homy-handed, knowledgeable proletariate of the past. Now my companions were well-dressed, soft-palmed business people of some sort, often with their legitimate wives, armed with Japanese binoculars, their thirst assuaged by Coca-Cola. Seated just above me, a man of affairs answered a mobile telephone, an effect at a bullfight as gauche as a nude leaping from a cake in church during mass. A few of the ancient, frog-voiced, male vendors of beer and whiskey were on hand, contrasting ludicrously with the pretty American ice cream sellers. Not only wives but groups of unaccompanied young girls made up perhaps half of the section, in contrast to the days when the only women present were mistresses and whores. The expensive barreras were now occupied by businessmen on expense accounts, for bullfighting had become chic among the newly prosperous, whose experience derived from occasional corridas on television. The passion and long experience of the art and spectacle were missing among such gentry.

On day four we were treated, if that is the word, not to the regulation six bulls but to ten, in a three-hour endurance contest. Four of the scheduled animals were rejected by the public and the president of the proceedings as unfit, although they were not much different from many of the bulls we saw on other days. No longer festive, the glum crowd filtered out into a moonless night, while several variously cynical of my friends gathered at the bar. Lingering too long, we found the great gates shut, but we knew the press-room was open, and through it, the abattoir and the attendants' exit. In the abattoir, the butchers were still at work. Normally they completed their tasks and were away, but ten bulls to slaughter was not normal. They went about their indelicate surgery on the suspended tenth carcass, as the apprentices hosed down blood and excrement, each man covered in a black, cloak-like waterproof and black boots, silent and efficient under the dim, artificial light. Except for the sanitary hose-pipe, the scene was meant for William Hogarth or Francisco Goya. The butcher's work cannot be gentrified, as so many other phases of Spanish life have been.

Until recently, fighting bulls were bred on the extensive lands of the grand or lesser aristocracy, whose motive commonly was not profit but pride, an expression of a way of life and expertise. Not all breeders were rigidly honorable, for complaints about deliberate alteration in stock to produce a bull easy for the torero go back generations. Of late, however, abuses have multiplied, given the proliferation of corridas throughout Spain in the past ten years and the profits now to be gained from bulls: A standard string of seven bulls now brings the rancher, on average, 70 million pesetas. Cows that once would have gone straight to the butcher are now bred despite defects, leading to public disappointment and too often to a bogus "triumph" on the part of cynical toreros, who also may gain untold riches from the cornucopia of contracts on offer. Not only does the overproduction of bulls and of corridas reflect the gentling of bullfighting, but by depriving bullfighting of a necessary element, it may well mean that pure, classical bullfighting will change from high to low, from near-tragedy to farce.

Toreros often come from the villages near the breeding ranches, learning their craft from childhood to young manhood, when, if they are talented and lucky, they might also become wealthy. Like any true art, bullfighting demands mastery of craft, intelligence, knowledge of tradition, and the spontaneity deriving

THE BULLFIGHT GENTRIFIED / 49
from imagination. Unlike the other arts, bullfighting also depends on the craftsman's long experience of the animal, which trains his intuition of the bull he must face and properly kill. It is a rural rather than an urban pursuit, one rooted in both aristocratic and peasant sources; sadly, both sources in Spain become muddied as gentrification takes over. Formerly, bullfighting belonged to the pueblo (people, village, land), and even the most citified Spaniard formerly returned annually to his village to witness the celebration of its saint's day in a corrida and in homage to his rural roots. Too busy now in the city, he may no longer make the pilgrimage, but his attendance at the corrida in the city, however corrupted, becomes a surrogate, subliminal form of homage, which soccer cannot supply. Extremely high prices for tickets in the small, provincial plazas mean that the pueblo have virtually been eliminated from their own celebrations, their places taken by city people and tourists. Some ground for hope in the future of bullfighting nevertheless exists. Entrance into the European Community (EC) brought high prices, inflation, and demands in the European parliament for the abandonment of the abomination of bullfighting in Spain. In the face of a warm campaign in northern Europe and in Spain itself, the struggle was quietly abandoned; Spaniards who rarely or never went to the bulls were deeply offended at the insult to their tradition; did not the royal family itself frequently occupy the royal box in Las Ventas? The controversy has recently been renewed in the EC with the news that matadors are being paid £35 for each bull they kill in the plaza, thanks to a curious bureaucratic reading of arcane regulations.

If gentrification was held briefly at bay by loyalty to tradition, the good life nevertheless continued to spread. One no longer skis over prawn shells, cigarette ends, spit, and abandoned newspapers to make one's way to the tapas bar. Trash bins have been placed at strategic intervals, and the noxious old smells have vanished. Only the din of unwatched television and the shouted talk, assertion not conversation, remain. Many of the lovely old bars have been remodeled in plastic or have become boutiques, while U.S. fast-food chains purveying gastronomic disaster abound.

In Madrid just outside the Bank of Spain, the subway to the Paseo del Prado used to be inhabited by begging gypsies and ill-trained guitarists; now a lone busker expertly plays a harp taller than he is.

Just as a market economy and entrance into the EC has brought a measure, or the illusion, of prosperity to Spain, and with it a shift in manners and mores, so a rough underside of Spanish life has not been dislodged, nor has unemployment, currently standing at 22 percent. Spain remains, for better or for worse, a man's country. Long overdue, women's liberation in Spain is decades behind the women's movement in Britain, northern Europe, or the United States. Women's presence at the corridas, in the soldiery, and the police may be seen as a gesture of liberation, but it can also be seen as a coarsening of outlook. The abrupt changes in Spain after Franco's death affected sexual mores and speech as in no other country: For sale on the Gran Via, Madrid, is a magazine called New C——s, to cite only one example of the pornography that would put to shame the worst of Eighth Avenue in New York or Soho in London. Drugs are bought and sold, muggings, unknown before, are an everyday fact in the cities.

It is stupid and sentimental to wallow in recollections of a possibly better past, but it remains essential to try to assess modern fact against past fact, against the times when men had to work two full-time jobs in order to feed their families, when agricultural workers lived on bread, olives, and on feast days, dried fish. Spain dirty and hungry was not pleasant, but Spain well-fed and prosperous has lost savor and character as it joins the rest of the well-off world. Both that world and Spain, although unknowingly, will surely become impoverished and thinner if they continue to gentrify, to vulgarize, and thus to lose the unique art and spectacle of the corrida de toros.

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