

For Observance, a selected non-fiction

I say that the blueness we see in the atmosphere is not intrinsic colour, but is caused by warm vapour evaporated in minute and insensible atoms on which the solar rays fall, rendering them luminous against the infinite darkness of the fiery sphere which lies beyond and includes it. And this may be seen, as I saw it by any one going up number 5 Monoso, a peak of the Alps which divide France from Italy, The base of this mountain gives birth to the four rivers which flow in four different directions through the whole of Europe. And no mountain has its peak at so great a height as this, which lifts itself almost above the clouds; and snow seldom falls there, but only hail in the summer, when the clouds are highest. And this hail lies there, so that if it were not for the absorption of the rising and falling clouds, which does not happen twice in an age, an enormous mass of ice would be piled up there by the hail, and in the middle of July I found it very considerable. There I saw above me the dark sky, and the sun as it fell on the mountain was far brighter here than in the plains below, because a smaller extent of atmosphere lay between the summit of the mountain and the sun. Again as an illustration of the colour of the atmosphere I will mention the smoke of old and dry wood, which, as it comes out of a chimney, appears to turn very blue, when seen between the eye and the dark distance, but as it rises, and comes between the eye and the bright atmosphere, it at once shows of an ashy grey colour; and this happens because it no longer has darkness beyond it, but this bright and luminous space. If the smoke is from young, green wood, it will not appear blue, because not being transparent and being full of superabundant moisture, it has the effect of condensed clouds which take distinct lights and shadows like a solid body. The same occurs with the atmosphere, which, when overcharged with moisture appears white, and the small amount of heated moisture makes it dark, of a dark blue colour; and this will suffice us so far as concerns the colour of the atmosphere; though it might be added that, if this transparent blue were the natural colour of the atmosphere, it would follow that wherever a larger mass air intervened between the eye and the element of fire, the azure colour would be more intense; as we see in blue glass and in sapphires, which are darker in proportion as they are larger. But the atmosphere in such circumstances behaves in an opposite manner, inasmuch as where a greater quantity of it lies between the eye and the sphere of fire, it is seen much whiter, this occurs towards the horizon. And the less the extent of atmosphere between the eye and the sphere of fire, the deeper is the blue colour, as may be seen even on low plains. Hence it follows, as I say, that the atmosphere assumes this azure hue by reason of the particles of moisture which catch the rays of the sun. Again, we may note the difference in particles of dust, or particles of smoke, in the sun beams admitted through holes into a dark chamber, when the former will look as grey and the thin smoke will appear of a most beautiful blue; and it may be seen again in the dark shadows of distant mountains when the air between the eye and those shadows will look very blue, though the brightest parts of those mountains will not differ much from their true colour...But if any one wishes for a final proof let him paint a board with various colours, among them an intense black; and

over all let him lay a very thin and transparent white, he will then see that this transparent white will nowhere show a more beautiful blue than over the black- but it must be very thin and finely ground.

Anyway it is the best two dollars' worth I have ever had. Still, I remembered, at the first bullfight I ever saw, before I could see it clearly, before I could even see what happened, in the new, crowded, confused, white-jacketed beer vender passing in front of you, two steel cables between your eyes and the ring below, the bull's shoulders smooth with blood, the banderillas clattering as he moved and a streak of dust down the middle of his back, his horns solid-looking like wood on top, thicker than your arm where they curved; I remembered in the midst of this confused excitement having a great moment of emotion when the man went in with the sword. But I could not see in my mind exactly what happened and when, on the next bull, I watched closely the emotion was gone and I saw it was a trick.

I saw fifty bulls killed after that before I had the emotion again. But by then I could see how it was done and I knew I had seen it done properly that first time.

When you see a bull killed for the first time, if it is the usual run of killing, this is about how it will look: The bull will be standing square on his four feet facing the man who will be standing about five yards away with his feet facing the man who will be standing about five yards away with his feet together, the muleta in his left hand and the sword in his right. The man will raise the cloth in his left hand to see if the bull follows it with his eyes; then he will lower the cloth, hold it and the sword together, turn so that he is standing sideways toward the bull, make a twist with his left hand that will furl the cloth over the stick of the muleta, draw the sword up from the lowered muleta and sight along it toward the bull, his head, the bull, the muleta held low in his left hand. You will see him draw himself taut and start toward the bull and the next thing you will see is that he is past the bull and either the sword has risen into the air and gone end over end or you will see its red flannel wrapped hilt, or the hilt and part of the blade sticking out from between the bull's shoulders or from his neck muscles and the crowd will be shouting in approval or disapproval depending on the manner in which the man has gone in and the location of the sword.

That is all you will see of the killing; but the mechanics of it are these: Bulls are not killed properly by a sword thrust in the heart. The sword is not long enough to reach the heart, if driven in where it should go high up between the shoulder blades. It goes past the vertebrae between the top of the ribs and, if it kills instantly, cuts the aorta. That is the end of a perfect sword thrust and to make it the man must have the good luck that the sword point should not strike either the spine or the ribs as it goes in. No man can go toward a bull, reach over the top of his head if it is carried high, and put a sword in between his shoulders. The instant the bull's head is up the sword is not long enough to reach from his head to his shoulders. For it to be possible for the man to put the sword into the place where it is designed to go to kill the bull he must have the bull's head down so that this place is exposed and even then the man must lean forward over the bull's lowered head and neck to get the sword in. Now, if when the bull raises his head as the sword goes in and the man is not to go up in the air two things must be happening; either the muleta in the man's

left arm as he shoves the sword in with his right or else the man must be in motion past the bull who is guided away from the man by the muleta held by the left hand which is crossed low in front of and to the left of the man's body as he goes in over the bull's head and comes out along his flank. Killing can be tricked by having both the man and bull in motion.

These are the mechanical principles of the two ways to kill bulls properly; either the bull must come to and pass the man, cited, drawn on, controlled and going out and away from the man by a movement of the muleta while the sword is being inserted between his shoulders; or else the man must fix the bull in position, his front feet together and his hind feet square with them, his head neither too high nor too low, must test him by raising and lowering the cloth to see if he follows it with his eyes and then, with muleta in his left hand making a cross in front of him so that if the bull follows it he will pass to the man's right, go in toward the bull and as he lowers his head after the cloth which is to guide him away from the man, put the sword in and come out along the bull's flank. When the man awaits the charge of the bull it is called killing *recibiendo*.

When the man goes in on the bull it is called a *volapie'* or flying with the feet, Preparing to go in, left shoulder toward the bull, sword pointed along the man's body, muleta held furled in the left hand, is called *profiling*.

The closer it is done to the animal the less chance the man has to deviate and escape if the bull does not follow the cloth as the man goes in. The movement made to swing the left arm holding the muleta, which is crossed in front of the body, out and past the right side to get rid of the *uyll* is called *crossing*, Any time the man does not make this cross he will have the bull under him. Unless he swings him far enough out the horn is certain to catch him. To make this cross successfully necessitates a wrist movement which will swing the folds of the furled muleta out and to the side as well as a simple arm movement across and away from the body. Bullfighters say that a bull is killed more with the left hand which controls the muleta and guides the animal than with the right which shoves in the sword. There is no great force needed to put in the sword if the point does not strike bone; properly guided by the muleta if the man leans after the blade the bull will seem sometimes to pluck the sword out from his hand. Other times, hitting bone, it will seem as though he had struck a wall of rubber and cement.

And the roof:

It is of short hand-hewn boards so thick and broad, they are shingles only of a most antique sort: crosswise upon rigid beams laths have been nailed, not far apart, and upon these laths, in successive rows of dozens and of hundreds, and here again, though regularly, with a certain shuffling of erratism against pure symmetry, these broad thick shingles are laid down overlapping from the peak to the overhung edge like the plumage of a bird who must meet weather: and not unlike some square and formalized plumage, as of a holy effigy, they seem, and made in profligate plates of a valuable metal; for they have never been stained, nor otherwise touched or colored save only by all habits of the sky:

Upon these structures, light:

It stands just sufficiently short of vertical that every leaf of shingle, at its edges, and every edge of horizontal plank (locked, at each center, with squared verticals) is a most black and cutting ink: and every surface struck by light is thus: such an intensity and splendor of silver in the

silver light, it seems to burn and burns and blinds into the eyes almost as snow; yet in none of that burnishment or blazing whereby detail is lost: each texture in the wood, like those of bone, is distinct in the eye as a razor: each nail-head is distinct: each seam and split; and each slight warping; each random knot and knothole: and in each board, as lovely a music as a contour map and unique as a thumbprint, its grain, which was its living strength, and these wild creeks cut stiff across by saws; and moving nearer, the close-laid arcs and shadows even of those tearing wheels: and this, more poor and plain than bone, more naked and noble than sternest Doric, more rich and more variant than watered silk, is the fabric and the stature of a house.

It is put together out of the cheapest available pine lumber and the least of this is used which shall stretch a skin of one thickness alone against the earth and air; and this is all done according to one of the three or four simplest, stingiest, and thus most classical plans contrivable, which are all traditional to that country: and the work is done by half-skilled half-paid men under no need to do well, who therefore take such vengeance on the world as they may in a cynical and part willful apathy; and this is what comes of it: Most naive, most massive symmetry and simpleness. Enough lines, enough off-true, that this symmetry is strongly yet most subtly sprained against its center, into something more powerful than either full symmetry or deliberate breaking and balancing of 'monotonies' can hope to be. A look of being most earnestly hand-made as a child's drawing, a thing created out of need, love, patience, and strained skill in the innocence of a race. Nowhere one ounce or inch spent with ornament, not one trace of relief or of disguise: a matchless monotony, and in it a matchless variety and this again throughout restrained, held rigid: and off all this, nothing which is not intrinsic between the materials of structure, the earth, and the open heaven. The major lines of structure, each horizontal of each board and the edge of shingle, the strictness yet subtle dishevelment of the shingles, the nail-heads, which are driven according to geometric need, yet are not in perfect order, the grain, differing in each foot of each board and in each board from any other, the many knots in this cheap lumber all these fluencies and irregularities, all these shadows of pattern upon each piece of wood, all these in rectilinear ribbons caught into one squared, angled, and curled music, compounding a chord of four chambers upon a soul and center of clean air: and upon all these masses and edges and chances and flowerings of grain, the changes of colorings of all weathers, and the slow complexions and marchings of pure light.

Or by another saying:

'In all this house:

'In all of this house not any one inch of lumber being wasted on embellishment or on trim, or on any form of relief, or even on any doubling of walls: it is, rather, as if a hard thin hide of wood has been stretched to its utmost to cover exactly once, or a little less than once, in all size planes the skeletal beams which, with the inside surface of the weatherboarding are the inside walls; and no touch, as I have said, of any wash or paint, nor, on the floors, any kind of covering, nor, to three of the rooms, any kind of ceiling, but in all places left are the plain essences of structure; in result all these almost perfect symmetries have their full strength, and every inch of the structure, and every aspect and placement of the building materials, comes inevitably and purely through into full esthetic existence,

the one further conditioner, and discriminator between the functions and proprieties of indoors and out, being the lights and operations of the sky'. Or by a few further notes:

'On symmetry: the house is rudimentary as a child's drawing, and of a bareness, cleanness, and sobriety which only Doric architecture, so far as I know, can hope to approach: this exact symmetry is sprung slightly and subtly here and there, one corner of the house a little off vertical a course of weatherboarding failing the horizontal between parallels, a window frame not quite square, by lack of skill and by weight and weakness of timber and time; and these slight failures, their tensions sprung against centers and opposals of such rigid and earnest exactitude, set up intensities of relationship far more powerful than full symmetry, or studied dissymmetry, or use of relief or ornament, can ever be: indeed, the power is of another world and order than theirs, and there is, as I mentioned, a particular quality of a thing hand-made, which by comparison I can best suggest thus: by the grandeur that comes of the effort of one man to hold together upon one instrument, as if he were breaking a wild monster to bridle and riding, one of the larger fugues of Bach, on an organ, as against the slick collaborations and effortless climaxes of the same piece in the manipulations of an orchestra.'

"Well, first of all," he began, "there were three, maybe four categories. One was like 'go'. You built the thing-like the Cat and the Mole, they built things that were just rat-assed, but, boy, they went like a son of a bitch. The body could be almost falling off, you'd be sitting in an egg crate, but everything was in the engine, and that was very sanitary. Then there was 'go-and-show,' which was like a car that went real good but wasn't necessarily going to be in a class with the Cat and the Mole, but it would look fine. It was a question of taking a car that was a classic model and then just doing the few right things with it to accentuate why it was a classic model, building it up to absolutely cherry condition. Then there was 'show,' and then there were like 'pussy waggons,' which were strictly kind of like Chicano cars are now: lowered way down, everything exaggerated, blue lights under the fenders, Angora socks bobbing in the window, seats that tilt back, all that sort of bad taste, which has now achieved almost the level of a profession. "Well, I was category two, go-and-show. Sort of a little bit of both, I mean, the car had to be real good, because it had to have an edge on it, but on the other hand, it had much more to do with its being an absolutely classic model, with everything set up just right.

... As we wheeled out of Baldwin Hills, back down many of the same streets Eddie Black had often cruised, Bob recalled that particular '39: "Well, I finally got that car finished, I had twenty coats of ruby-red maroon on the dash and I had this great finish outside, The car was absolutely hunky-dory. Twenty coats of ruby-red maroon, let me tell you, to paint the dash: that means taking everything out, all the instruments and everything, painting it, building up these coats very slowly, spraying the lacquer, It was just a very exaggerated thing...

"Of course, what's going on in such situations is precisely an artistic activity. A lot of art critics, especially New York Artforum types, have a lot of trouble seeing the validity of such a contention. I once had a runin with one of them about this - this was years later... This guy was out here, one of the head honchos, and he was upset - what was it? - oh, yeah - because

Billy Al Bengston was racing motorcycles at the time. This critic just dismissed that out of hand as a superficial, suicidal self-indulgence. And I said you can't do that, We got going and ended up arguing about folk art. As far as I'm concerned, a folk art is when you take a utilitarian object, something you use everyday, and you give it overlays of your own personality, what it is you feel and so forth, You enhance it with your life. And a folk art in the current period of time would more appropriately be in the area of something like a motorcycle, I mean, a motorcycle can be a lot more than just a machine that runs along; it can be a whole description of a personality and an aesthetic.

"Anyway, so I looked in the paper, and I found this ad of a guy who was selling a hot rod and a motorcycle. And I took the critic out to this place, It was really fortunate, because it was exactly what I wanted. We arrived at this place in the Valley, in the middle of nowhere, and here's this kid: he's selling a hot rod and he's got another he's working on. He's selling a '32 coupe, and he's got a '29 roadster in the garage, The '32 he was getting rid of was an absolute cherry. But what was more interesting, and which I was able to show this critic, was that here was this '29, absolutely dismantled, I mean, completely apart, and the kid was making decisions about the frame, whether or not he was going to cad plate certain bolts or whether he was going to buff grind them, or whether he was them raw as they were. He was insulating and soundproofing the doors, all kinds of things that no one would ever know or see unless they were truly a sophisticate in the area. But, I mean, real aesthetic decisions. Here was a fifteen-year-old kid who wouldn't know art from schmart, but you couldn't talk about a more real aesthetic activity than what he was doing, how he was carefully weighing: what was the attitude of this whole thing? What exactly? How should it look? What was the relationship in terms of its machinery, its social bearing, everything? I mean, all these things were being weighed in terms of the aesthetics of how the thing should look. It was a perfect example.

"The critic simply denied it. Simply denied it: not important, unreal, untrue, doesn't happen, doesn't exist, See, he comes from a world in New York where the automobile....I mean, automobiles are 'What? Automobile? Nothing,' Right? I mean, no awareness no sensitivity, no involvement. So he simply denied it: 'It doesn't exist.' Like that: 'Not an issue.' Which we argued about a little on the way back over the Sepulveda pass.

"I said, 'How can you deny it? You may not be interested, but how can you deny it? I mean, there it is, full blown, right in front of you, and it's obviously a folk art!'

"Anyway, he, 'No, no.'

"So I finally just stopped the car and made him get out, I just flat left him there by the road, man, and just drove off. Said, 'See you later, Max.'"

Leonardo on: Arial Perspective

Hemmingway on: Killing Bulls

Agee on: a Tenant Farmers House

Irwin on: Cars & Folk Art