HE WAS A FIGHTER: BOXING IN NORMAN MAILER'S LIFE AND WORK

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BOXING HAS PROVIDED A SIGNIFICANT MORAL PARADIGM throughout much of Norman Mailer's life and work. In his seminal essay entitled "Death" in *The Presidential Papers* (1963), Mailer uses the first Sonny Liston/Floyd Patterson championship bout as a point of departure from which to develop a profound series of perceptions about the American national temperament, particularly that of blacks. In *King of the Hill* (1971) and more strikingly in *The Fight* (1975) he deals nominally with a specific championship bout, but goes beyond journalism to find certain normative precepts in the sport. But there is another level on which boxing informs and conditions Mailer's vision: In his fiction, most notably *An American Dream* (1965) and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984), boxing experiences help define the protagonists. Stephen Richards Rojack and Tim Madden respectively find "the reward of the ring" (*Dream* 16) applicable to their existential quests for self. Ultimately, Mailer's views on boxing are far from simplistic. From the powerful account of Benny Paret's death in the ring at the hands of Emile Griffith to his statements to me about the ill-fated conclusion to Muhammad Ali's career to his 1988 article on Mike Tyson, "Fury, Fear, Philosophy," Mailer has found in this arena of ritualized violence a rich source of perception about the human condition. In fact, in his 1993 essay in *Esquire*, "The Best Move Lies Next to the Worst" (reprinted in *The Time of Our Time*), he deals with his own boxing experiences at the Gramercy Gym with José Torres, Ryan O'Neal and others. The title of the piece comes from the comparison of boxing to chess (*Time* 1045–1052).

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I believe it's best to confront the central issue here at the outset. Mailer has, indeed, perceived gladiatorial confrontation and violence as a central metaphor for his own artistic and personal struggles for growth, fulfillment, salvation. As he muses retrospectively upon a turning point in his career during his personal crises of the early 1960s,

> [T]he review in *Time* [of *Deaths for the Ladies*] put iron into my heart again, and rage, and the feeling that the enemy was more alive than ever, and dirtier in the alley, and so one had to mend, and put on the armor, and go to war, go out to war again, and try to hew huge strokes with the only broadsword God ever gave you, a glimpse of something like almighty prose. (*Existential Errands* 204)

Very well, then: Mailer unabashedly uses violent confrontation as a touchstone for his vision of life and art. He has persistently perceived himself as embattled. But witness the artistic regeneration, the prolific and truly significant output that resulted as a direct consequence of this attitude.

Mailer's significant writing about boxing begins with *The Presidential Papers* in the long and riveting essay entitled "Death," originally titled "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," one of his "Big Bite" columns for *Esquire*. Not only does this piece prefigure and announce the new mode of Mailer's nonfiction writing in the late 1960s and 1970s, notably *The Armies of the Night*, it is the key to his fascination with boxing.

The first Patterson/Liston fight provides Mailer an opportunity to embark on a series of sophisticated statements on boxing and the national disposition. But the center of the piece, as the title suggests, is the brutal killing of Benny Paret in the ring by Emile Griffith. Let us deal with the most hideous aspects of boxing first. Unlike most bouts, this one was fueled by an intense hatred between the fighters. Here is Mailer's description of the climax:

> In the twelfth, Griffith caught him. Paret got trapped in a corner. Trying to duck away, his left arm and his head became tangled on the wrong side of the top rope. Griffith was in like a cat ready to rip the life out of a huge boxed rat. He hit him eighteen right hands in a row, an act which took perhaps three or four seconds, Griffith making a pent-up whimpering sound all the

> while he attacked, the right hand whipping like a piston rod which has broken through the crankcase, or like a baseball bat demolishing a pumpkin.... I had never seen one man hit another so hard and so many times. Over the referee's face came a look of woe as if some spasm had passed its way through him, and then he leaped on Griffith to pull him away. It was the act of a brave man. Griffith was uncontrollable. His trainer leaped into the ring, his manager, his cut man, there were four people holding Griffith, but he was off on an orgy, he had left the Garden, he was back on a hoodlum's street. If he had been able to break loose from his handlers and the referee, he would have jumped Paret to the floor and whaled on him there.
>
> And Paret? Paret died on his feet. As he took those eighteen punches something happened to everyone who was in psychic range of the event. Some part of his death reached out to us. One felt it hover in the air. He was still standing in the ropes, trapped as he had been before, he gave some little half-smile of regret, as if he were saying, 'I didn't know I was going to die just yet,' and then, his head leaning back but still erect, his death came to breathe about him. ("Death" 244–245)

This event was not, of course, taken lightly by the public: "There was shock in the land.... There were editorials, gloomy forecasts that the Game was dead. The managers and the prizefighters got together. Gently, in thick, depressed hypocrisies, they tried to defend their sport" (245).

Mailer goes on to delve into that species of blood religion to which fight people adhere and the kind of mystery it has lent to the works of such writers as D. H. Lawrence and Ernest Hemingway. And what of Mailer's own response?

> Something in boxing was spoiled.... I loved it with freedom no longer. It was more like somebody in your family was fighting now. And the feeling one had for a big fight was no longer clear of terror in its excitement. There was awe in the suspense. (247–248)

Professional boxing, then, presents difficult moral problems to Mailer as well as to any humane person. This does not, I submit, obviate its significance in

Mailer's work as a test of courage. I would suggest that it is in the exercise of disciplined skill, resourcefulness, stoicism, the force of will in the face of risk, that the human spirit is capable of reaching its peak expression.

Another case in point is *King of the Hill*, a modest little book originally published as a long article in *Life* magazine (with photographs by Frank Sinatra), dealing with Muhammad Ali's hard-fought defeat at the hands of Joe Frazier after his three year enforced layoff from boxing. As in "Death," the opponents assume symbolic, almost mythic proportions. Central to this is Mailer's pervasive Manichean vision of the cosmos, even down to Ali's twin poodles named "Angel" and "Demon." But the conclusion is most significant to Mailer's last work:

> [Y]et Ali got up, Ali came sliding through the last two minutes and thirty-five seconds of this heathen holocaust in some last exercise of the will, some iron fundament of the ego not to be knocked out, and it was then as if the spirit of Harlem finally spoke and came to rescue and the ghosts of the dead in Vietnam, something held him up before arm-weary triumphant near-crazy Frazier who had just hit him the hardest punch ever thrown in his life and they went down to the last few seconds of a great fight, Ali still standing and Frazier had won.
>
> The world was talking instantly of a rematch. For Ali had shown America what we all had hoped was secretly true. He was a man. He could bear moral and physical torture and he could stand. And if he could beat Frazier in the rematch we would have at last a national hero who was hero of the world as well. (*King* 92–92)

Ali *was* a national hero, for his moral and physical courage. His heroism had fascinated Mailer for years. In a short piece, "An Appreciation of Cassius Clay," he wrote: "[I] don't want to get started writing about Muhammad Ali, because I could go on for a book" (*Errands* 264). He went on to condemn Ali's exclusion from boxing because of his conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and concluded: "Therefore we are all deprived of an intimate spectacle which was taking place in public—the forging of a professional artist of extraordinary dimensions…he was bringing a revolution to the theory of boxing.…" (264). And when I asked him, "… now that it's pretty well doc-

umented that Ali has been damaged by boxing, do you love the sport as much as you did?" Mailer responded, "Well, I don't think I love it as much as I used to. One reason is because he's out of it" (Leeds 1).

All of this of course points directly to Mailer's most significant work on boxing, *The Fight*. Suffice it to say that Mailer's obsessive preoccupation with existentialism and Manichean polarities, his newly found fascination with African mysticism and the concept of *N'golo* (or force), his vision of Muhammad Ali as artist and hero, find their serendipitous confluence here.

As in virtually all of his work after 1968, Mailer treats a factual situation, and the people involved, in terms of highly subjective and fascinating digressions. Thus, in addition to an in-depth account of the fight and the circumstances preceding and following it, the reader is offered observations on African religion and politics, allusions to Hemingway, Hunter Thompson, and George Plimpton, and further candid insights into Mailer himself: the status of his projected big novel, his compulsion to walk parapets, his hatred of jogging. Most amusing, however, is the self-deprecating anecdote in which Mailer, returning late at night along a jungle path on which he had been doing road work with Ali, hears a lion roar. He proceeds through a series of serio-comic reactions, culminating in the fantasy that he is about to be eaten by "Hemingway's own lion" waiting all these years for a fit substitute, and the final recognition that the lion he hears is probably caged in the city's zoo (91–92). This announces, I believe, an attractive new modesty in Mailer.

Such modesty pervades "The Best Move Lies Close to the Worst," in which Mailer recounts his adventures and misadventures in boxing in a consistently self-deprecating manner. Boxing with José Torres is described thus (*Time* 1048):

> He was impossible to hit and that was an interesting experience-you felt as if you were sharing the ring with a puma.... Over ten years of boxing with José Torres I was able to catch him with a good right hand lead twice, and the first occasion was an event. He ran around the ring with his arms high in triumph, crying out, "He hit me with a right—he hit me with a right!" unconscionably proud that day of his pupil.

The story, in a mildly oversimplified form, has circulated for years that Mailer gave Torres writing lessons in return for boxing lessons. Actually,

Mailer first began to learn boxing under the tutelage of the father of Adele Morales, his second wife. In the "Sixth Advertisement for Myself," Mailer states:

> I was doing some boxing now. My father-in-law had been a professional; he was always putting on the gloves with me.… I was in nice shape, and my senses were alert. (*Advertisements* 331)

Most interesting in the later collaboration are the parallels that Torres and Mailer found between the two occupations. When asked if there is a difference in the discipline required for writing and boxing (in an interview with Jessica Blue and Legs McNeil for *Details*), Torres responded, "No fucking difference" (*Details*, nd., 86). But earlier in the same interview, he tells of how Mailer "told me that writing was about truth.… He knew that boxing was the opposite. It's about cheating and deceiving and lying, and he said that it's a very hard transition.… You're cheating the other guy by feinting with a left and cheating with a jab" (*Details* 85).

Another regular at the Gramercy Gym in the 1980s was Sal Cetrano, who is mentioned (though not by name) in "The Best Move." In a hitherto unpublished interview with J. Michael Lennon (dated May 24, 2007), Cetrano disarmingly recounts a series of anecdotes regarding his experiences with Mailer, Torres, and Ryan O'Neal.

Cetrano first met Mailer by accident on Broadway in 1980, and the first thing they talked about was the Paret/Griffith fight. Subsequently, Cetrano wrote Mailer a letter which was reciprocated by a postcard that simply said, "Be at the Gramercy Gym at 10:30 AM Saturday." Sal had been in the Golden Gloves as a kid, but he "weighed about 145 pounds and everyone seemed bigger." His solution to this problem, since "I had been a distance runner as a kid," was to keep opponents at arm's length. Of the relationship between Mailer and Torres, he describes it as one of "power to power: Norman was a king of literature; Jose a king of boxing."

When asked by Michael Lennon of the parallels between Mailer as boxer and as writer, Cetrano responds (with deprecating laughter as risking a cliché) that he's "existential" in both: "He does things to their fullest." Although Norman had a "wonderful teacher in Jose," he's not a fast boxer. "He wades in and clubs you to death." This suggestion of Mailer's legendary fearless-

ness will echo for anyone who knows his life and work, in every act or stunt as well as every piece of prose.

Since Mailer's death on November 10, 2007, there has (not surprisingly) been an outpouring of retrospective summaries and evaluations of his life and career in magazines, newspapers, radio and television, virtually all mass media. Equally unsurprising is the fact that Mailer has been almost universally portrayed as a fighter for everything he believed in, and more precisely, in many cases as a boxer. For example, in an article in *The New York Observer* (Nov. 19, 2007, 8) Leon Neyfakh tells the story of how Mailer acquired the original David Levine illustration of Mailer "as a boxer, his … body in a crouch and his gloves at his face." Mailer had just published "Some Children of the Goddess" in *Esquire* (July 1963, rpt. *Cannibals and Christians*, 1966) in which he took on his major novelistic contemporaries and rivals and was photographed posed in the corner of a boxing ring. Neyfakh goes on to recount how Mailer took the cardboard-mounted illustration to show Jose Torres, who teased Mailer's vanity by idly bending it almost to the breaking point. Apparently, by remaining silent (if not unperturbed) Mailer passed the Torres modesty requirement.

It is, in fact, almost impossible to enumerate the many retrospectives appearing immediately after Mailer's death which either pictured him in a boxing contest: with gloves on or actually in a ring. Many others referred pointedly to his predilection for fisticuffs both in and out of the ring. Thus, it is clear that boxing has always been and will always be associated with the Mailer legend. *Sports Illustrated* titled Kostya Kennedy's tribute, "The Pugilist at Rest."

Violence in Personal Confrontation Outside the Ring

What I further consider significant here is Mailer's fictive vision of fighting. Violence in personal confrontations outside the ring, both in heterosexual relationships and between male adversaries, is central to Mailer's fiction. Christian Messenger, in a related article, makes some interesting points, but I think it's a critical commonplace to trot out Mailer's 1959 story, "The Time of Her Time," as the beginning of all this. As early as *A Transit to Narcissus* (1978), Mailer was already concerned with the smoldering violence between sexual partners, alluding to "the most terrible themes of my own life: the nearness of violence to creation, and the whiff of murder just beyond every embrace of love" (Introduction x).

And the darkest side of this vision is disturbingly revealed in *The Armies of the Night* (1968), when Mailer writes with horror of federal marshall and American soldiers brutally beating young women during the night after the 1967 march on the Pentagon: Such men, he suggests, "may never have another opportunity like this—to beat a woman without having to make love to her" (304).

It's true that in "The Time of Her Time," Sergius O'Shaugnessy, just back from Mexico after the end of *The Deer Park* (1955), does throw Denise Gondelman "a fuck the equivalent of a fifteen round fight" ("Time" in *Advertisements* 501). Sergius has been a boxer in the Air Force, and in bed he and Denise are "like two club fighters" (490). But it is she who gets in the last literal punch: "I might have known she would have a natural punch. My jaw felt it for half an hour after she was gone…" (494–495). And in the story's last line, he muses that "[L]ike a real killer, she did not look back, and was out the door before I could rise to tell her that she was a hero fit for me" (503). This is, therefore, a battle of equals, which prefigures embryonically the growth toward the graceful, loving equality of the central Rojack/Cherry passage in *An American Dream*.

The extended fighting metaphor reaches its peak in *An American Dream*. Stephen Rojack is an amateur boxer, and clearly the central bout of the novel is the vitriolic and deadly scene in the opening chapter when, in a surprisingly even match, he fights and kills his powerful, witch-like wife, Deborah. But I must point out yet again that Rojack does not, as Kate Millet suggests, "get away with murder" (*Sexual Politics* 15). Instead, this scene, with its pervasive parallel imagery of combat and sex is part of a cohesive and symmetrical pattern of symbolism which unifies the novel tonally, structurally and thematically. After a series of mutual insults and the escalating fury of an intense physical struggle, Rojack strangles Deborah:

> [S]pasms began to open in me, and my mind cried out then, "Hold back! you're going too far, hold back!" I could feel a series of orders whiplike tracers of light from my head to my arm, I was ready to obey. I was trying to stop, but pulse packed behind pulse in a pressure up to thunderhead; some blackbiled lust, some desire to go ahead not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection came bursting with rage from out of me. (35–36)

This inflammatory scene introduces a more significant bout: that of Rojack with himself, in the heroic struggle to purge his own moral weakness and set out on that terrifying journey into the labyrinthine recesses of the self, on the existential quest for the true identity that lies at his core. This quest is punctuated by successively more frightening confrontations: first the scene of hellish fornication with the "Nazi" maid, Ruta, which establishes the allegorical nature of Rojack's pilgrimage to salvation in an infernal world of Manichaean choices; then with Ike "Romeo" Romalozzo, a brutal and corrupt ex-boxer; and with police Lieutenant Roberts, who is described after Rojack outwits him as a crooked wrestler who hadn't known it was his night to lose.

Penultimately, he faces Shago Martin, who in a scene of intimate violence redolent of sexual connection ("I got a whiff of his odor … a smell of full nearness, as if we'd been in bed for an hour." [*Dream* 182]) teaches Rojack something about nobility and forgiveness and passes on to him the phallic power (as epitomized in Shago's totemic umbrella) necessary for his climactic confrontation with Barney Oswald Kelly.

Insofar as each of these characters has allegorical as well as literal value in the novel, Rojack's struggles with them may be seen as confrontations with the worst aspects of himself, which he must overcome and purge. On a larger scale, his progress is a peculiarly American one, a repudiation of the false American dream of meretricious corruption and an embracing of a new, true American Dream of authenticity of self. Rojack comes to represent what was best in the American character after WWII, what was shamelessly corrupted, and what Mailer suggests may be redeemed by courage, discipline, and a commitment to selfless heterosexual love. And he does this with the aid of representatives of marginalized groups: Shago and Cherry.

Tough Guys Don't Dance is a lesser novel: a pale reflection, a distant echo of the masterful *An American Dream*. But a few points are worth touching on. Again, Tim Madden has been an amateur boxer in his youth. He does fight and defeat Spider Nissen and Stoodie, the badness twins, with the aid of "Stunts," his dog, who dies with Spider's knife in his heart. But despite initial, ambiguous appearances, Tim does not hurt, does not kill women, or kill anyone for that matter. But Patty Lareine, his wife, does kill Jessica Pond. In fact, two women are murderers: Madeleine Falco also shoots her husband, the corrupt Chief of Police Alvin Regency. Significantly, Tim Madden refuses the tempting suggestion of Patty Lareine that he kill her then husband,

Meeks Wardley Hilby III, and by the novel's end is capable of compassionate tenderness toward the suicidal, homosexual Wardley. Further, Tim establishes an almost friendly relationship with Patty's hostile, dangerous black lover, Bolo Green (a.k.a. "Mr. Black"). Most important, like Rojack at the conclusion of *An American Dream*, Tim is shown to fight his true battle with himself and his own fears and weaknesses.

Thus, in this novel as in virtually all of Mailer's work as well as his personal and public life, combat with adversaries is most pivotal as an external manifestation of the true central struggle within oneself against the ignoble, ignominious emotions of cowardice and moral sloth. Courage, personal discipline, stoicism, the leap of faith essential to love, the definition and celebration of the existential self: these values are not outmoded. They never will be.

And what of the man who wrote of these all his life? He is gone now from this sphere, from our limited purview. But his work will be with us forever, and we will remember: He was a fighter.

This essay consists largely of previously published material with substantial additions and emendations.

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