

FIGHTERS AND WRITERS

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“At Corinth two temples stood side by side, the temple of Violence and the temple of Necessity.”

—Albert Camus, “The Minotaur” (1939)

A BANNER HANGING ON A WALL at Gleason’s Gym testifies to boxing’s enduring appeal for writers. The Brooklyn boxing institution takes its motto—“Now, whoever has courage and a strong and collected spirit in his breast let him come forward, lace on the gloves and put up his hands”—from Virgil. From antiquity to the present, writers have been fascinated by humans fighting, seeing in the sport something akin to their own efforts. Appropriately, two contending views of the sport emerged. In the red corner stand those who see meetings between nearly naked and practically unprotected combatants as simple and straightforward pursuits of victory through the unmediated imposition of their wills. Writers like to see them as symbolic of their own lonely quests after the elusive truth. In the blue corner are those who see fights as far more complex endeavors fraught with meaning and metaphorical possibilities. Rather than immediately comprehensible physical contests, fights are primarily mental challenges. Far from being basic and true, boxing involves trickery and deception. In one camp, boxing is free of artifice; in the other, it is full of it.

José Torres, a boxer turned writer, takes the latter view. The former world light heavyweight champion relishes describing boxing as a game of intelligence, cunning, deception and confidence. Some of his favorite boxing stories involve Muhammad Ali, a boxer with special appeal for writers. After he retired from the ring, Torres became one of the many authors (such as Murray Kempton, Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, Ishmael Reed, Wole

Soyinka, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe) to write about Ali. Long after committing them to print, Torres continued to tell his Ali stories very much like he did in *Sting Like a Bee*, which he co-authored with sportswriter Bert Sugar.

The first time I met Torres he was with Paul Johnson, a former club fighter who later became chairman of the Boxers Organizing Committee, a group set up to form a union for professional boxers. Johnson set the stage for his friend to tell some of his favorite stories by recounting a time when the two were speaking together at a university. Paul had been telling students about what he then thought of as the fundamental honesty at the heart of boxing. Torres interrupted him.

“Boxers are liars,” he said.

Torres believes that boxing is “not really a contest of physical ability.” He elaborated his ideas in a subsequent meeting: “I felt it was a contest always of character and intelligence. And I always felt what made a champion and an ordinary fighter was that, the character, the will to win, more than the physicality. Because when you are up there, among the best, the physicality is the same.” Torres takes evident pleasure in explaining why Ali was *not* the greatest boxer, but was a genius in the ring. Doing so affords him the opportunity to recall fond memories of Ali and legendary trainer Cus D’Amato while also illustrating his point about boxers being liars. In his book on Ali, he starts the story with D’Amato, the guide to three world champions: Floyd Patterson, Torres himself, and Mike Tyson. “[Ali] is not a good fighter, so says D’Amato, much less a great fighter. But he is champion of the world. Which, believing Cus, and I do, makes Ali a genius....” He continues, in virtually the same words he spoke to me decades after the 1971 book appeared:

Ali is not a great fighter in the conventional sense that Sugar Ray Robinson, Willie Pep and Joe Louis were. Each of these fighters knew every punch and every move and added some tricks to the book, that unwritten book whose teachings are passed on from gym to gym and are the nearest thing we have to our own culture.... We have a man who does not have the physical greatness of the greatest men of other times, yet no professional has been able to beat him.... The explanation is simple. Muhammad Ali is a genius.... Don’t watch Ali’s gloves, arms or legs when he’s fighting. Watch his brains.

Other writers have made similar claims in connection with other fighters. Jack Dempsey's "overwhelming power made many people overlook the calculation that went into every punch he threw," Roger Kahn writes in *A Flame of Pure Fire*. "In that regard, he was a thinking, even intellectual boxer." In the first volume of *A Man without Qualities*, published not long after Dempsey's reign as heavyweight champion ended, novelist Robert Musil prefigured Torres and D'Amato with observations like this one: "the tricks and dodges used by an inventive mind in going through the logical operations of a mathematical problem are really not very different from the ring-craft displayed by a well-trained body." A. J. Liebling, who composed numerous entertainingly digressive, erudite articles on boxing for *The New Yorker* in the 1950s and early 1960s, distinguishes between "the *ruffian* approach" and that of "the *reasoner* inside the ring."

Part of boxers' "culture," in the view of Torres and his fellow thinkers, is the ability to lie successfully. As Jeremy Campbell notes in his so-called history of falseness, *A Liar's Tale*, "when winning is the important factor, deceitfulness is a kind of ethic...." From a technical standpoint, Ali did plenty "wrong," but excelled nonetheless because of his cleverness, his ability to con his opponents. He perfected the liar's ethic.

Of course, eventually Ali did meet opponents who could beat him, but even then his genius was evident. *Sting Like a Bee* ends with Ali's first bout with Joe Frazier, which Ali lost. Frazier's trainer, Eddie Futch, told Ali's biographer, Thomas Hauser, that Ali still successfully tricked his fighter during the bout: "Joe should have knocked him out in the eleventh round, but Ali conned him out of it. We teased Joe about that later, because he didn't realize at the time that he was being conned. Ali was in trouble. He got hit with a left hook, and was hurt very badly, and he exaggerated the fact that he was hurt like he was clowning. He gave Joe exaggerated moves, and Joe walked casually to Ali all the way across the ring. We call that 'The Long March.' It gave Ali extra time and kept Joe from scoring a knockout. By exaggerating, Ali made Joe think that he was fooling. He conned him good."

Ali did eventually regain the championship, and he did so by again digging into his bag of tricks. He prevailed over George Foreman by fighting a very different fight than most expected. Rather than dancing around the ring, using his speed to outmaneuver the famously hard-hitting Foreman, Ali positioned himself on the ropes, allowing Foreman to tire himself out throw-

ing punches. While the “rope-a-dope” might not have been a good practice if concern for long-term health had been a primary concern, it was a successful tactic that morning in Zaire. Looking back on “Rumble in the Jungle,” Foreman conceded that Ali had him fooled.

The sport, as Ali so skillfully showed, shares elements with confidence games. In *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man*, David Mauer observes that such deceptions are not as simple as unscrupulous exploitation of the naïve. Con men prey not on the gullible and good but on the devious. A mark must have more than money ready for the taking. As Mauer puts it, “he must also have what grifters term ‘larceny in his veins’—in other words, he must want something for nothing, or be willing to participate in an unscrupulous deal.” The delicious irony of this is that con men are themselves susceptible to swindles. They have the very trait, the “thieves’ blood,” that they try to exploit in others.

Confidence games would not be so compelling if they were as simple as taking candy from a baby. Cons, whether big or small, take some ingenuity; otherwise they would be mere thievery. Con men and their targets navigate a world in which not everyone is honest and not everything is as it appears. Thus, confidence games have provided artists such as Herman Melville and David Mamet with material because they entail questions of practical epistemology: Who can you trust? How do you know your information is reliable? And how can you use it to your advantage?

The same is true with boxing at its best, at least according to one way of looking at it. Boxing is much more than two brutes beating up on each other. It is also more complicated than one fighter tricking an unprepared dupe: mismatches may be a part of the game, but they are boring. When the fighters are well matched physically and also shrewd strategists, with each seeking to exploit the other’s desire to find an opening, an advantage, a weakness—then the sport rises to the level of art.

An art with very real consequences. As Mauer observes, a confidence man “cannot fool his associates for long. Either he takes off the scores or he doesn’t, and he stands or falls in his profession by the record he makes for himself.” The importance of cunning in boxing doesn’t lessen the very real physical perils. Boxing is not professional wrestling; the violence is real. The sport’s mental aspect, which Torres so prizes, comes into play when physical abilities are comparable. Ali, the “Louisville Lip,” was able to back up his bluster, even if he did so with an unorthodox style.

The idea that boxers, individuals who choose to engage in a brain-damaging game, are smart might strike the uninitiated as peculiar if not ridiculous. Indeed, the strangeness of associating fighters with intelligence cause some to doubt that Torres actually wrote his books (he also published a biography of Tyson). A rumor suggested that Mailer actually wrote Torres's portions of the Ali book. Jonathan Rendell, in his brilliantly titled *This Bloody Mary Is the Last Thing I Own*, recounts hearing a version of it. "Mailer wrote it for him," the man on the next barstool explained to Rendell. "That was the deal they had. Torres taught Mailer how to box and Mailer wrote *Sting Like a Bee* for him. Ain't that something?" Mailer and Torres were friends, and Mailer admitted to providing editorial aid to the fighter, who did give the novelist some boxing pointers. Still, Mailer insists that the book is genuine and not another instance of a boxer's con game. For he did share his friend's views about pugilistic trickery. In his 1975 account of the Ali-Foreman fight, Mailer explicitly invokes the D'Amato-Torres philosophy, a key component of which is that a skilled boxer can block or evade any punch they can see coming. "Champions were great liars," Mailer explains in *The Fight*. "They had to be. Once you knew what they thought, you could hit them. So their personalities became masterpieces of concealment."

However, Mailer elsewhere expresses the other widely held view of boxing, the one in which fighters are heroic warriors, which is precisely how Mailer imagined writers, or at least himself. Although the solitary writer slouching at a desk seems worlds apart from a well-conditioned fighter confronting an opponent in a ring, Mailer saw them as very similar. In *The Spooky Art*, he insists the demands writing makes on a novelist, including physical ones, are much like those a fighter confronts:

Only a writer can know how much damage writing a novel can do to you. It's an unnatural activity to sit at a desk and squeeze words out of yourself. Various kinds of poisons—essences of fatigue—get secreted through your system. As you age it grows worse. I believe that is one of the reasons I've been so interested in prizefighters. I think often of the aging boxer who has to get into shape for one more fight and knows the punishment it will wreak on his body.... Even if he wins the fight—even if he wins it well—he is not going to get a new purchase on life out of a dazzling success, not in the way he did as a young fighter. That's

also true of my profession. Often, you have to make grave decisions: Am I going to attempt this difficult venture or not?

Put another way, writing is hard, just as boxing, more obviously, is hard. In this comparison of fighters and writers, Mailer does not invoke cunning and craftiness. Instead, he stresses earnest exertion.

Mailer goes even further in his search for commonality, arguing that boxers and writers are similar not only in the rigors they put themselves through but also in their willingness to hurt others:

Just as a fighter has to feel that he possesses the right to do physical damage to another man, so a writer has to be ready to take chances with his readers' lives. If you're trying for something at all interesting or difficult, then you cannot predict what the results of your work will be. If it's close enough to the root, people can be physically injured reading you. Full of heart, he was also heartless—a splendid oxymoron. That can be the epitaph for many a good novelist.

Mailer's "splendid oxymoron" clearly applies to many a good boxer. However, he almost certainly exaggerates both the challenges a novelist faces and the effect he or she can have on a reader. Yet he clearly liked the idea of having a fighter's heartless heart—his will, determination, drive and competitiveness—beating in his chest. For him, boxing serves as a handy metaphor for what he imagined was his risky, intensely masculine style of writing.

Like Mailer, another friend of Torres also gave expression to both conceptions of the sport without achieving a synthesis of them. When the boxing-as-trickery notion was useful, journalist Jack Newfield used it. When he wanted to point to a model of certain virtues, boxing again offered handy examples. Newfield believed the deceitful personalities involved in boxing provide a reason for writers' unflagging interest in the sport. "As in the record business and horse racing, almost everyone in boxing seems like a character," he writes in *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King*. "That's why writers and filmmakers are drawn to it. Almost everyone in boxing is a colorful story teller with a touch of lunacy or larceny." It is certainly true that he chose to focus on one of boxing's colorful characters in

King. A former numbers runner who killed two men, King became fabulously wealthy by using the rhetoric of racial solidarity to sign black boxers to his promotional company and then exploit them mercilessly, according to Newfield's account. Newfield finds conniving and cunning not only on the business side of the sport, but in the fights themselves. He discusses the Ali-Foreman bout in terms very similar to Mailer's, writing: "Boxing is based on deceit. Fighters are taught to lie—to conceal fatigue, mask pain, disguise intent with a feint, deny an injury, look one way and punch another." As the fights with Frazier and Foreman illustrate, the trickery extends beyond concealing intentions in order to avoid being hit; for Ali, it also meant baffling expectations.

Newfield changes tack when relating his own work to that of boxers, who then become paragons. For instance, in *Somebody's Gotta Tell It*, the story of his life as a newspaperman, Newfield, following Mailer's example, finds fighters worth emulating, but at the keyboard rather than the gym. Boxers' bravery and relentlessness ought to characterize a dogged journalist as well. He promotes what he calls the "Joe Frazier method" of journalism: "keep coming forward. Don't get discouraged. Be relentless. Don't stop moving your hands. Break the others guy's will."

One of Newfield's intellectual heroes writes about boxing as though it reflects the process of finding or creating meaning in an absurd world. Albert Camus describes boxers as "gods with cauliflower ears," giving some indication of the respect he has for athletes who, like Sisyphus, persevere through ultimately pointless endeavors. He also transmutes physical combat into the equivalent of a matter of language, viewing a fight as though it were an argument. Fighters' representative capabilities—their amply documented tendency to be regarded by spectators as the embodiment of a race, an ethnicity or a nationality—offers writers plenty of material to work with beyond mere athleticism. Camus explains how, for those in attendance at a fight he witnessed in Algeria between Amar from Oran and Pérez from Algiers, the boxers became stand-ins for their respective cities and how their bout became an extension of an ongoing rivalry between the two places. "Thus a page of history is unfolding in the ring. And the tough Oranese, backed by a thousand yelling voices, is defending against Pérez a way of life and the pride of a province." Spectators' responses to fighters' struggles often have more to do with such allegiances rather than with what the contestants actually do in the ring, and in describing boxers'

moves Camus finds a parallel with disputation. "Truth forces me to admit that Amar is not conducting his discussion well. His argument has a flaw: he lacks reach. The slugger from Algiers, on the contrary, has the required reach in his argument. It lands persuasively between his contradictor's eyes." What writer wouldn't want to have such a reach?

Joyce Carol Oates, for one, expresses impatience with the sort of "hellish-writerly metaphor" in which boxing serves to stand for something else. She concedes that skill, courage and intelligence can all be observed in a boxing match. She even "can entertain the proposition that life is a metaphor for boxing." However, boxing itself is, quite simply, "the most primitive and terrifying of contests." Her *On Boxing* does not offer extravagant assertions of fighters as avatars of artistry or as unrecognized geniuses. She briefly surveys other writers' writing on boxing and is impressed by little of it. She dislikes Liebling and does not think Ernest Hemingway's boxing stories rank among his best. She admires aspects of Mailer's work on the subject, but concludes that in the end he gets it wrong. "It seems clear to this reader at least that Mailer cannot establish a connection between himself and the boxers: he tries heroically but he cannot understand them," she writes. Whereas Camus likens boxing to an argument, Oates stresses its wordlessness, its lack of language. Whereas he sees fighters carrying on historical disputes, she counters that men fighting and those watching them belong "to no historical time." For Oates, boxing is not like something else. It is certainly not like writing, as it was for Mailer, Newfield and others. Instead, "boxing is only like boxing." If she finds truth in boxing, it is of a much more diminished and melancholy sort.

Rendell fell into the Johnson camp, the camp that sought truth in the sport, only to conclude that viewing boxing as expressive of some deep meaning can only lead to disappointment. In *This Bloody Mary*, his memoir of experiences in the boxing world, he recalls being a teenager looking at the photos in *Ring* magazine of ritualistic post-fight events—the announcement of the decision and the victor consoling the vanquished—and thinking: "It was as if all of them, the winners and losers and the managers and trainers, had touched something that only they could know about, something big, like truth." Later, when the romance was gone and he'd seen enough of the fight game, he concludes that its connection to the truth was very different than he'd initially thought. "Boxing had been leading me to a truth after all, but only to the truth about boxing. And the truth

was just a story itself, the first addictive dance under the chandeliers, and then the doomed roller coaster ride on thousands of blue curves.” The sort of truth he discovers is fighters dying in their twenties or living but with irreparable damage. For him, too, Ali becomes symbolic of boxing’s truth. Rendell describes meeting the former champion, who required an hour to eat a bowl of soup. The fighter once famous for his quickness and prowess now had to move carefully, deliberately, and slowly in order not to dribble.

The competing views of boxing—the notion that it is an honest expression of man’s nature versus the belief that it entails artful deception as well as the more obvious physical challenges—also appear in W. C. Heinz’s 1958 novel *The Professional*. Doc Carroll, a boxing manager, holds both, without acknowledging the paradox of viewing boxing as essentially truthful and involving much trickery. Explaining why he likes boxing, Doc says he sees the “truth of life” in it, and that truth includes “that remnant of the animal in man.” He says, “I find man revealing himself more completely in fighting than in any other form of expressive endeavor. It’s the war all over again, and they license it and sell tickets to it and people go to see it because, without even realizing it, they see this truth in it.” Later he tells his fighter, Eddie: “There’s only so many punches. Everybody knows what they are. You’ve got to con the other guy into walking into them. It’s thinking, first of all.” If Doc’s theories of boxing can be reconciled at all, it is by concluding that the essential truth, as revealed by boxing, is that man is a thinking beast, violent and clever, basic in animal desires and inclined toward misdirection to satisfy them. Doc favors the fundamental-honesty-of-boxing school, regarding cons as tactical rather than essential elements of the game. Eddie, who admits to Doc that he had not realized role of trickery despite his nine years in boxing, loses the fight at the end of the book.

Another novelist, Darin Strauss, combines elements of history and fiction while mining the deep vein of literary possibilities offered by the idea of an intimate bond between pugilists and tricksters. If in Heinz’s world deception is merely a part of boxing strategy, in Strauss’s it throbs in the very heart of the sport. He very loosely based his 2002 novel *The Real McCoy* on the life of Norman Selby (a.k.a. Charles “Kid” McCoy), a crafty boxer who used his skills as a con man both in and out of the ring. Strauss remains faithful to these essential features even if he rearranges some facts to suit his story. (“We can change the normal way of things to fit our case,” McCoy persuades one

of the women he marries.) Like the historical McCoy, the fictionalized Kid was born in Indiana in the late nineteenth century, becomes known for his trademark “corkscrew punch,” and has a colorful career as a charlatan. Strauss departs from the documented record of Selby’s life in various ways. For instance, his “Virgil Selby” assumes the identity of another boxer known as Kid McCoy rather than creating the identity himself. The “real” McCoy won the vacant middleweight title in 1898, whereas Strauss has his McCoy win the welterweight title on January 1, 1900, by tricking the reigning champion into fighting what he thought was a mere exhibition. Strauss not only puts his McCoy in a lower weight division, he stresses his character’s slight build in order to highlight his mendacity in the ring.

Some of the fictional McCoy’s comments about boxing make him sound like he could have come straight out of D’Amato’s school of boxing philosophy. “I lack in bulk, but I make up for it in guile,” McCoy explains in response to a reporter’s commentary on his skin-and-bones physique. “Boys, artifice is a dignified defense.” After successfully deploying his skin-ripping corkscrew punch in his title bout, McCoy is confronted by the deposed champ’s wife: “Admit it, Mr. McCoy.... You lied to my husband to get the crown.... Admit your trickery!” “I don’t admit it,” he replies, “I *relish* in it.” Of course, Strauss recognizes that boxing requires physical ability and is more than just deception. “McCoy knocked out Tommy Ryan thanks to real skill and the flimflam.”

The contending views of boxing as either the brutal violence it immediately appears to be or something akin to art and equally complicated and ultimately irreducible to any simple explanation will not be settled for as long as human beings stage combat for enjoyment’s sake. Given that boxing’s roots can be traced back hundreds of years before Virgil and that writers continue to find something of themselves in fighters long after the sport’s heyday in the twentieth century, imminent resolution seems unlikely. That does not mean the match is even, however. The conclusion of Paul Johnson and José Torres’s well-rehearsed account of their college speaking engagement has the union organizer wondering if he never became a better fighter than he did because he was too honest. It may be that writers and other successful practitioners of artifice (such as Ali) do not suffer from such scrupulousness. An indication of which perspective appears to have the upper hand might be found at Gleason’s, a deliberately spare gym in a once-gritty neighborhood that later transformed itself into one filled with galleries, boutiques,

and pricy loft apartments. Almost every time I have visited the place to talk with its proprietor, Bruce Silverglade, there have been camera crews filming movies or commercials or taking photographs of models. Athletes still train there, but meaning-making and spectacle-creation simultaneously occur amid the sparring and shadow boxing. Artifice, whether dignified or not, should never be underestimated.