

HOOKING OFF THE JAB:
NORMAN MAILER,
ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND BOXING

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NORMAN MAILER ONCE PUBLISHED A BOXING PIECE ENTITLED “The Best Move Lies Very Close to the Worst.” In it, he explained how some strategies in boxing, like some in chess, simultaneously offer the greatest rewards as well as the greatest risks. Given Mailer’s penchant for mixing it up both in and out of the ring, in physical as well as literary scraps, hooking off the jab seems an apt point of departure for a brief commentary on his best-known written pieces on the sport. Boxing also played a central role in Ernest Hemingway’s persona. He, too, wrote about it, socialized with boxers and—to a much greater degree than Mailer—fancied himself as an accomplished fighter. Part II of this essay provides commentary on Hemingway as a boxer. The final section offers a fantasy ring match between the two would-be heavyweight literary champions, based on a passage from Mailer’s book, *The Fight*. Two recent essays, which further explore the topic of boxing as it relates to Mailer’s career, were published in the Fall 2008 Memorial Issue of *The Mailer Review*: “He Was a Fighter,” by Barry Leeds, and “Fighters and Writers,” by John Rodwan.

I. MAILER ON BOXING

The expression “hooking off the jab” refers to an advanced-but-risky technique in boxing which, when properly executed, can be an effective offensive weapon. The boxer first throws a left jab, followed immediately by a left hook. Because the hook approaches the opponent’s head from an angle, rather than straight-on like a jab, there is the chance the hook will be

outside of his field of vision, especially if the jab lands solidly, distracting the recipient with its sting. The hook is a power punch—according to some trainers the most dangerous punch in boxing—because along with not being easy to see, if properly thrown it conveys a considerable amount of the thrower’s weight, distilled into the diameter of his fist. All of this takes place in much less time than it has taken to describe. The caveat for hooking off the jab is, if not executed properly, the fighter throwing it leaves himself open to a right-hand counter. My trainer, the venerable Earnie Butler, would demonstrate the consequence by gently planting his fist into the opposite palm, as if catching a softball. Butler, who taught Larry Holmes how to box, would then point to the canvas and declare, “End of fight.”

Mailer’s unprecedented writing on boxing took similar risks in that he wove oblique story angles and quirky digressions into his delivery. While he did not risk being knocked out by a right-hand counterpunch, as a writer he risked its literary equivalent: the reader who snaps the book closed and never returns. Mailer’s unorthodox approach to writing about boxing works much more often than not. Unlike the after-effects of a ring knockout that often leave the victim with no memory of what has happened, Mailer’s accounts provide readers long-lasting visual, sensory, and emotional images.

From the early 1960s on, following the publication of his seminal essay, “Ten Thousand Words A Minute,” boxing emerged and endured as a central facet of Mailer’s persona. Even though his writing about boxing comprised only a fraction of Mailer’s immense body of work, when he died in November 2007, many of the headlines from across the United States and around the world referenced boxing. “Norman Mailer was a True Heavyweight,” declared Bill Gallo in the *New York Daily News*. “Two-fisted Mailer Finally Counted Out,” announced the *Irish Times*. “Stormin’ Norman Loses Last Fight,” stated the London *Sunday Mail*.

Mailer was introduced to boxing in the early 1950s by Al Morales, the father of his second wife, Adele. Morales had been a professional lightweight in his younger years and he often sparred with his son-in-law, teaching him the fundamentals of the sport. Later in life, Morales, who worked in the printing department at the *New York Daily News*, became a friend of *News* boxing writer and cartoonist Bill Gallo. He reported to Gallo that Mailer “was a pretty willing scrapper,” who “no matter how many jabs he took on the snoot, keeps coming” (Gallo). This description is confirmed by Sal Cetrano, a friend of Mailer’s who often boxed with him in the 1970s in the

Gramercy Gym in New York City. Cetrano described Norman as a game-but-not-gifted boxer who did not shy away from receiving a punch in order to deliver one.

By the late 1950s, Mailer had attended a number of prize fights in New York City and had done considerable reading on the history of the sport and the lives of its champions. One of his sources was Englishman Pierce Egan's *Boxiana*. Published in five volumes between 1813 and 1828, the massive work included biographical sketches of fighters, round-by-round descriptions of key fights, and ringside observations about the spectators. Similar observations subsequently appear in Mailer's writing about boxing. His study of the sport during the 1950s nourished Mailer's growing interest in existential philosophy and his exploration of the place of violence in modern life. Along with his new knowledge, his social circle expanded beyond literary friends to include people in and around boxing. This led to some of Mailer's most important writing (Dearborn 124).

Mailer's essay, "Ten Thousand Words A Minute," describes the first Liston-Patterson heavyweight championship match held in Chicago in 1961, as well as the death of welterweight champion Benny Paret following a savage beating by Emile Griffith. A brief excerpt from that account provides an example of the way Mailer combined visual and auditory details with his interpretive comments to build a scene which will endure in the mind of the reader:

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. He began to pass away. As he passed, so his limbs descended beneath him, and he sank slowly to the floor. He went down more slowly than any fighter had ever gone down, he went down like a large ship which turns on end and slides second by second into its grave. As he went down, the sound of Griffith's punches echoed in the mind like a heavy ax in the distance chopping into a wet log. (466)

“Ten Thousand Words A Minute,” also includes Mailer’s personal impressions, misadventures, and fantasies. A landmark essay, it not only demonstrates Mailer’s chops as a boxing writer, it provides the stylistic template for his later, longer boxing pieces. Of these, the two best known are *King of the Hill*, which describes the first Ali-Frazier fight, held at Madison Square Garden in 1971, and *The Fight*, a book-length account of the epic Ali-Foreman “Rumble in the Jungle,” held in Kinshasa, Zaire in 1974. While the two later and longer pieces are better-known, if they had never been published, “Ten Thousand Words A Minute,” stands on its own as a classic boxing essay and an indicator of Mailer’s emerging, highly-personal, idiosyncratic style of reportage. This approach served as a model for many of the New Journalists of the Sixties and beyond. What may be most remarkable about the piece is that it was written in four weeks in late 1962, only twenty-two months after Mailer had stabbed Adele, spent seventeen days in Bellevue Hospital’s psychiatric ward, and was thought by close friends to be “in worse shape than he had been in before the stabbing” (Dearborn 188). The illogical associations Mailer suggests in “Ten Thousand Words A Minute” come across with a manic clarity suggesting the essay could only have been written by someone careening in and out of control. Mailer’s behavior of that period seems to confirm that was the case. Even more remarkable than this single achievement is that he recovered from the condition and went on in the succeeding four-plus decades to produce a huge body of work.

Following the motifs established in “Ten Thousand Words A Minute,” in both *King of the Hill* and *The Fight*, Mailer takes the side of Muhammad Ali, around whom he spins a socio-political-mystical web combining factual reportage and fantasy. Numerous passages echo scenes in “Ten Thousand Words A Minute”: Mailer claims at times to believe his own actions may somehow mystically influence the outcome of the fight.

In one of *The Fight*’s most memorable scenes, Mailer describes himself scaling around a partition dividing the balcony of his seventh floor hotel room from the adjacent balcony. It is the middle of the night, he is drunk—he takes the risk to show symbolic support for underdog Muhammad Ali (*The Fight* 124). The succinctly and dramatically described incident will make the reader’s palms sweat when Norman—as he refers to himself in the text—relates how both sides of the partition had to be squeezed to avoid tumbling backward and down. As exciting as the account is, however, the

stunt was not witnessed by anyone, nor is the report supported by internal evidence in the text. An objective reader may fairly ask whether the description could have been fictional. The point is largely moot, as this and similar anecdotes in all three of Mailer's major boxing pieces make for compelling reading and demonstrate fine examples of his stylistic technique.

While Mailer's pure boxing writing—his description of events in the ring and his analysis of fighters' strategy—has received universal accolades, it is not without an occasional shortcoming. At times it reveals the lack of a comprehensive understanding of strategy and technique which a veteran fighter or trainer would possess. In spite of the claim by Mailer's close friend and former light heavyweight champion Jose Torres that Mailer "could even be a champion of the Golden Gloves" (Mills 381), by Mailer's own admission, his personal skill level in the ring and the abilities of his sparring partners in the Gramercy Gym were limited to the fundamentals. Of his workouts there he wrote, "Some of us ventured into combinations, but never too far" (Mailer, "The Best Move" 61). Mailer's incomplete "body knowledge" may have placed limitations on his ability to interpret what he saw taking place in the ring when observing a match.

An example of Mailer's limited experience as a boxer is reflected in his account in *The Fight* of the intense first round of the Ali-Foreman battle in Zaire. While illuminating, it is also reductive. In the chapter entitled "Right Hand Leads," Mailer attributes Ali's advantage in the opening round to his effective use of right hand lead punches. While the unorthodox strategy was a key element of Ali's success, a careful analysis of the round shows—and Mailer never notes—that Ali was able to land the punches which caught Foreman by surprise due to subtle lateral movement. By gliding around the perimeter of the ring and then reversing direction, Ali induced Foreman to "open up" his stance, leaving himself vulnerable to Ali's right. Equally important, Foreman had been expecting Ali to rely on his trademark left jab, the greatest in the history of the sport.

Boxing as a creative endeavor shares something with other art forms such as writing, photography, and music, in that sometimes what is not shown directly but, rather, subtly implied, can be more effective than stating the obvious. Ali hinted and his reputation almost guaranteed that he would come out jabbing. Foreman could not afford to ignore the jab and Ali capitalized on Foreman's anticipation by occasionally leading with his right hand. The surprise strategy earned Ali the early psychological and tactical advantage,

eventually resulting in an eighth-round knockout of the seemingly-invincible Foreman.

To Mailer's credit, according to archivist and biographer J. Michael Lennon, there is no evidence Mailer used anything other than his ringside observations and notes to write his boxing accounts. He apparently did not have the luxury of reviewing film or tape of the matches. Given the methods Mailer used to write his boxing pieces, his descriptions of the Ali-Foreman fight and others are remarkable works of reportage and analysis. The minor deficiency noted in Mailer's analysis above, relating to Ali's lateral movement, becomes evident only upon repeated viewings of the first round in Zaire. On the whole, the comment in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, is true: "probably no one has written better about boxing than Mailer has."

II. HEMINGWAY AS BOXER

Whether Ernest Hemingway was, as he might have put it, "any good" as a boxer depends in large part upon the personal relationship the source had with Hemingway. To some, he was the uncrowned heavyweight champion. To others, he was a fake. It is impossible, of course, to make an objective assessment without motion picture evidence and, apparently, none exists. The brief accounts that follow are not all-inclusive but are offered to show the range of opinion that will come to the attention of anyone seeking a definitive answer on the subject.

Eyewitness accounts of Hemingway boxing vary greatly and many are provided by observers who had little or no boxing experience either as spectators or participants. Many storytellers clearly had reasons to compliment Hemingway. Max Perkins, editor to both Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, once told Morely Callaghan—a central figure in the Hemingway boxing myth—that Hemingway had knocked out the middleweight champion of France with one punch. He had not. This was prior to Callaghan lacing on the gloves in the summer of 1929 and stepping into the ring with Hemingway at the American Club in Paris. As soon as Callaghan did, he realized Hemingway was not a real boxer. Fitzgerald, too, figures prominently in the Callaghan story, which will be related shortly (Callaghan 124).

Another anecdote from that period, by painter and writer Wyndam Lewis, is typical of the uninformed accounts. Like Hemingway, Lewis was an ambitious young writer and a member of the expatriate social circle living in

Paris in the 1920s. Other members of the group included Joan Miró, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. Lewis became a significant enough figure in Hemingway's life to be mentioned in *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway's memoir of the Paris years written in the late 1950s. In his own writing, Lewis describes what he witnessed one day while visiting the studio of another expatriate, his friend, poet Ezra Pound.

A splendidly built young man, stript to the waist, and with a torso of dazzling white, was standing not far from me. He was tall, handsome and serene, and was repelling with his boxing gloves—I thought without undue exertion—a hectic assault of Ezra's. After a final swing at the dazzling solar plexus (parried effortlessly by the trousered statue) Pound fell back upon the settee. The young man was Hemingway. ("Hemingway in Paris")

From this glowing, almost awe-stricken account, we see that Hemingway apparently made short work of Pound. However, Ezra Pound has never been on any boxing writer's list of "Authors Who Could Have Been a Contender." A more accurate title for the list might be "Writers Who Wanted Others to Believe They Could Have Been a Contender." Hemingway and Mailer both belong at the top of this list and their quest to wear the championship belt there deserves additional inquiry beyond this essay.

Mailer was by far the more modest of the two writers in terms of promoting his own boxing talent. "Never made a cent from it," he once replied to an overenthusiastic interviewer who tried to puff up his boxing achievements (Mailer, "Living a Literary Life"). Mailer may have also done more actual boxing than Hemingway, though never in any sanctioned amateur or professional venue. Mailer's son, Michael, did compete in several Golden Gloves tournaments and other amateur boxing competitions.

The idea of any writer on the level of Hemingway or Mailer having what it takes to excel in the professional boxing ring is as absurd as the idea of any heavyweight champion winning the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize for Literature. Gene Tunney and Muhammad Ali are two champions who immediately come to mind as "thinking man's fighters." Both studied the style of their opponents and adjusted their strategy accordingly—especially Ali—most brilliantly in his against-the-odds triumph over George Foreman in Zaire. While Ali and Tunney displayed remarkable intelligence in the ring,

Ali's literary output was limited to his sometimes-clever but otherwise child-like poetry. Tunney is given credit for authoring three books: *Boxing and Training*, *A Man Must Fight*, and *Arms for Living*; however it is unknown whether they were ghostwritten, as is the case with many books by athletes (Belfiore).

Tunney, who was the heavyweight champion from 1926 to 1928, actually did box—briefly—with Hemingway. According to Tunney's son, some years after retirement the former heavyweight champion visited the author at his estate in Cuba, where Hemingway cajoled him into sparring, bare-fisted, in the living room. Through a combination of clumsiness and ineptitude—and, perhaps, alcohol, Hemingway struck Tunney with a low blow, and it hurt. Tunney answered with a punch that would have knocked out and possibly killed Hemingway had Tunney not stopped it just short of the author's face. "Don't you ever do that again," the champion warned, peering down the length of his arm into Hemingway's eyes. The two remained friends, but in later years when Tunney returned to the *finca*, Hemingway never again asked him to spar (Plimpton 65).

Tunney's most famous nemesis, Jack Dempsey, wisely avoided putting on the gloves with Hemingway—much to Hemingway's benefit. During the Roaring Twenties, for publicity purposes, celebrities such as Douglas Fairbanks and Al Jolson often sparred a friendly round or two with the heavyweight champion. The affairs usually ended in smiles—but not always. Fairbanks apparently adhered to the social contract in his encounter with the champ. Jolson, though, made the mistake of throwing a hard punch at Dempsey and for his foolishness was knocked cold as the champion's trained reflexes automatically responded with a short-but-effective counterpunch. Afterward, Dempsey was extremely embarrassed and apologetic. The incident made him reconsider boxing with amateurs. It may, in fact, have prevented Hemingway from sustaining a serious injury. In Roger Kahn's biography, *A Flame of Pure Fire*, Dempsey recalls,

"There were a lot of Americans in Paris and I sparred with a couple, just to be obliging," Dempsey said. "But there was one fellow I wouldn't mix it with. That was Ernest Hemingway. He was about twenty-five or so and in good shape, and I was getting so I could read people, or anyway men, pretty well. I had this sense that Hemingway, who really thought he could box, would come

out of the corner like a madman. To stop him, I would have to hurt him badly. I didn't want to do that to Hemingway. That's why I never sparred with him." (qtd. in Gertz)

The most widely-told account of Hemingway in the boxing ring revolves around his June 1929 Paris sparring match with his friend, fellow writer Morely Callaghan, as F. Scott Fitzgerald served as timekeeper. Several versions of the story exist. The main details are consistent in both Carlos Baker's biography of Hemingway and Morely Callaghan's memoir, *That Summer in Paris*, from which the following summary has been written.

Hemingway and Fitzgerald picked up Callaghan at his apartment on the way to the American Club, where Hemingway and Callaghan had sparred several times previously. According to Callaghan, the afternoon began in a relaxed attitude: before departing, Hemingway lounged for a time at the apartment, reading a copy of the *New York Times Book Review* he spotted on a table. Friction between Hemingway and Fitzgerald over the negative influence Zelda Fitzgerald was having on Scott had been a source of conflict between the two men for some time, but on this day Callaghan describes them as very chummy (Callaghan 211).

Once at the club, Callaghan claims standard three-minute rounds were agreed upon, along with a one minute rest period between rounds. Fitzgerald was given the watch and the first round passed uneventfully, save for Callaghan scoring easily on his bigger-but-slower opponent. Callaghan, four inches shorter and forty pounds lighter, had trained for a year with good collegiate boxers, and was able to hit Hemingway almost at will (Callaghan 212).

The second round continued much as the first, with Callaghan landing consistently, drawing a little blood from Hemingway's nose and mouth. According to Callaghan, because the two had sparred numerous times, what was happening was of no surprise or consequence to either of them. During the second round, however, according to Callaghan and Baker, Hemingway—possibly embarrassed at his poor showing in front of Fitzgerald—made a careless lunge forward without protecting himself. Callaghan dropped him onto his back with a shot to the jaw (Callaghan 213). As Hemingway picked himself up from the canvas, Fitzgerald is reported to have cried, "Oh my God, I let the round go four minutes!" Hemingway

responded, “All right Scott. If you want to see me getting the shit knocked out of me, just say so. Only don’t say you made a mistake” (Callaghan 214).

It was only then that Callaghan realized the degree of tension that had been building between the other two writers. Fitzgerald immediately believed Hemingway thought he had let the round go on deliberately. In reality, as happens to many people who observe boxing up close for the first time, Fitzgerald may simply have been mesmerized by the action and forgot to keep time. Hemingway then left the ring to wash the blood off his face and by the time he returned appeared to have regained his composure (Callaghan 214).

Callaghan’s version of subsequent events involves one more round of boxing, followed by Hemingway administering a good-natured boxing lesson to a bystander. Afterward, the men all adjourned to the Falstaff for drinks. Callaghan remembers the three of them discussing his novel-in-progress in a very professional and friendly way. Hemingway seemed in good spirits, but as a result of this incident his friendship with Callaghan essentially ended (Callaghan 219).

Hemingway’s version of the afternoon differs. In his letter to Maxwell Perkins of August 28, a little more than a month after the match, he writes that he had drunk “several bottles of white Burgundy” at lunch and also “had a couple of whiskeys en route” to the sparring session. Rounds were set at one minute, with two minutes rest, “on account of my condition.” He admits to Perkins that Callaghan “cut my mouth and mushed up my face in general.” He credits Callaghan with being a good boxer, who, luckily, “can’t hit hard—if he could he would have killed me” (Hemingway, *Selected Letters* 302). While never admitting to being knocked to the canvas, Hemingway does concede, “I slipped and went down once.” He later notes that in the last five rounds he had sweated the alcohol out of his system and came back to out-point or at least hold his own “with someone who had been beating me all over the place” (303).

Complicating matters and contributing to Fitzgerald’s upset, Paris journalist Pierre Loving had secretly sent an embellished account of the incident to the *Denver Post*. The *Post* story was subsequently reported by Isabel Patterson in the November 24 edition of the *New York Herald Tribune*. In this version, following an argument at the Café Dome, “Callaghan knocked Hemingway out cold” (Meyers 163). Callaghan saw the story and immediately wrote to Patterson, receiving assurance a correction would be printed. Then,

just prior to the publication of his letter, Callaghan received a cable—sent collect—which read: “HAVE SEEN STORY IN HERALD TRIBUNE. ERNEST AND I AWAIT YOUR CORRECTION. SCOTT FITZGERALD” (Callaghan 243).

Hemingway initially attributed the story to Callaghan and was infuriated. He pressured Fitzgerald into sending the cable. Hemingway later found out that Loving and not Callaghan was the source. He cabled Loving, “Understand you saw Morley Callaghan knock me cold answer Guaranty Trust Paris.” He received no answer (318).

The incident continued to trouble Fitzgerald. Hemingway wrote to him about it at length in December of 1929, assuring Fitzgerald he had no ill feelings. Hemingway repeatedly expressed his belief in Fitzgerald as a man and writer and in their friendship, writing, “I know you are the soul of honor. I mean that” (312). Referring to the long round of the previous summer, Hemingway writes,

Besides *if you had let the round go on deliberately*—which I know you did not—I would have not been sore. I knew when it had gone by the time agreed. It is something that is done *habitually* at amateur bouts often. When two boys are really socking each other around the time keeper gives them an extra ten, fifteen or thirty seconds—sometimes even a minute to see how things come out. You seemed so upset that I thought you had done this and regretted it. But the minute you said you had not I believed you implicitly . . . You as I say are a man of the greatest honor. (313)

Callaghan, while exonerated as the originator of the false story, fell forever out of Hemingway’s circle of friends. According to Callaghan, in February of 1930, Hemingway wrote him a friendly letter stating he felt quite certain that wearing small gloves, he could knock Callaghan out in about five two-minute rounds. “This belief of his however,” Callaghan relates, “wasn’t to be taken as the unfriendly gesture of a man who was still sore.” Hemingway qualified the remark as saying he knew he would have to absorb a lot of punishment. However, he did want Callaghan to agree that he could knock him out. Callaghan wrote back a “good-humored” letter stating that while he had no objections to Hemingway thinking he could knock him out, since he had

never *been* knocked out it was hard for him to imagine. He never heard from Hemingway again (Callaghan 251).

In subsequent letters to others, Hemingway makes several derisive references to Callaghan. In 1930, while recovering from a broken arm in Billings Montana, Hemingway writes to Archibald MacLeish that the surgeon used kangaroo tendons to tie the bone together—"which ought to help me land awfully hard on the jaw of Morely Callaghan some day" (Hemingway, *Selected Letters* 329). In 1936, writing to poet and critic Ivan Kashkin, Hemingway remarks that his story "Up in Michigan" had been "re-written by Morely Callaghan many times in saleable terms" (430).

Writing to Fitzgerald's biographer Arthur Mizener in 1951, Hemingway recounts the match that took place twenty-two years earlier. He describes the first round as going *thirteen* minutes, an obvious spoof, and recalls at the end of the round saying to Scott, "You son of a bitch . . . Did you like what you let happen to your best friend for eight full minutes when all you had to do was be honest and call time?" He goes on to repeat that he is pretty sure he could have knocked Callaghan out. "But I did not want to knock him out," he writes. "He boxed well. He was a promiseing [sic] writer; and I liked him" (Hemingway, *Selected Letters* 716–17). Regardless of the exact details of the June afternoon in Paris in 1929, those few minutes made an indelible mark on the lives of all three writers.

Many other stories of Hemingway as boxer have emerged over the years: his backyard matches with all comers in Key West; his standing offer of \$250 to any man on the island of Bimini who could last four rounds in the ring with him; his claim to novelist and critic Josephine Herbst, among others, that "My writing is nothing. My boxing is everything" (Callaghan 122). Such stories—whether true or not—achieved an effect when repeated over the years to fellow writers and people in publishing who knew nothing about boxing.

In 1949, Malcolm Cowley, whom Hemingway had deemed "the best critic working in America" (Baker 464), opened a feature on Hemingway in *Life* with the following sentence: "Having 'liberated' Paris, set records in boxing, hunting, fishing, and matrimony, and written the most influential novels of his time, Ernest Hemingway is finishing a new book and trying to be everybody's father." It is a glorious, eye-catching opening sentence—as long as the reader does not stop too long to think critically about it. At least Cowley was gracious enough when referring to Paris to place "liberated" within

quotation marks. As for boxing, the reader might legitimately ask exactly to which “records” Cowley refers. Not only did Hemingway never set any boxing records, like Norman Mailer, he never fought in a sanctioned amateur or professional bout. In other words, Hemingway never had a real fight with a real fighter.

In addition to associating with many fighters, Hemingway also had a close relationship with a veteran boxing trainer, George Brown. Based in New York, Brown was a respected figure in boxing circles. He also reluctantly advised author George Plimpton in his 1959 tongue-in-cheek challenge of light-heavyweight champion Archie Moore. Plimpton was a friend to both Hemingway and Mailer, but unlike them he harbored no illusions about his fistic talents. Brown, who often sparred with Hemingway, told Plimpton that Papa was a dirty fighter and that Plimpton should not “even fool with him.” In his 1977 book, *Shadow Box*, Plimpton provides an entertaining account of how he talked his way out of just such an encounter at Hemingway’s house in Cuba. He also tells of the night Hemingway and Mailer almost met, but did not (Plimpton 74–75).

Hemingway visited Brown’s gym to box whenever he passed through New York City during the 1940s and 1950s. A.E. Hotchner, in his memoir *Papa Hemingway*, provides the following anecdote, told in Hemingway’s own words:

“Any time I was in New York I used to work out at George Brown’s Gym,” he recalled. “I was working out there one time with George when *The New Yorker* asked if they could send over St. Clair McKelway to do a ‘Talk of the Town’ on Hemingway the Boxer. Well, George and I talked it over and decided McKelway ought to have some good authentic color for his piece. At the entrance to George’s place there was a big photo blowup of an Abe Attell fight, two faces like raw liver, so bloody you couldn’t see the features; when McKelway shows up I say, ‘See those guys, Mr. McKelway? They weren’t really trying.’

Then George and I start to work out in the ring. George kept calling out, ‘Maurice!’ (The ring boy was named Morris.) ‘Maurice! Mr. Hemingway wants to toughen his feet.’ (I didn’t own boxing shoes, so boxed in my stocking feet.) ‘Bring down some pebbles from the roof.’ Morris got some pebbles and sprinkled

them around the ring. McKelway took notes. We boxed a little; then George yelled, 'Maurice! Strew some broken glass.' McKelway is writing a mile a minute. 'Mr. Brown' Morris says, 'we aint' got no broken glass.' 'Then break some,' George says. Finally we belted each other a few times for show. McKelway was very impressed. Don't know if *The New Yorker* ever published the piece." (Hotchner 92)

The author and the trainer became close friends. While visiting Hemingway at his home in Cuba, in September of 1955, Brown served as one of three witnesses when Hemingway hand wrote and signed his last will and testament. Brown had been brought in to work with Hemingway in an attempt to help deliver him through one of his increasingly frequent periods of depression. Brown was one of the few men to whom Hemingway would entrust his care (Baker 531).

At some time in the 1950s or early 1960s, Hemingway inscribed a 1935 first edition of *Boxing in Art and Literature* to Brown, writing "For George from his pal Ernie." The anthology includes Hemingway's most famous boxing story, "Fifty Grand." Currently the book is for sale by rare book dealer Charles Agvent of Mertztown, Pennsylvania, for \$20,000 (Agvent).

Brown's attention and unwavering loyalty earned him the role of confidant and caretaker in the final years of Hemingway's life. In 1961, when Hemingway was released from his second stay at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester Minnesota, Mary Hemingway summoned George in New York City. Hemingway had received a series of electroconvulsive treatments for his depression and delusions and his doctors believed he was improving. Just prior to discharge, Hemingway wrote an encouraging, articulate, and tender note to his doctor's nine-year-old son, who was hospitalized with a heart condition. The writing seems to originate from a clear and caring mind, as evidenced from the opening line: "Dear Fritz, I was terribly sorry to hear this morning in a note from your father that you were laid up in Denver for a few days more and speed off this note to tell you how much I hope you'll be feeling better" (Baker 562).

Mary Hemingway knew otherwise. She had witnessed her husband's manipulative behavior many times and knew that Ernest was nowhere near recovery. He was, in fact, in grave danger. She telephoned Brown in New York City and he immediately flew to Rochester to drive Ernest and Mary back to

Ketchum, Idaho. Throughout the five-day, 1700-mile drive, Hemingway suffered from paranoid delusions. He believed the state police were going to arrest him for having alcohol in the car. He was frightened as to where they would spend each night. During what must have been a very tense journey, Brown was instrumental in helping to calm Hemingway's fears. Finally, they arrived home in Ketchum. It was a Friday. That Sunday morning, arising at dawn, before everyone else in the house, Hemingway shot himself in the front hallway. Brown served as a pallbearer at the funeral (Baker 563).

What did Mailer, who both admired Hemingway and sought to challenge him as the figurative "Heavyweight Champion of Literature," think of Hemingway as a boxer? In "Boxing with Hemingway," an essay also published under the title "Punching Papa," Mailer reveals his impressions. The opening of the essay leaves no doubt that Mailer immediately understood Hemingway was a boxing poseur. He recounts the naïve Fitzgerald telling Morely Callaghan prior to the big fall-out that "while Hemingway was probably not good enough to be heavyweight champion, he was undoubtedly as good as Young Stribling, the light-heavyweight champion. 'Look Scott,' said Callaghan, 'Ernest is an amateur. I'm an amateur. All this talk is ridiculous'" (Mailer, "Boxing" 3).

Mailer's commentary on the Callaghan story then takes an interesting turn. Rather than disparaging Hemingway's bravado and self-mythologizing, Mailer delivers an insight revealing an empathetic and plausible explanation for Hemingway's behavior. "It is not likely that Hemingway was a brave man," Mailer writes, "who sought danger for the sake of the sensations it provided him. What is more likely the truth of his long odyssey is that he struggled with his cowardice and against a secret lust to suicide all his life, that his inner life was a nightmare, and he spent his nights wrestling with the gods." At this point, the reader might think Mailer is poised to deliver the knockout punch. Instead, he concisely articulates the foundation for his immense respect for Hemingway by writing, "There are two kinds of brave men: those who are brave by the grace of nature, and those who are brave by an act of will. It is the merit of Callaghan's long anecdote that the second condition is suggested to be Hemingway's own" (Mailer, "Boxing" 4).

III. THE FIGHT REVISITED

For literati interested in Mailer's personal boxing prowess and endeavors, an obvious question would be how would Norman have fared in the ring

against his chief role model Ernie Hemingway? Let us, in the spirit of Mailer's mind, allow our imaginations to take over, making sure, as Mark Twain once warned, to not let the facts stand in the way of a good story.

The Mailer-Hemingway match would be held at the old smoke-filled Madison Square Garden. On the morning of the weigh-in, the principles and their entourages arrive in full force, some swaggering, some staggering from the previous night's final training session—Mailer's at Sugar Ray Robinson's bar in Harlem and Hemingway's at Jack Dempsey's watering hole in Manhattan. During the traditional stare-down before stepping onto the scale, Hemingway condescendingly growls, "Keep your chin down Sonny Boy. Try not to lead with it like you usually do." Mailer, undaunted, stares up at his six-inch taller rival and responds, "Not only can you not hook off the jab; you can't even hook off a participle." In keeping with tradition, both fighters have to be briefly restrained by their seconds, and cooler heads soon prevail.

Like Ali in Zaire, Mailer has been tagged a three-to-one underdog by odds makers. An ugly rumor has been circulating, its source attributed to the Hemingway camp, that Mailer, behind on his alimony payments, has, like the protagonist in Hemingway's classic boxing story *Fifty Grand*, bet fifty thousand dollars on himself—to lose.

On the night of the fight, in Hemingway's corner we find Stanley Ketchel, the former world champion Ernie admired, chief second A.E. Hotchner, with Maxwell Perkins serving as cut man. In Mailer's corner, as expected, we find trainer and strategist, the former light heavyweight champion Jose Torres. Also there, holding the spit bucket and sponge, in tuxedos with towels slung around their necks, providing what might best be described as moral imperative and motivation, are George Plimpton, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Gore Vidal. Zack Clayton, who refereed the Ali-Foreman match Mailer wrote about in *The Fight*, is the third man in the ring.

The following account borrows heavily from Mailer's description of the Ali-Foreman fight, in which the specter of Hemingway loomed large: one morning at three a.m., after doing roadwork with Ali along the banks of the Zaire River, Mailer fantasized about being eaten by the descendents of what he called "Hemingway's lions." What better way to resolve the literary grudge match than to transpose the writers into the principals of Mailer's account of the first round of the "Rumble in the Jungle"?

The bell! Through a long unheard sigh of collective release, Mailer charged across the ring. He looked as big and determined as Hemingway, so he held himself, as if *he* possessed the true threat. They collided without meeting, their bodies still five feet apart. Each veered backward like similar magnetic poles repelling one another forcibly. Then Mailer came forward again, Hemingway came forward, they circled, they feinted, they moved in an electric ring, and Mailer threw the first punch, a tentative left. It came up short. Then he drove a lightning-strong right straight as a pole into the stunned center of Hemingway's head, the unmistakable thwomp of a high-powered punch. A cry went up. Whatever else happened, Papa had been hit. No opponent had cracked Ernie this hard in years and no sparring partner had dared to (Mailer, *The Fight* 177–78).

The course of subsequent rounds and the outcome of the match are left to the imagination of the reader. Hopefully the action will be resumed this evening in a local bar, with friends over drinks, ending in a late-night split decision or, possibly, a draw.

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