

NORMAN MAILER'S *THE FIGHT*:
HEMINGWAY, BULLFIGHTING,
AND THE LOVELY
METAPHYSICS OF BOXING

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ALTHOUGH NORMAN MAILER'S *THE FIGHT* IS OSTENSIBLY REPORTAGE about the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman championship heavyweight boxing match in Zaire on 30 October 1974, we learn more about Mailer and his aesthetic and artistic values than we do about either fighter. We also learn far more than Mailer's thoughts on boxing; we glean a broader metaphysical and philosophic notion of action and danger, and the writer's own role in recording it in prose. One of Mailer's methods for capturing his Zaire experience is to employ Ernest Hemingway as a ghostly father figure, a *doppelgänger*, both an inspiration and a nagging reminder of his own inadequacies. Hemingway, whose suicide was thirteen years before the fight, is still active in Mailer's text, who was enjoying a consciously Hemingwayesque project in Africa.

In Chuck Klosterman's recent assessment of Norman Mailer as a boxing writer, he writes that "there is nothing metaphysical about getting punched in the face" (56). This assertion suggests that Klosterman either has never been punched in the face, or was concentrating on the wrong sensation when he was. Mailer and Hemingway represent the boxing ring and the bullfighting arena as possessing such metaphysical possibilities that they invite us to appreciate each of their values in human behavior and the qualities they demand their artists to possess. In *The Fight*, Mailer's conspicuous comparisons of boxing to bullfighting, Hemingway, and to art further invite

comparison to Hemingway's earlier texts. In all instances, we see Mailer and Hemingway with their incisive, intellectual evocations of men of thought (that is, Ali, and any quintessential Hemingway Hero, such as Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or his short story alter ego Nick Adams) in moments of peak activity. So, if Klosterman limits the transcendence of boxing simply to "primordial reality" and the "base qualities of being alive" (56), he sharply diverges from Mailer and Hemingway, who find in the maelstrom of a boxing match or the murderous possibilities of a bullring, life's truest, most elevated and aesthetic moments. "Every wound," Mailer observes in *The Fight*, "has its own revelation" (214), both promising the importance of chronicling the defeated and the damaged, and signaling his own fascination and debt to the warriors and athletes and even artists of the Hemingway canon. While Mailer may be overly epigrammatic, this aphorism accurately synthesizes the "wound theory" of criticism that defined (and later encumbered) Hemingway Studies for decades.

To Hemingway, boxing might have been important for more complex reasons than many readers ever understood. A celebrated example of this tension offers a useful illustration. The sordid history behind F. Scott Fitzgerald's revisions to Hemingway's short story "Fifty Grand" is relevant not as a salacious biographical anecdote or to provide retrospective textual minutiae. Instead, this conflict's enduring controversy is itself the issue, one that reveals a major facet of Hemingway's approach to character, and the larger importance of boxing to Hemingway and writers that would follow, primarily Mailer.

"Fifty Grand," included in Hemingway's second volume of short stories, *Men Without Women* (1927), was inspired by the anecdote with which the typescript draft begins:

Up at the gym over the Garden one time somebody says to Jack, "Say Jack how did you happen to beat Leonard anyway?" And Jack says, "Well, you see Benny's an awful smart boxer. All the time he's in there he's thinking and all the time he's thinking I was hitting him." (qtd. in Beegel 15)

Lillian Ross reports Hemingway re-telling the story in 1950, about a quarter-century later: "One time I asked Jack, speaking of a fight with Benny Leonard, 'How did you handle Benny so easy, Jack?' 'Ernie,' he said, 'Benny

is an awfully smart boxer. All the time he's boxing, he's thinking. All the time he was thinking, I was hitting him." Hemingway gave a hoarse laugh, as though he had heard the story for the first time . . . He laughed again. 'All the time he was thinking, I was hitting him'" (64). Ross implies surprise that this stale anecdote is so alive for Hemingway, standing in for the readers who may not have appreciated its importance. In his obnoxious essay "The Art of the Short Story," written in 1959 and unpublished in his lifetime, Hemingway recollects of "Fifty Grand": "This story originally started like this: "'How did you handle Benny so easy, Jack?' Soldier asked him. 'Benny's an awful smart boxer,' Jack said. 'All the time he's in there, he's thinking. All the time he's thinking, I was hitting him'" (88–89). These examples demonstrate that his acquiescence to Fitzgerald's editorial judgment in 1927 haunted him for three-and-a-half decades, literally until his death.¹

Fitzgerald's objection to Hemingway opening the short story with the boxing anecdote was similar to his misgivings about the original beginning of *The Sun Also Rises*, what he perceived to be Hemingway's "tendency to envelope or . . . to *embalm* in mere wordiness an anecdote or joke" (142, emphasis in original). As Susan Beegel notes in her discussion of Hemingway's impulse to include the anecdote, "Thinking takes time, and boxing is a sport in which speed is of the essence" (15). Beegel's point must be extended: life, at times, is a sport in which speed is of the essence, particularly if it is to be lived to its fullest. As we see in Mailer—think of *The Naked and the Dead* and certainly *The Fight*—Hemingway placed all of his characters in situations in which a quick, strategic, pragmatic response is more appropriate than contemplation and conceptualization, despite the characters' natural inclinations to indulge their memories, imaginative speculation, and ruminations. Muhammad Ali, after all, is no mindless slugger; he is portrayed as a genius, a scientist, an artist, or a "brain fighter," in the champ's own words. More than a boxer, Mailer considers Ali "the first psychologist of the body" (*King of the Hill* 23), suggesting that his power is in his mind, as opposed to the brute force, the rage, and the animalistic approach of Foreman and Joe Frazier.

But why did Hemingway's remorse over deferring to Fitzgerald's suggestions for "Fifty Grand" fester for the rest of his life? After all, what does one paragraph matter? In "The Art of the Short Story," Hemingway recounts his version of the circumstances behind the editorial change, and his regret over excising "that lovely revelation of the metaphysics of boxing" (89).

Hemingway's essay taunts Fitzgerald for not appreciating that Hemingway was "trying to explain to him how a truly great boxer like Jack Britton functioned" (89). The manuscript of "Fifty Grand" betrays Hemingway's bitterness: on it, he scrawled, "1st 3 pages mutilated by Scott Fitzgerald" (qtd. in Burwell 148). How can one writer—particularly an established one, which by 1927 Hemingway was—blame a colleague for ruining his own text? This irrational grudge must have endured so persistently because Hemingway disobeyed his instincts as a writer, ironically behaving with the same lack of intuitive trust as the excerpt negatively portrays Benny Leonard. Hemingway obeyed Fitzgerald to great success with *The Sun Also Rises*, did so again the following year with "Fifty Grand," and, by 1929, responded to Fitzgerald's criticisms of *A Farewell to Arms* with "Kiss my ass" (qtd. in Reynolds, *First War* 78).

Fitzgerald and others have misconstrued aspects of Hemingway's objectives, which Mailer grasped intuitively and intellectually. The central thrust to Hemingway's literary project was to dramatize the compromised functioning of thought as the modern consciousness is incorporated into the violent activities of the twentieth-century man of action. Hemingway's portrayal of thinking during war takes this idea to the extreme. In Hemingway's introduction to *Men at War*, the anthology of war writing he edited, he writes, "Cowardice, as distinguished from panic, is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination. Learning to suspend your imagination and live completely in the very second of the present minute with no before and no after is the greatest gift a soldier can acquire. It, naturally, is the opposite of all those gifts a writer should have" (xxiv). Hemingway's articulation of this conflict is a revelation: he is disclosing the tension that defines his work, the internal struggle between a man of action and a man of thought. Hemingway is distinguishing between the curse of Ishmael and the curse of Stubb in *Moby-Dick*: Ishmael cannot turn the thinking off; for him, the sea and meditation are inextricable, even when he is on the night watch; Ahab's eleventh commandment, on the other hand, is: do not think.

This dichotomy is always in play in the Hemingway text, and sometimes baldly explicit. Early in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for example, Robert Jordan coaxes himself, "Turn off the thinking now . . . You're a bridge-blower now. Not a thinker" (17), just as he later disingenuously asserts, "My mind is in suspension until we win the war" (245). In a 1938 letter to Maxwell Perkins,

Hemingway blames his depressed mood on the rigors of living in a Spanish war zone while simultaneously trying to write his stories of the Spanish Civil War: "If I sound bitter or gloomy throw it out. It's that it takes one kind of training and frame of mind to do what I've been doing and another to write prose" (qtd. in Brucoli 253). Ultimately, Hemingway's contribution to the psychological novel, and to literary Modernism's conception of mind, is his depiction of how a human being thinks during episodes of great stress, including matadors, boxers, and soldiers, as well as those haunted by their memories of those experiences.

For the purposes of Mailer's and Hemingway's intertextuality, boxing and bullfighting are virtually synonymous. Each sport affords the spectator an opportunity to witness violence in a largely—but not completely—sanitized outlet. In *The Sun Also Rises*, a novel that essentially introduced the bullfight to mainstream American consciousness, boxing and bullfighting are explicitly compared. In addition to the scapegoat Robert Cohn's dubious (but eventually demonstrable) boxing background, Jake Barnes and his friend Bill Gorton attend the Ledoux-Kid Francis fight in Paris less than a week before their excursion to the Pamplona bullfights. Later, during the *desencajonada*, or unloading of the bulls, however, Jake constructs the simile of bullfighting to boxing. He tells Brett Ashley, "Look how he knows how to use his horns . . . He's got a left and right just like a boxer." As Brett confirms, "I saw him shift from his left to his right horn" (144). The two activities are clearly appealing to Hemingway: one man, by himself, confronting his own limits as he encounters an attacker with his skill, knowledge, courage, and mind control. Both activities are ritual performances, yet both flirt with the possibility of death, danger, crippling injury, as well as murder.

In Mailer, similarly, the allure of boxing seems to be the formalized structure of a violent situation as an attenuated restatement of war experience. Mailer has suggested as much, saying that boxing presents "a way for a violent man to begin to comprehend that living in a classic situation—in other words, living within certain limitations rather than expressing oneself uncontrollably is a way to live that he didn't have before" (*The Big Empty* 185). Mailer's articulation is anticipated by Jake Barnes himself, who explains the process to Brett so that the bullfight "became more something that was going on with a definite end, and less of a spectacle with unexplained horrors" (171); in other words, the difference between bullfighting/boxing and war. Just as Mailer differentiates between a championship boxing match between

professionals and a street fight, Hemingway distinguishes between a properly sanctioned bullfight and an amateur bullfight: "The amateur bullfight is as unorganized as a riot and all results are uncertain, bulls or men may be killed; it is all chance and the temper of the populace. The formal bullfight is a commercial spectacle built on the planned and ordered death of the bull and that is its end" (*DIA* 372). If the Marquis of Queensbury rules codify violence in boxing and allow it to transcend a back-alley brawl, Hemingway and Mailer are always conscious of this spectrum of violence and its relative level of chaos.

To Mailer and Hemingway, the men who prevail within this organized violence transcend athletic excellence, and attain the status of aesthetic and artistic exemplars. Mailer begins *The Fight* by describing Ali as "our most beautiful man" (3), just as Jake says that bullfighting prodigy Pedro Romero is the "best-looking boy I have ever seen" (167).² Ali was thirty-two when the Rumble in the Jungle took place; Romero is no more than twenty. Mailer was fifty-one in Zaire; Hemingway turned twenty-six in the summer of 1925, when *The Sun Also Rises* was composed. If Ali and Romero serve as embodiments of male beauty, Hemingway also uses Romero as a counterbalance to the malaise that had infected the "lost" members of the post-war generation. When Robert Cohn laments, "my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it," Jake responds, "Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters" (18). Fitzgerald texts like *The Great Gatsby* impute an additional intensity of experience to the wealthy; Hemingway ascribes this same quality to the courageous activity of bullfighters. Boxing is precisely the same. In the extended set-piece of the Ledoux-Francis fight that Hemingway sketched in the first draft of *SAR*, the characters remark on the fight and Ledoux in a way that previews their same awe of bullfighters. Bill Gorton tells Jake, "By God Ledoux is great" (*Facsimile* 233) and asks, "Why don't they have guys like that in my business [that is, writing]?" (234). Bill later deflects a compliment by telling Jake, "I'm not such a good man as Ledoux" (234). In the same way, the bullfighter Maera, whom Hemingway kills off in Chapter XIV of *In Our Time*, is declared by Nick Adams to be "the greatest man he'd ever known" (*NAS* 237). Between Maera and James Joyce, Hemingway wrote Ezra Pound in 1924, there is "absolutely no comparison in art . . . Maera by a mile" (*SL* 119). Boxing and bullfighters emerge in these texts as ideals, both masculine and artistic.

The artistic component of the allure of these sports is Mailer's explicit

reason for attending the Rumble in the Jungle. When Mailer attributes Foreman's reference to himself in the third person as equivalent to the "schizophrenia" that "great artists" possess (*Fight* 56), it echoes Hemingway's Romero who "talked about his work as something altogether apart from himself" (SAR 178). For Mailer, though, the real artist is of course not Foreman, but Ali. "If ever a fighter," Mailer writes, "had been able to demonstrate that boxing was a twentieth century art, it must be Ali" (*Fight* 162). Hemingway writes in *Death in the Afternoon* that the only trait separating bullfighting from its inclusion as one of the major arts is its impermanence. In *The Dangerous Summer*, Hemingway pointedly compares bullfighting to art: "A bullfighter can never see the work of art that he is making. He has no chance to correct it as a painter or writer has. He cannot hear it as a musician can. . . . All the time he is making his work of art he knows that he must keep within the limits of his skill and the knowledge of the animal" (198).³ Whether Hemingway is posturing in an intentionally provocative way or not—he surely enjoyed presenting himself as the only novelist who would prefer to be Maera killing a bull than Joyce writing *Ulysses*—it is sufficient to note that in his career-long characterizations of bullfighters, he saw artistry and exemplary conduct when they excelled during their performances, and displayed high and noble aims in their approaches to their work.

The crucial way that bullfighting is instructive to a reading of *The Fight* emerges when Mailer captures Ali's demeanor in the ring and the strategy he uses to dismantle and ultimately defeat Foreman. This exalted strategy is two-fold: in the first round, Ali relies on the enormously dangerous right-hand leads to score against Foreman. The audacity of this means of attack is captured in italicized awe in *The Fight*. It is not a right, but a *right*. "Right-hand leads!" Mailer exults, "My God!" (180). He explains the technicality that leading with the right "is the most difficult and dangerous punch. Difficult to deliver and dangerous to oneself" (179). Hemingway makes the same observation in Romero's code of performance, which is that he has "the old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposure" (SAR 172). Ali might have danced his way to victory against Foreman, but he did not. He deftly took on the punishment of a much stronger man, and attacked in a way that would leave himself vulnerable, all in the hopes of sapping Foreman's power. These are the qualities which Hemingway and Mailer extol.

In rounds two through five, Ali uses the infamous rope-a-dope, which absorbs punishment as Foreman punches himself out, using the great

champion's strength against himself. The parallel between Ali's strategy and the matador's gambit is evident. Hemingway quotes the bullfighter El Gallo as shunning exercises that would increase his strength: "What do I want with strength, man? The bull weighs half a ton. Should I take exercises for strength to match him? Let the bull have the strength" (*DIA* 21). As this remark suggests, rather than the simple-minded machismo that Hemingway is too frequently reputed to value, the virtue of the effective matador comes in mastering the fear that will inevitably arise when a man encounters a beast that dwarfs him. The successful matador must control his thoughts and emotions, and rely on his skill and knowledge to subdue his opponent. Ali faces something precisely equivalent in Zaire. During a training sequence in *When We Were Kings*, Ali yells out, "He's the bull. I'm the matador," clearly deferring to Foreman the trait of power and aggressiveness, and assuming for himself the wit, the knowledge, and the artistry needed to prevail.

Mailer's hagiography of Ali, then, becomes the more vital when we go beyond his admiration for the fighter to recognize why this admiration was so profound. Ali's preparation for the Foreman fight (in the 234-page Vintage edition of *The Fight*, the opening bell to the knockout is confined to pages 177–210; thus, in a book called *The Fight*, only fourteen percent of the book chronicles the fight)⁴ follows El Gallo's logical yet somewhat counterintuitive training procedure. Mailer reports that Ali confesses, "Foreman can hit harder than me" (16). During the uninspired sparring session that opens *The Fight*, Ali's strategy is presaged. Since he knows he cannot compete with Foreman's strength, Ali contrives to use Foreman's strength against him. Mailer chronicles this strategy meticulously, writing of Ali that "part of his art was to reduce the force of each blow he received to the head and then fraction it further" (4). Art? An art to getting hit in the face? If so, it is coupled by fractioning, a melding of the art of war and the sweet science of boxing. Ali consciously courts the same dichotomy that Mailer proposes. Skipping rope in his training quarters, he barks out, "I'm a brain fighter. I'm scientific. I'm artistic" (*When We Were Kings*). The marriage of art and science continues when Mailer describes "the second half of the art of getting hit was to learn the trajectories with which punches glanced off your glove and still hit you" (*Fight* 5). If the study of trajectories is associated with physics, Ali the artist is associated with dance and writing and theatre. This almost suicidal strategy—unappreciated, Mailer suggests, by lesser minds like sportswriters and fight critics—recalls the "calculus" with which

Hemingway claimed he wrote *Across the River and Into the Trees*, destined for dismissal by ignorant critics. Mailer is unapologetic about twinning art and boxing: he references Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Rembrandt's "The Night Watch," *Moby-Dick*, and even Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, reaching to masterpieces of art and literature to evoke athletic performance.

Mailer extends this articulation to propose that Ali has a physiological understanding of receiving violence that is almost hair-trigger in its fineness. "It was a study," he writes, "to watch Ali take punches" (5). Mailer sees Ali "teaching his nervous system to transmit shock faster than other men could" (4), and possessing the ability to "assimilate punches faster than other fighters," as Ali "could literally transmit the shock through more parts of his body, or direct it to its best path" (5). After watching a Foreman training session, Mailer concludes, "it seemed certain that if Ali wished to win, he would have to take more punishment than ever before in his career" (53). As Mailer mentions during his commentary in *When We Were Kings*, "It was as if he wanted to train his body to receive these messages of punishment."

Just as Ali is positioned as an artist, a craftsman, and a scientist, Mailer describes him in the same way that Hemingway describes matadors. During the first round of the fight, after Ali has tagged Foreman with a scoring punch, Foreman "charged in rage" (178), a raging bull whose strength must be absorbed, reallocated, frustrated, and then eliminated by the more intelligent foe. After another exchange, in fact, "Foreman responded like a bull. He roared forward. A dangerous bull. His gloves were out like horns" (178–79). Even the collection of declarative sentences, uncluttered by punctuation marks, recalls the way Hemingway captures Romero's style in the ring. After Ali's strategy of absorbing punches against the ropes emerges, Mailer writes that Foreman "had the pensive expression of a steer being dogged to the ground by a cowboy" (184), continuing the juxtaposition of Ali's savvy with Foreman's depiction as an animal, a beast of the same variety that charges mindlessly and dies inevitably in Pamplona. A brilliant depiction of Ali using his facial expression to deceive Foreman furthers the comparison: Ali, against the ropes, is

now banishing Foreman's head with the turn of a matador sending away a bull after five fine passes were made, and once when he seemed to hesitate just a little too long, something stirred in

George like that across-the-arena knowledge of a bull when it is ready at last to gore the matador rather than the cloth, and like a member of a cuadrilla, somebody in Ali's corner screamed, "Careful! Careful! Careful!" (196–97)

Is this comparison self-indulgent? How many American readers would find a description of Ali's defensive strategy in any way clarified by an esoteric gesture towards a bullfight? This link only makes sense in the context of Mailer's incessant negotiation with the specter of Ernest Hemingway, shadowing him during his journey through Zaire.

Hemingway is introduced into the narrative when Mailer arrives in an unappealing Kinshasa with a stomach ailment, and immediately name drops Joseph Conrad and Ernest Hemingway: Conrad for his iconic depiction of the Congo, and Hemingway, about whom Mailer wonders, "Was it part of Hemingway's genius that he could travel with healthy insides?" (22), ignoring the overwhelming catalogue of incidents and accidents that Hemingway suffered during his lifetime of travels. When Mailer hears the mighty roar of a lion, he begins a reverie: "To be eaten by a lion on the banks of the Congo—who could fail to notice that it was Hemingway's own lion waiting down these years for the flesh of Ernest until an appropriate substitute had at last arrived?" (92). If the sound of the lion causes Mailer to fancy a lofty re-enactment of Francis Macomber's paranoia, or Mary's quest for the lion in *Under Kilimanjaro*, he does well to confess that the joke is on him: Zaire has a zoo. In Mailer's description of a drunken balancing act on a balcony outside his hotel room, he speculates of the possibility of dying in this way. "What could be worse than accidental suicide?" he asks rhetorically. "A reverberation of Hemingway's end shivered its echo" (123). These three examples indeed position Mailer as an "appropriate substitute" for Hemingway, both in his ambitious writing project in Africa, his encounters with the beasts of the jungle, and the courting of his own death, with Hemingway's 1961 suicide still hovering over Mailer's behavior, his thoughts, and his writing.

But Mailer is not through. When he puts forth Ali's quandary once the fight is under his control, that he must choose between a victory by either a lethargic decision or the flourish of a spectacular knockout, he is compared to "a torero after a great faena who must still face the drear potential of a protracted inept and disappointing kill," while Foreman remains "a bull" (200). In the sixth round, by which time the bout's fate is foretold, Ali sizes

up Foreman “the way a bullfighter lines up a bull before going in over the horns for the kill . . . a fair conclusion was that the bull still had an access of strength too great for the kill” (202). In a sequence where Mailer would make dozens of comparisons, frantically seeking metaphorical images to convey the magnitude of the scene, his clinging to bullfighting imagery is striking thematically and strategically, even if the image might only resonate with a specialist, with himself, or with a fellow *aficionado* of *Death in the Afternoon*.⁵ When Mailer compares Foreman’s clumsiness to “a street fighter at the end of a long rumble” (204), the reader does not require any special base of knowledge to access the comparison.

The dynamic set up between Foreman and Ali leads to the rope-a-dope strategy that is ultimately Foreman’s undoing and proof of Ali’s ingenuity. Parodying his own proclivity towards “Germanic formulation,” Mailer teases that he might characterize this approach as “the modal transposition from Active to Passive” (221). The serious point about Ali’s strategy, though, is that he did not overpower Foreman (because he could not), and did not even use superior skill. He outsmarted him, outclassed him. Ali kills *recibiendo*. His technique is the boxing equivalent of the bullfighter’s choice to kill by receiving the bull, to allow the bull’s aggression to work against itself by charging into the sword, rather than attacking the animal. Just as Ali’s technique is legendary, both Mailer and Hemingway have extolled the *recibiendo* style as, on several levels, the most sublime way to kill a bull.

Not many Americans understood the importance of *recibiendo* before 1926, when Hemingway turned the technique into an objective correlative for courage, the grace-under-pressure ideal that has become threadbare in recent discussions of Hemingway’s texts. In the final bullfight before the end of the festival of San Fermin, Romero’s performance is captured:

The bull watched him. Romero spoke to the bull and tapped one of his feet. The bull charged and Romero waited for the charge, the muleta held low, sighting along the blade, his feet firm. Then without taking a step forward, he became one with the bull . . . (SAR 224)

In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway defines *Recibir*, “to kill the bull from in front awaiting his charge without moving the feet once the charge has started” (442). This definition is nearly a precise restatement of Romero’s

triumph in *The Sun Also Rises*, his feet firm, waiting for the charge. Hemingway refers to *recibiendo* as the most “difficult, dangerous and emotional way to kill bulls” (DIA 442). In *The Dangerous Summer*, Hemingway refers to the technique as “the oldest and the most dangerous and the most beautiful” manner of killing (202). By employing the *recibiendo* technique, Antonio Ordóñez in *The Dangerous Summer* and Pedro Romero in *The Sun Also Rises* impress their observers, and impress the writers recording their accomplishments.

Mailer shares Hemingway’s fascination with a matador killing *recibiendo*. His miniaturized version of *Death in the Afternoon*, published in 1967, called simply *The Bullfight*,⁶ describes this classic style of killing with a sense of awe, and is worth quoting at length:

the bull charged prematurely, and Amado, determined to get the kill, did not skip away but held ground, received the charge, stood there with the sword, turned the bull’s head with the muleta, and the bull impaled himself on the point of the torero’s blade which went right into the proper space between the shoulders, and the bull ran right up on it into his death, took several steps to the side, gave a toss of his head at heaven, and fell. Amado had killed *recibiendo*. He had killed standing still, receiving the bull while the bull charged. No one had seen that in years. (n. pag.)

By leaning back against the ropes and inciting Foreman’s charge, Ali displays the same bravado, courage, and panache in dominating his opponent as these matadors who Mailer and Hemingway laud with such emotion.⁷

Mailer and Hemingway mimic the matadors they lionize in two significant ways. For Hemingway, the *corto y derecho* style of bullfighting that he describes in “The Undefeated,” another story from *Men Without Women*, is so closely associated with his own “short and straight” writing style that the reference is almost transparently self-referential, and was so already by its publication in 1927. In the same way that Jake’s attention to Romero is revelatory of what he values in a man, Hemingway’s own characterization of Romero is crucial for what Hemingway values in art. When Romero’s performance is summarized as “not brilliant bull-fighting . . . only perfect bull-fighting” (SAR 221), and that Romero’s style contained “no tricks and no

mystifications” (223), Hemingway is separating his own novel from modern masterpieces of the previous few years like *Ulysses* or *The Great Gatsby* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, and even anticipating the experimentation of *The Sound and the Fury*, which would come a few years later.

Just as Hemingway mimics Romero’s clarity, classicism, and linearity in prose,⁸ Mailer links the passes of his narrative, endeavoring to reach a narrative climax just as the fight reaches its dramatic climax in the eighth round. Unlike Hemingway, who did not cling to figurative language in a conspicuous quest to have the reader understand perfectly a situation which he might not have ever seen before, Mailer’s sequence of comparisons rises to the task as the most memorable writerly performance in his account of the “Rumble in the Jungle.”

A few years earlier, Mailer warned his readers that “Sooner or later, fight metaphors, like fight managers, go sentimental. They go military” (*King of the Hill* 66). True to his word, the first similes of the eighth round follows such a trope: Ali chooses his shots “as if he had a reserve of good punches . . . like a soldier in a siege who counts his bullets” (*The Fight* 206). Some of the exchanges at the beginning of round eight recall the “great bombardment” of the fifth (207), which Mailer calls one of the greatest in the history of boxing, with a “shelling reminiscent of artillery battles in World War I” (195). While Mailer may caution us of the glibness of comparing boxing to warfare, he gleefully perpetuates the absurdity; he well knows that three minutes of getting punched by a man—even by George Foreman—is nothing like a world war, but he willingly adopts the parlance and conventions of boxing writing.

Towards the end of the seventh round, Mailer uses scenery-chewing similes to control the pace of the narrative, the better to convey Foreman’s mighty fatigue.

Foreman was fighting as slowly as a worn-out fighter in the Golden Gloves, slow as a man walking up a hill of pillows, slow as he would have looked if their first round had been rerun in slow motion, that was no slower than Foreman was fighting now . . . he was reminiscent . . . of a linebacker coiling around a runner with his hands and arms in the slow-motion replay . . . (204–05)

And no slower than Mailer is narrating now. In this sequence of three similes, the first and third are comparing a slow fighter to a slow fighter. To say that Foreman, a tired professional fighter, looks as tired as a tired amateur fighter, is patently ridiculous. Furthermore, to state that he is as slow as a slow motion version of himself, or a slow motion version of someone else is not a helpful comparison; it is not vivid and inventive writing. The second simile is brilliant, and would be the only one needed, if the first and third did not aid in establishing the pacing of the moment in the fight.

Directly before the eighth round, Ali's eyes, by contrast to Foreman's torpor, are "quick as the eyes, indeed, of a squirrel" (206), demonstrating the energy, vivacity and speed that has been sapped from Foreman. During the round, Mailer's similes are telling; they evoke the spectator's enthusiasm, the witness's thrill of the final sequence of the fight. Foreman's legs become "like a horse high-stepping along a road full of rocks" (206); he bounces off the ropes and pursues Ali "like a man chasing a cat" (206); he waves his gloves at Ali "like an infant six feet tall waving its uncoordinated battle arm" (207). When Ali delivers the *coup de grâce*, "Foreman's arms flew out to the side like a man with a parachute jumping out of a plane" (208). How does he fall? "He went over like a six-foot, sixty-year-old butler who has just heard tragic news" (208). Foreman transforms from a six-foot infant to a six-foot sexagenarian manservant in two minutes. And, finally, Mailer compares a knocked-out fighter to "a drunk hoping to get out of bed to go to work" (208), an unfortunately predictable association.

All of these similes are Mailer's own flourishes, the passes that he links together, striving to express his enthusiasm and awe, seeking to get the reader more intimately involved with the experience, culminating with one final comparison, not of Ali or of Foreman, but of his own reaction: our narrator was "like a dim parent who realizes suddenly his child is indeed and indubitably married" (209). The figurative rope-a-dope that Mailer employs is unlike Hemingway's description of the bullfight, but identical in that the scene he is attempting to capture must be described according to the terms of the action being rendered.

Where does *The Fight* ultimately belong in Norman Mailer's life's work? Is it a self-aggrandizing study of a sport, the nuances of which only a select few appreciate or care about? Is *The Fight* Mailer's *Death in the Afternoon*—the disquisition on bullfighting Hemingway wrote as a young man—or more precisely his *The Dangerous Summer*, Hemingway's revisitation of the

bullfights at the end of his career? Is it Mailer's *A Moveable Feast*, a version of his memoirs? Does it equate to the two books Hemingway devoted to African safaris? A combination of all of these? *The Fight*, ultimately, illuminates the reader of the way Mailer views violence, writing, and Hemingway himself, which positions it as a supplementary text to virtually every other major Mailer effort. With Hemingway and bullfighting as constant presences in *The Fight*, these intertextual questions yield results that allow Mailer's project to transcend journalism, or sports writing, to become a key text to determining his restatement of Hemingway's classic twentieth-century themes.

NOTES

1. Elsewhere, Hemingway remarks on the intelligence of fighters just as he evaluates their physical skill: in 1922, Hemingway describes Battling Siki, the challenger to Georges Carpentier, "siki tough slowthinker but mauling style may puzzle carp" (Reynolds, *Paris Years* 73). In his early journalism, Hemingway reports that, "Jack Dempsey has an imposing list of knockouts over bums and tramps, who were nothing but big slow-moving, slow-thinking set ups for him" (Reynolds, *Young Hemingway* 192). Indeed, the payoff of "Fifty Grand"—when Jack Brennan double crosses the double crossers—comes when Jack says, "It's funny how fast you can think when it means that much money" (CSS 249).
2. After Ali's victory, Mailer suggests that "Maybe he never appeared more handsome" (212).
3. Earlier in *The Dangerous Summer*, Luis Miguel Dominguín is also compared to an artist: "He had the complete and respectful concentration on his work which marks all great artists" (106).
4. Mailer's pacing might have been a model for *When We Were Kings*, an 89-minute film of which the fight itself spans 7:14, or about 8%.
5. Cf. *Advertisements For Myself*, when Mailer writes, "I used to compare the bed to the bullfight, sometimes seeing myself as the matador and sometimes as the bull" (495).
6. Mailer's introductory remarks in that text are titled: "Footnote to Death in the Afternoon."
7. One of the ways Mailer praises Ali in *When We Were Kings* is by saying, "What a *classic* performance," suggesting the classic style of defeating an opponent that parallels a heroic matador.
8. The first draft of *The Sun Also Rises* originally began in medias res, beginning in Spain, then flashing back to Paris. The change to linearity transcends a narratological decision to achieve thematic importance. For the essential study of *The Sun Also Rises*'s composition and its implications, see Svoboda.

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