

MAILER, HEMINGWAY AND BOXING

KASIA BODDY

IN 1998, NORMAN MAILER PUBLISHED *THE TIME OF OUR TIME*, a 1,300-page retrospective of his own work, covering not simply of the “fifty years of American time” which had passed since his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, had appeared but also the previous nineteen, as Mailer had understood them (ix). The book begins with two “preludes”—the first, an account of the “historic afternoon” in June 1929 when Morley Callaghan floored Ernest Hemingway in a boxing ring at the American Club in Paris, is entitled “Boxing with Hemingway” (3).¹

It is often assumed that the relationship between Mailer, Hemingway and boxing is a matter of simple repetition. As Hemingway sought to “square up” to Turgenev, Maupassant and Tolstoy in order to become the heavyweight “champion” of the literary world (Hemingway, *Selected Letters* 673), so Mailer aspired to become the next generation’s “novelist-as-giant” by taking on and superseding Hemingway (Mailer, *Cannibals* 96). Mailer himself then became “the man to beat for the men [and women] who punch out words” (Healy 173)—so Max Apple imagines being “Inside Norman Mailer” (49) while Joyce Carol Oates fantasizes about “eat[ing] Mailer’s heart” (*Our Private Lives* 335).² But it may not be as straightforward as all that.

Mailer was certainly happy to use boxing to express competitiveness. If the original Romantic writer-as-boxer Lord Byron had dismissed the “quarrels of authors” as an inferior form of sparring, mere evidence of “an irritable set” (Gunn 142), Mailer believed that regular spats with other male writers—at parties, during protest marches and, mostly, on TV—was an essential part of “keep[ing] in shape” (*Cannibals* 217). The chat show provided an ideal forum for literary quarrels which Mailer repeatedly imagined as boxing matches. After an appearance with Nelson Algren, for example, he concluded that “[t]wo middleweight artists had fought a draw” (*Cannibals* 178).³ His much-

publicized quarrel with Gore Vidal on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1971 was a less satisfactory affair. Sharing the couch with the two men was Janet Flanner, whom Mailer accused of being “Mr. Vidal’s manager” instead of the “referee” (Mailer, *Pieces* 65); at the end of the Show, Cavett asked the audience to “let us know who you think won” (73).

How seriously should we take all this? Mailer once declared himself the “Ezzard Charles of the heavyweight division” (*Pontifications* 161) and argued that to claim the title in the sixties was hardly hubris when the competition was so “minor” (*Cannibals* 124).⁴ To announce that “‘I’m going to be the champ until one of you knocks me off’” was, Mailer suggested, simply a way of offering Baldwin, Bellow and the others a little encouragement (*Pieces* 70). But “champ” was just one of many “half-heroic and three-quarters comic” advertisements for himself that he cultivated (*Pontifications* 153). In *The Armies of the Night* (1968), for example, he noted the instability of his speaking voice at the Pentagon demonstration against the Vietnam war; how, without any plan, his accent shifted from Irish to Texan, from “Marlon Brando’s voice in *The Wild One*” (127) to some “Woo-eeee’s” and grunts which showed “hints of Cassius Clay” (48). Eventually he tried “to imitate a most high and executive voice,” but that too came out as “[s]hades of Cassius Clay” (60).⁵ The extent to which Mailer played with, or cultivated for effect, a “false legend of much machismo” is often forgotten (*Pieces* 21).

Mailer’s humor, and his self-mocking presentation of manliness as an elaborately constructed masquerade, has often been missed in discussions of his relationship with Hemingway. Most commentators read their respective claims of champ (or should that be “dumb ox”?) as indicators of a straightforward genealogy of decline of an easy-to-understand (and thus easy-to-dismiss) machismo; the passage from writer to writer providing a pale imitation of the “series of punches on the nose” said to connect the bare-knuckle fighter Bob Fitzsimmons to his feeble, gloved successors (Liebling 1).⁶ As John Whalen-Bridge has noted, it was not unusual for Mailer’s obituaries to announce that he had “wanted,” and failed, “to be the Hemingway of his generation,” thus refusing to recognize “that Mailer, in presenting himself as a ‘poor man’s papa’ offered a parodic, postmodern rejuvenation and not a wannabe” (181–82).

While it would be misleading to deny that, for both, to talk of writing in relation to boxing was a way of talking about ambition and manliness as

well as literature, the precise “equation of masculinity with greatness in literature,” as Oates puts it, is hardly self-evident (“Hemingway Mystique” 303).

BOXING AS AMERICAN CRAFT

For Mailer, Hemingway represented a distinct variety of the “quintessentially American”—the kind that responds to “legitimate” fears of “the river,” or “chaos,” by writing about, and indeed enacting, the effort to secure “the camp” (*Pieces* 92). By constructing, and reducing, style, Hemingway created both a circumscribed “mold into which everything else had to fit” and a kind of “rabbit’s foot” (Kazin 5).

Hemingway’s view of boxing is closely connected to this conception of style—what Alfred Kazin describes as the modernist “dream of literature as perfect order” (15). But, of course, it was only ever a dream. In practice, as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) suggests, boxing and writing are seldom perfectly ordered. Boxing is first introduced into the novel as the sport of amateurs such as Robert Cohn, whose dilettante dabbling in the gymnasiums of Princeton and Paris is straightforwardly aligned with his “very poor novel” (10) from a “fairly good publisher” (9). Cohn is contrasted with two professionals: first Jake himself, a journalist who is happiest after a “good morning’s work” (13), and then Bill Gorton, who has “made a lot of money on his last book, and was going to make a lot more” (34). Gorton arrives in Paris from New York where he has seen a “whole crop of great light heavyweights. Any one of them was a good prospect to grow up, put on weight and trim Dempsey” (33–34). The suggestion is that Gorton is himself a literary contender, although his experience of crooked prize fighting in Vienna reminds us how impure the profession of boxing (and, by extension, the profession of writing) really is.

Bullfighting is like boxing *should* be—Jake describes a bull having “a left and a right just like a boxer” (116). Pedro Romero, the only completely admirable character in the novel, represents the professional ideal. His “work”—neither he nor Jake call it “sport” or “art” (140)—is characterized by its “sincerity” (he does not “simulate”) and its “absolute purity of line” (144). “It was not brilliant bull-fighting,” Jake says, “it was only perfect bull-fighting” (178). But such perfection can only exist in what Jake characterises as the primitive culture of Spain; elsewhere, all that fighters or writers can do is try to work as “hard” (181) and as “clean” (14) as the modern world will allow.

Mailer evoked the boxing-and-bullfighting combination in *The Deer Park* (1955), his third novel and the one in which he most directly confronts the Hemingway persona and style. It is the story of an Irish-American orphan called Sergius O'Shaugnessy, who before the story begins had "boxed [his] way into the middleweight semi-finals of an Air Force enlisted man's tournament" (45) and therefore into flying school. O'Shaugnessy goes first to Hollywood, where the producers are initially dismissive ("I didn't even know the athlete could read" (198)); and then, when he gets depressed—becoming "a boxer without a punch" (325)—he goes to Mexico. There he plans to learn to be the "first great and recognized American matador" (352), but finally he gives up his novel on bullfighting as "inevitably imitative" of Hemingway (353). O'Shaugnessy's crisis of confidence reflected that of his creator. On receiving the novel's proofs, Mailer decided that *The Deer Park* needed substantial revision. He would abandon its "poetic prose," rip up its "silk," smash its "porcelain," create a first person voice "bigger" and more "muscular" than himself (*Advertisements* 235–37), and, "like a fighter who throws his right two seconds after the bell," think much more closely about variations in pace (239). In leaving the controlled Hemingway style behind, in other words, the novel would regain punch.⁷ His next book, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), he later said, was the first one to be "written in what became my style" (*Pontifications* 145).

That style was never again going to be confused with Hemingway's—not that it ever really was.⁸ However much O'Shaugnessy might worry about imitation, no one had ever thought of Mailer as a pure and orderly minimalist. And yet, throughout his career Mailer nevertheless felt the need to speak out forcefully against the modernist credo of technique as mere "craft," its tendency to reach for "a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures—methodology, in short" (*Spooky* 104).⁹ "Craft" was a dirty, or at least dismissive, word—one Mailer elsewhere associates with "light and middleweight" boxers. Heavyweights are always something more than "hardworking craftsmen"; they have "inner lives" (*Existential* 10). As late as *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), Mailer was linking a devotion to "craft" and "procedures" with a misplaced desire for order—here employed by the CIA all over the globe—with the American camp-building (or Hemingwayesque) tradition. Hemingway himself crops up many times in the novel. The narrator, Harry Hubbard, recalls getting an "A" on a college paper about the Shakespearean quality of the "consciously chosen irony of

the later style" (167). When he expands on this to Rodman Knowles Gardiner, the Shakespeare scholar retorts, "Why concern yourself with the copyist?" But Gardiner himself is a kind of copyist, naming his daughter for Hemingway's first wife, Hadley, whose hair ("cut short like a boy's") is also in imitation of the original (*Harlot's* 167).¹⁰ Harry marries the girl. Still other characters are associated either with Hemingway hangouts—Oak Park or Sloppy Joe's bar in Havana—or quote his *bon mots*. But the key connection comes in the form of the narrator's father, Cal Hubbard, who bears a considerable "degree of resemblance" (116–7) to the writer in build, moustache and presence; he's a drunk and a "prodigious philanderer" (114) who's fond of big-game hunting and cross-country skiing and who hangs elephant tusks and a pair of miniature boxing gloves said to belong to Jack Dempsey above his drinks cabinet. He is also, as a CIA operative, a great proponent of "protocol" (869), "craft" (445) and the "rules of procedure" (241).

Harry Hubbard is only half Hubbard, of course—his mother is a Silberzweig—and as well as reading Hemingway, he enjoys Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* because "Noah Ackerman, the Jew, had appealed to me" (145). Harry also reflects upon the character of Robert Cohn (422)—whose upperclass New York background he shares—and to some extent, he belongs to the ranks of Cohn's literary "avengers" (Fiedler 71). *Harlot's Ghost* reveals the limits of methodology and "purity of intent" (1021) and instead asserts the virtues of division and dialectic, of ongoing "war" and "relation" (594).¹¹

And yet, in Mailer's eyes Hemingway was divided, too. He may have been a craftsman but he was not a *mere* craftsman. As much as D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller—indeed, every major figure in the Mailer pantheon—Hemingway was a "great writer, for he contained a cauldron of boiling opposites" (Mailer, *Prisoner* 137). Reviewing Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris* in 1963, Mailer declared that Hemingway's bravery was "an act of will"; the "heroic" product of a lifelong struggle with "cowardice" and an ability to carry "a weight of anxiety within him" which would have "suffocated any man smaller than himself" (*Cannibals* 159).¹² His decision to reprint these comments as the first "prelude" to *The Time Of Our Time* suggests that they should be thought of, in some way, as initiating his own work (*Time* 4). What Hemingway's example initiated was not a style or methodology—not camp-building—but a fascination with the futile effort involved in such constructions and an awareness of the incapacity of all camps to remain secure, to keep the river away. For all that Hemingway

strove to be “classic,” “sophisticated,” “purer,” and “graceful,” for all that he represented the ideals of “scrupulosity,” “manners,” and “gravity” (*Pieces* 91–2), the chaos of his “inner” life was still apparent to Mailer (*Existential* 10). In other words, like Cal Hubbard, “[t]he two halves of his soul were far apart” (*Harlot’s* 117). The question was one of balance. At his best, like Hubbard, Hemingway’s “strength was that he had managed to find some inner cooperation between these disparate halves” (*Harlot’s* 117). At “his worst” (*Advertisements* 474) shortly before his death, the “old moldering” (477) writer was adding to “the nausea he once cleared away” (474).

“BEING MACHO IS NO FUN” (*THE BIG EMPTY* 185)

Nowhere in Hemingway’s fiction does what Mailer called the “continuing battle” of “being a man” emerge more clearly than in his representation of boxers (*Advertisements* 222). To consider a boxer (especially a heavyweight) is to consider a man who should—at least in the world into which Hemingway was born—epitomize a straightforward, unambiguous Anglo-Saxon heterosexual manliness. But, for one reason or another, Hemingway’s boxers are unable to fulfill the brief. Cooperation between one’s disparate halves—“the Champ and the Fraud”—is not always possible (*Pontifications* 160).

Consider “The Light of the World” (1933), in which the teenage narrator and his friend, Tom, encounter a motley crew of late-night travelers at a railway station: “five whores . . . and six white men and four Indians” (Hemingway, *Short Stories* 385). Among the prostitutes are two “big” women, Alice and Peroxide, who argue about who really knew “Steve” or “Stanley” Ketchel (they also can’t agree on the first name).¹³ The cook remembers Stanley Ketchel’s 1909 fight with Jack Johnson, in particular how Ketchel had floored Johnson in the 12th round just before Johnson knocked him out.¹⁴ Peroxide attributes Ketchel’s defeat to a punch by Johnson (“the big black bastard” (389)) when Ketchel, “the only man she ever loved” (388), smiled at her in the audience. Alice remembers Steve Ketchel telling her she was “a lovely piece” (390). Both women refer continuously to Ketchel’s “whiteness”—“I never saw a man as clean and as white and as beautiful,” says Peroxide (388). “White,” as Walter Benn Michaels notes, “becomes an adjective describing character instead of skin” (“The Souls” 193); and so, Ketchel is figured as a kind of Christ-like figure, while Johnson, “that black son of a bitch from hell” (Hemingway, “The Light” 389), is the devil. Ketchel’s pseudo-divinity is

further suggested by such statements as “I loved him like you love God”; “His own father shot and killed him. Yes, by Christ, his own father” (388); and, of course, the title. Philip Young points out that Hemingway placed this story after “the most pessimistic of all his stories,” “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” in *Winner Take Nothing*, “as if the point of the story is really that the light of the world has gone out” (50).¹⁵

But there seems to be more going on under the surface of this particular iceberg. First, the confusion of names and facts is important. Stanley Ketchel was not killed by his father—that was Steve Ketchel, a lightweight boxer, who never got near Johnson. Stanley was shot in 1910 by the husband of a woman with whom he was having an affair. Second, of all boxers, Stanley Ketchel was perhaps the most unlikely possible candidate for Redeemer. His nickname was the “Michigan Assassin,” and, according to one reporter, “he couldn’t get *enough* blood” (Roberts 82).¹⁶ While the prostitutes may be seeking salvation, the story that they tell is absurd. So what is going on? Howard Hannum argues that much of the dialogue between the two women “has the quality of counterpunching,” as if they are restaging Ketchel’s contest against Johnson: here, the (bleached) blonde versus the heavyweight (325). But the cook’s role also needs to be considered. The discussion of whiteness begins when the narrator notices a “white man” speaking; “his face was white and his hands were white and thin” (Hemingway, “The Light” 385). The other men tease the cook about the whiteness of his hands (“he puts lemon juice on his hands” (386)) and hint that he is gay. Are these two things connected? And, if they are, what does that suggest about clean, white, beautiful Ketchel? When asked his age, Tom joins in the sexual bantering with hints at “inversion”—“I’m ninety-six and he’s sixty-nine” (387)—but throughout the boys remain uneasy and confused. By the end of the story, the narrator seems quite smitten with Alice (“she had the prettiest face I ever saw” (391)). Tom notices this and says it is time to leave. The supposedly natural order of whites beating blacks, men having sex with women, and “huge” whores being unappealing has been unsettled (386). When the cook asks where the boys are going, Tom replies, “the other way from you” (391).

Racial and sexual ambiguities also trouble “The Battler,” one of the Nick Adams initiation stories in *In Our Time* (1925).¹⁷ The story begins with Nick himself having just survived a battle with a brakeman on a freight train. He has been thrown off the train and lands with a scuffed knee and bruise on the face, of which he is rather proud—“He wished he could see it”

(“Battler” 129)—but he is still standing. “He was all right” (129). Nick then ventures into another battling arena—a fire-lit camp that seems to be a refuge but which also turns out to be a kind of boxing ring.¹⁸ There he encounters Ad Francis, an ex-champion prizefighter whose bruises are more impressive, and much more disgusting, than his own:

In the firelight Nick saw that his face was misshapen. His nose was sunken, his eyes were like slits, he had queer-shaped lips. Nick did not perceive all this at once, he only saw the man’s face was queerly formed and mutilated. It was like putty in color. Dead looking in the firelight. (131)¹⁹

That “Nick did not perceive all this at once” suggests that he kept looking away (131). “Don’t you like my pan?” the fighter asks, revealing even worse: “He had only one ear. It was thickened and tight against the side of his head. Where the other one should have been there was a stump” (131). Although Nick is “a little sick,” he counters Ad’s pugnacious assertions with gusto:

‘It must have made him [the brakeman] feel good to bust you,’
the man said seriously.
‘I’ll bust him.’
.....
‘All you kids are tough.’
‘You got to be tough,’ Nick said.
‘That’s what I said.’ (131)

Nick’s pleasure at establishing a rapport with a fellow battler is short-lived, however. Ad, he discovers, is unstable (“crazy”), and depends on his companion Bugs to stop him from battling (132). When Ad tries to start a fight with Nick, in “an ugly parody of a boxing match” (Strychacz 252), Bugs intervenes by knocking him out with a stick from behind in a manner that recalls Hemingway’s very first story, “A Matter of Color” (Brucoli 98–100). Color is also important here as Nick is obviously startled by the fact that Bugs is black, and makes a great deal of his “negro’s voice,” the “negro” way he walks, and his “long nigger’s legs” (Hemingway, “Battler” 133). Although it has been argued that the story reveals Hemingway’s racism, these almost compulsively repeated epithets (like those describing whiteness in “The Light

of the World”) seem to be Nick’s as he struggles to understand the relationship between the two men. White prizefighters, after all, were not supposed to have black friends. Bugs tells Nick a story about Ad which adds to his confusion. Ad had a woman manager, and it was always being “written up in the papers all about brothers and sisters and how she loved her brother and how he loved his sister, and then they got married in New York and that made a lot of unpleasantness” (136–37). Nick vaguely remembers this, but then Bugs adds, “[O]f course they wasn’t really brother and sister no more than a rabbit, but there was a lot of people didn’t like it either way” (137). Bugs repeatedly stresses how “awful good-looking” the woman was, and how she “looked enough like him to be twins” (137). Some have read this admiring comment (along with the description of Ad’s face as “queerly formed” and his lips as “queer shaped” (131)) as a suggestion that the two men may be lovers.²⁰ Less directly, like “The Light of the World,” the story slides anxiously between taboos—incest becomes homosexuality becomes miscegenation. The “perplexing behavior” of boxers once more promises to reveal the perplexing nature of masculinity, and again the boy flees (Brenner 159).

What boxers reveal again and again is that the biggest of men are just “not big enough” to take on the “dark” and ambiguous world that surrounds the most well-regulated and well-lit ring, as the narrator of “Fifty Grand” notes (Hemingway 320). The first quotation above is from Mailer’s response to a question from his son, John Buffalo Mailer, about the relation between boxing and writing. A writer, he said, like a fighter, can come to realize that he’s “[b]ig, but not big enough” (*Big Empty* 189). This is an insight that Nick Adams tries to avoid in “The Killers” (1927). Two men show up in a small-town café and hold the staff hostage as they wait for the man they want to kill, Ole Andreson, a former heavyweight boxer. When Nick, who has been in the café, tells Andreson about the men, the boxer says that nothing can be done to save him and turns his face to the wall. Little more than a page of this eleven-page story is devoted to Nick’s encounter with Andreson, but it changes everything. The gangsters dub Nick “bright boy,” but the story reveals how little he knows about power and powerlessness (Hemingway, “Killers” 283). In an attempt to escape his revelation—that the heavyweight, the epitome of masculinity, is not prepared to fight back—Nick decides to move on. “I can’t stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he’s going to get it” (289). As in the case of “The Battler” and “The Light

of the World,” the story ends with Nick preparing to “get out of this town” (289).

BOXING AS AMERICAN WAR

The boxers in these stories reveal the ways in which seemingly solid distinctions between hypermasculinity and homosexuality, between whiteness and blackness or Jewishness—confront and often threaten to collapse into each other. As Walter Benn Michaels remarks of *The Sun Also Rises*, “Hemingway’s obsessive commitment to distinguishing between Cohn and Jake only makes sense in the light of their being in some sense indistinguishable” (*Our America* 27). For all their differences, Robert Cohn and Jake Barnes are both “taken in hand” by Brett Ashley, “manipulated” in a way that recalls the boxer dolls that Jake nearly trips over on the Boulevard des Capuchines (Hemingway, *The Sun* 8). There, a “girl assistant” lackadaisically pulls the threads that make the dolls dance, while she stands with “folded hands,” “looking away” (32).

America (condensed into American masculinity) was, to use a favorite Mailer word, “schizoid,” and the boxing match—for Mailer much more persistently than for Hemingway—provided a metaphor or structure within which to explore its violently felt divisions. Like a literary Tex Rickard or Don King, Mailer specialized in setting up big matches: an essential masculinity is pitted against an essential femininity; an idealized heterosexuality confronts a mythical homosexuality; imaginary “blacks” encounter imaginary “whites.” The continuing clash of one hero against each other is what constitutes “[e]xistential politics” (Mailer, *Presidential* 6), and “form . . . is the record of a war . . . as seen in a moment of rest” (*Cannibals* 370). In fiction then, Mailer’s characters became the embodiments of opposing positions which need to be argued through; in non-fiction, he favoured the Q&A, in which he could have “A Rousing Club Fight” with an interviewer (*Presidential* 125), or sometimes enter the “arena” with an imagined alter ego (*Existential* 182–90). And sometimes genres—in particular, fiction and history—argue with each other.²¹ “[T]he element which is exciting, disturbing, nightmarish perhaps, is that incompatibles have come to bed” (*Advertisements* 342).

If all relationships have a comparable dialectic structure, then it makes equal sense to use language of sex to describe boxing—the first fifteen seconds of a fight are equivalent “to the first kiss in a love affair”—and the

language of boxing to describe sex (*Existential* 29).²² For the narrator of “The Time of Her Time” (1959), for example, the “dialectic” of sex stages conflicts between Jewishness and non-Jewishness, high culture and low culture, and even the competing therapeutic claims of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich (*Advertisements* 495). If conflict is the model for the relationship between men and women, men additionally face an internal battle between heterosexuality and homosexuality (Mailer does not think that women have this problem). So the brutal outcome of the 1962 fight between Emile Griffith and Benny (Kid) Paret is said to dramatise the “biological force” with which men disavow their inherent homosexuality (*Presidential* 243). Paret had taunted Griffith with homophobic remarks at the weigh-in and during the fight, and Griffith responded by beating him to death.²³ For Mailer, this is an example of the ring not doing its usual job of containing and controlling (or sublimating) sexual desire.²⁴

The boxing ring also enacts, and thus mostly contains, another conflict that Mailer saw as fundamental to American culture of “our time,” one between blacks and whites (*Time* x). Again the challenge is to foreground and disrupt familiar stereotypical dichotomies: between whites, who are civilized, sophisticated, cerebral, literate and literary; and blacks, who are primitive, illiterate, attuned to the “pleasures of the body,” and fluent in its language (*Advertisements* 341). James Baldwin (and many others) complained about Mailer’s tendency to see “us as goddam romantic black symbols” (Weatherby 78). But Mailer saw everyone and everything symbolically. For Patterson vs. Liston, therefore, read Art vs. Magic, Love vs. Sex, God vs. the Devil.

HEMINGWAY AND ALI: EXISTENTIAL EGO

“I think there is a wonderful study to be made about the similarities between Ernest Hemingway and Muhammad Ali,” Mailer told Michael Lennon in 1980, making a start himself. Both men, he argued, “come out of that same American urgency to be the only planet in existence. To be the sun”—and at the heart of each was a dialectical struggle that was somehow both personal and national (*Pontifications* 161–2). The fact that “the mightiest victim of injustice in America” was also “the mightiest narcissist in the land,” he observed of Ali in 1971, proved that “the twentieth century was nothing if not a tangle of opposition” (*Existential* 28). “Ego” (later renamed “King of the Hill”), an account of Ali’s comeback fight against Joe Frazier, is not only

about a “dialogue between bodies” (*Norman* 19) but about a dialogue within Ali himself. For Mailer, the triumph of the fight’s end is that Ali has somehow managed to reconcile his two “sides”—he could dance—displaying “exquisite” grace, figured as black and feminine (86)—but he could also “stand”—revealing, for the first time, qualities of endurance to “moral and physical torture,” figured as white and masculine (93).²⁵

Troublesome “contradictions” also “[fall] away” in *The Fight* (1974), an account of Ali’s “Rumble in the Jungle” with George Foreman. Once again, the issue is survival as much as victory. Mailer models his essay on Hazlitt’s 1821 piece of the same name. As Hazlitt’s narrator-protagonist begins by announcing his desire to escape the sentimental complications of daily life, Mailer declares his disappointing love affair with himself. As Hazlitt travels companionably to the heart of the country, discussing Cobbett and Rousseau *en route*, Mailer flies Pan Am to Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” in Vachel Lindsay’s “Congo,” and on the return journey, plays dice with the air stewardess. Both men experience a “restoration of being” through journeys to watch boxing (*The Fight* 239). But while Hazlitt ends by simply acknowledging the ephemeral achievement of both the boxing match and his own essay, Mailer wants more, nothing less in fact than the restoration of the title “champ among writers” (33). The book plays with various versions of magical thinking, but all are designed to the same end: “the powers of regeneration in an artist” (162). Ali works magic on Mailer by showing him that regeneration is possible; and set against his example is that of Hemingway, whose suicide fourteen years earlier haunts the book (123, 162). Ali, in other words, is both Hemingway and a kind of anti-Hemingway.²⁶

BOXING WITH HEMINGWAY

So what does it mean to box with another writer? For Hemingway, at least in his youth, the analogy expressed the inevitability of succession. Once a great boxer or writer had lost his crown, there was no reclaiming it. The old must give way to the new. So in 1924 he complained to Ezra Pound that the writers Ford Madox Ford was selecting for *transatlantic review* were the literary equivalents of Great White Hope Jim Jeffries, dragged out of retirement for one last fight: “The thing to do with Ford is to kill him . . . I am fond of Ford. This ain’t personal. It’s literary” (*Ernest* 116). Killing is also what Hemingway envisaged for Sherwood Anderson, re-imagined as the has-been heavyweight Ole Andreson in “The Killers”; a “sock on the jaw” was not

enough to settle the score.²⁷ In an early draft of the story, the fighter was called Nerone; Hemingway changed the name to Anderson and then, finally, to Andreson.²⁸

For all that he joshed about minor and major contenders, Mailer's sense of literary influence was—like everything else in his worldview—less teleological than dialectical, less a matter of drastic, once-and-for-all Oedipal action than a conversation between competing “taste[s]” and “loyalties” (Mailer, *Pontifications* 149). To develop as a writer, Mailer did not want to kill Hemingway off so much as to continue to spar with him, while also sparring with (among many others along the way) Henry Miller and Herman Melville. If “Prelude—I” of *The Time of Our Time* evokes Hemingway, the presiding figure of its concluding “Acknowledgments and Appreciations” is Dos Passos, whose 1936 trilogy *USA* Mailer once described as “the most successful portrait of America in the first half of the twentieth century” (Bruce and Webster 173).²⁹ Setting up one “great American author” (Mailer, *Pieces* 87) or “literary athlete” (92) against another while, at the same time, looking forward to other juxtapositions—that was what boxing meant to Mailer: a way of exposing the truth that, in the ring or on the page, “no two Americas will prove identical” (*Time* x). Nothing, as he liked to say, “is settled after all” (*Pieces* 86).

NOTES

1. See also Callaghan 122; Inglis 4–7; Donaldson 138–44.
2. See also *On Boxing* 54, and, for sympathetic reading of Mailer's fiction, *New Heaven, New Earth* 177–203. Reviewers, such as Falconer, often present Oates as a “massive literary heavyweight” who is not allowed to compete with the men (10).
3. Algren had just published a satirical account of *Look Ma, My Fly is Open* by one Norman Man-lifellow (Algren 19). Mailer does not mention this attack but recalls his own swipe at Algren (*Advertisements* 467). As they leave the studio, the talk shifts to middleweights and they shake hands.
4. Mailer also compared himself to Leon Spinks in that, with the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, he became “champ before he [knew] whether he [could] really fight or not” (*Pontifications* 159).
5. See also Dearborn 109.
6. “Dumb Ox” was Wyndham Lewis's term for Hemingway.
7. Mailer later totted up the reviews much in the manner of a boxer's scorecard—“seven good and eleven bad” (*Advertisements* 245).
8. Except perhaps in Mailer's “sophomore year” at Harvard (*Advertisements* 27).

9. Hemingway was not the only writer who Mailer thought had been limited by methodology. Others include Katherine Anne Porter and Robert Penn Warren.
10. She shares a hairstyle with Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, the American girl in "Cat in the Rain" and Catherine in *The Garden of Eden*.
11. Poirier sees war as the "determining form of his imagination" (28) while Lennon, who argues for Mailer's debt to American Transcendentalism, argues that he is "interested in RELATION, an idea larger than war and which subsumes it under its rubric" ("Mailer's Cosmology" 150).
12. Mailer's review first appeared as "Punching Papa" in the *New York Review of Books*.
13. Ketchel's real name was Stanislaus Kiecal.
14. Ketchel's knockdown of Johnson was widely believed, even at the time, to have been staged for the film cameras. The painter John Sloan wrote appreciatively in his dairy of seeing "the cinematograph pictures of the recent fight between Ketchel and the negro Jack Johnson. The big black spider gobbled up the small white fly—aggressive fly—wonderful to have this event repeated" (St. John 346).
15. On the story's relationship to Holman Hunt's painting of Jesus with a lantern, see Reynolds 317–19.
16. In a 1922 letter, Hemingway described Ketchel as "too small for that damned smoke" (*Ernest* 64). See also discussions by Collins and Martine.
17. Hemingway described the story as being about a "busted down pug and a coon" (*Ernest* 157). Baker argues that Ad was an amalgam of Ad Wolgast and Bat Nelson and that Bugs was based on the trainer who had looked after Wolgast, a one-time opponent of Steve Ketchel (178–9).
18. The opening story of *In Our Time*, "Indian Camp," introduces into the collection the recurrent motif of a safe-seeming camp which turns out to be a violent and dangerous place.
19. Hemingway sent the manuscript to his publisher with a letter claiming it had "a good 3/1 chance" at success. "And I never bet on Jeffries at Reno nor Carpentier nor other sentimental causes" (*Ernest* 155). Hemingway was only 11 in 1910, but he did bet, and lost, on Carpentier in 1921 (52).
20. See, for example, Monteiro. Consider also Hemingway's reported comments to Gertrude Stein: "when you were a boy and moved in the company of men, you had to be prepared to kill a man, know how to do it and really know that you would do it in order not to be interfered with" (*A Moveable Feast* 28).
21. So *The Armies of the Night* is subtitled "History as a Novel, The Novel as History"; Marilyn (1973) is a "novel biography" (20).
22. Training is like making love to one's wife with "carnal indifference" (Mailer, *The Fight* 6); making "comfortable love" with a sparring partner is dangerous (69). When Ali starts fighting like a southpaw, Mailer thinks Foreman must feel like he's "making love to a brunette when she is wearing a blonde wig" (192). When Ali lies back on the ropes, he's like a "working man getting back into bed after a long day to be treated to a little of God's joy by his hardworking wife" (201). When, in *An American Dream*, Stephen Rojack kisses Cherry Melanie he feels as though he'd "been sparring with a bigger man and got hit with a full right hand, not a bare fist but a hand

- in a boxing glove" (109). Cherry, however, simply compliments him on being "such a sweet kisser" (109).
23. For Griffith's version, see Heller 383–87.
 24. Gerald Early reads the fight as "virtually antihomosexual theater" (15).
 25. See also Messenger 97–98 and Boddy 354–56.
 26. He returned to the comparison later. "After Ali got old, he still won a couple of great fights," while Hemingway "didn't make the big knockout . . . in his later books" (Mailer, *Pontifications* 162).
 27. In 1926, before publishing *The Torrents of Spring*, a ruthless Anderson satire, Hemingway wrote to his friend justifying the book, his "attempt to sock you on the jaw" (*Ernest* 210). An earlier letter developed the metaphor: "You see I feel that if among ourselves we have to pull our punches, if when a man like yourself who can write very great things writes something that seems to me, (who have never written anything great but am anyway a fellow craftsman) rotten, I ought to tell you so" (205–6). Anderson replied in the same vein. "Come out of it, man. I pack a little wallop myself. I've been middleweight champion myself. You seem to forget that. . . . Did you ever hear of Kid McAllister—the nonpareil—that was me" (*Selected* 80).
 28. See Small and Reynolds 4. Anderson responded with "The Fight," a story about two "substantial-looking" men whose fisticuffs settle nothing.
 29. For a reading of *The Time of Our Time* as an attempt at an equivalent portrait of the second half of the twentieth century, see Lennon's "Norman Mailer."

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