

BATTLES FOR REGARD, WRITERLY AND OTHERWISE

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HEMINGWAY WAS MAILER'S OEDIPAL FATHER, the elder to look up to, to imitate, and to destroy. In college, I think in 1959 or thereabouts, I read in *Esquire* a piece by Norman Mailer in which he saw himself climbing into the ring with Hemingway as the two battled for the championship of writing. I didn't know at the time that Mailer was responding to an interview Hemingway had given Lillian Ross for the *New Yorker*. "I started out very quiet and I beat Mr. Turgenev. Then I trained hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant. I've fought two draws with Mr. Stendhal, and I think I had the edge in the last one. But nobody's going to get me in the ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or I keep getting better" (Ross 35). I have browsed through *Advertisements for Myself* and *The Time of Our Time* to read that *Esquire* piece again, but if it has been reprinted, I couldn't find it.

Mailer, like Hemingway, was a boxing aficionado and a scrappy character, so the image of climbing into the ring with a perceived champion is not unusual, in fact, and Mailer uses a boxing analogy in describing how he sent an inscribed copy of *The Deer Park* to Hemingway hoping to receive praise for a jacket blurb, only to have the book returned unopened. Mailer, in reaction, thought of boxer Carmen Basilio, taking a hard punch and almost going down, where he could have rested for an eight-count, instead staying up and ultimately knocking out his opponent. When asked later why he didn't go down and take the count, Basilio answered, "I didn't want to start any bad habits"—he had never been knocked down before. After the book to Hemingway was returned, Mailer's "pride collapsed into powder and [he] sent off inscribed copies to Graham Greene, Cyril Connolly, Philip Rahv, and a dozen others whom I no longer remember." He says of the incident, "I must have carried the memory as a silent shame which helped to push me further and

deeper into the next half year of bold assertions, half-done work, unbalanced heroics, and an odd notoriety of my own choice" (Mailer, *Time* 208–09).

Mailer's work is rife with references to Hemingway. "In my sophomore year I wrote a great many stories which were influenced by Ernest Hemingway" (*Advertisements* 27). What is ostensibly a collection of articles, novel segments, and confessions in *The Time of Our Time* starts with an excerpt from his review of Morley Callaghan's *That Summer in Paris* focusing on a boxing match in which Callaghan, a smaller, lighter man than his opponent, knocked Hemingway down, something Mailer also wanted to do, at least figuratively (*Time* 3–4). *Advertisements for Myself* begins with passages like these:

Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and *macho* must sooner or later give a *faena* which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style. . . . I have come finally to have a great sympathy for The Master's irrepressible tantrum that he is the champion writer of this time, and of all time, and that if anyone can pin Tolstoy, it is Ernest H. (*Advertisements* 19)

Yet Mailer on the next page undercuts this bestowing of laurels by saying that Hemingway "has not written anything which would bother an eight-year-old or one's grandmother, and yet his reputation is firm" (20). Many grandmothers were disturbed by *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, but perhaps Mailer's grandmother was more liberal than most in the first half of the twentieth century; Hemingway's mother declared *The Sun Also Rises* "one of the filthiest books of the year." Mailer feels that for Hemingway "the best tactic to hide the lockjaw of his shrinking genius was to become the personality of our time" (20). No one ever accused Mailer of lockjaw, but did he not also campaign to become the personality of his time as writer, political commentator, candidate for office, and—that role he mocks Hemingway for—celebrity? His style as a mature writer was not Hemingway's—it was not sparse—but his style as a self-campaigner certainly outdid his model. In that regard, he was a champ.

WORKS CITED

- Mailer, Norman. *Advertisements for Myself*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959. Print.
 _____. *The Time of Our Time*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.
 Ross, Lillian. *Portrait of Hemingway*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961. Print. Rpt. of "How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?" *The New Yorker* 13 May 1950: 36–56.