THE LIVING GEORGE PLIMPTON: TAKING A SPORTING STANCE BETWEEN HEMINGWAY AND MAILER

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> Nobody on such casual good terms with the mighty and the accomplished and the renowned, nobody so in love with excitement of deeds and words, for whom the suffering that is mortality seemed so remote, nobody with as many admirers as George had, with as many attributes as George had, nobody who could speak to anyone and everyone as George did . . . On I went, thinking that the closest George would ever come to dying would be to simulate it in an article for *Sports Illustrated.*
>
> —Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost*

I
ON MEETING GEORGE PLIMPTON

On December 10, 1975, George Plimpton (1927–2003) came to Bradford, Pennsylvania, where I then lived and taught at the regional campus of the University of Pittsburgh.[1] The Bradford Artist Series sponsored his lecture. He talked about his experiences as an amateur in professional sports to a large enthusiastic audience. In November of that year, I had discreetly inquired about the possibility of doing an interview of him while he was with us. Shortly afterward, word came that Plimpton did not mind doing so. It was an affirmation of the editor of *The Paris Review*'s well-known graciousness. It made me feel extremely happy but still somewhat apprehensive as well. After all, he was the writer who had done some excellent interviews himself and published others

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as the editor of *The Paris Review*. It had been my good fortune to read some of them. His interview with Ernest Hemingway had been and still remains a revelation of singular importance to me. To have Hemingway talk (or write) about his craft as he did in that interview was remarkable.

The day finally came. Plimpton would be arriving at the local airport in the afternoon. As I was driving to the airport to pick him up in the pale light of that December afternoon, I fell into a bit of a troublesome reverie. I was beginning to feel again daunted about the prospect of interviewing Plimpton. I was neither a journalist nor an athlete. I had merely read Plimpton's books because he wrote so well and dealt, in my opinion, imaginatively with the reality of *lived experience*, dealing with its mysteries so deftly that it acquired a poetics of its own. I wondered, then as now, if there weren't a *lived experiential imagination*, a dimension born out of all that is conscious and unconscious in our relationship with the world, an imagination that truly resonated in the high register of extreme situations.

All this made me feel both eager and subdued to meet Plimpton. I hoped that I could find a more or less adequate and nonacademic language that would elicit answers to the fundamental nature of Plimpton's idea of "participatory journalism." The concept of participation had the promise of offering a way out of the tough problematic of mind-body dichotomy so prevalent in Western civilization throughout the millennia. Lived experience as an active participation in the lifeworld intermediates between troublesome duality of theory and practice and establishes a provisional synthesis, which subsequently the act of writing endows with permanence. What helped to some extent to allay my fears of making a botch of the interview with Plimpton was that, along with Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, to my knowledge, he was at the time the only writer so constituted and so voluntarily circumstanced through his notion of "participatory journalism" or, more precisely, participatory sports writing, to offer us the real of the real, or the Tao of the livedworld, if you will. At his best, Plimpton offered a texture of life "truer than true," as Hemingway has put it through what I have designated as lived experiential imagination. Plimpton was after all already an established writer of creative nonfiction. Since 1959, he had been putting into practice his notion of participatory journalism, competing as an amateur with first-class professionals in sports and interacting with them in order to get the *feel* of the mind-body *experience* such challenges offered. He would then write down in highly polished prose and publish them as

articles in *Sports Illustrated* and in books. His aim was to convey accurately the feeling of "what it is like" when an amateur crosses the limited boundaries of his or her abilities and skills to enter into the implausibly competitive world of professional sports.

I could remember seeing a grainy newspaper photo of Plimpton after a three-round exhibition fight with Archie Moore, light-heavyweight champion of the world from 1952 to 1959 and then again in 1961 at Lou Stillman's Gym in New York. Looking tall, lean, a little dazed with his nose bloodied, he was still standing and smiling, but perhaps not as broadly as Moore. Then there were the accounts of his playing tennis with number one tennis player Ricardo Alonso (Pancho) González (1928–1995), and swimming against former Olympic swimmer Donald (Don) Schollander. In due time, he would give yet fuller versions of his foray into professional baseball in *Out of My League* (1961), whose polished style owed much to its carefully chosen, accurate and yet evocative diction and supple syntax. In my mind, *Out of My League* shapes up as a sort of lyrical creative nonfiction. Its intensity creates the impression that carries a hint of what one might call metaphysical realism, with a touch of the beyond in the here-and-now. In this sense, *Out of My League* opened the way to Plimpton's participation in professional football in 1963 with his admission to the training camp of Detroit Lions of the National Football League, where he was given player status by coach George Wilson as a third string quarterback. *Paper Lion* (1966) narrates this experience as well as Plimpton's debut as a quarterback in an inter-squad exhibition game at Pontiac, Michigan. Then came *Mad Ducks and Bears* (1973), an account of the lives of Alex (The Mad Duck) Karras and John Gordy as football players, which also includes the journal of his preparation for his last "fling" as a quarterback for the Baltimore Colts in a preseason game against Alex Karras and his old Detroit Lions teammates in Ann Arbor.

With all these ideas and images going through my head I got to the airport shortly before Plimpton arrived. He got off the plane carrying a large satchel and walked into the dull steel-gray winter light and walked into the airport waiting room. He looked tall, patrician and somewhat tired, with a nimbus of long and slightly graying hair framing his face. But, above all, he looked confident without the slightest indication of arrogance. He seemed to be very much at ease among his fellow passengers. Wilfrid Sheed's remark about Plimpton having seen everything seemed suddenly quite credible. All the same, he gave no indication of superiority as such but rather complete

self-assurance. It was reminiscent of the confidence that a soldier might have who has finally learned for good and keeps the lesson that there may be worse things in life than getting killed in battle. As he walked closer, he looked somewhat larger, older, and more detached than the mental image I carried of him.

I waved to him. He walked over and I introduced myself. I immediately found him gracious but reserved. He then slowly followed me on the snow and ice into the penetrating winter cold without any protection against the cold but a dark navy blue blazer. Later, driving in the car, he suddenly looked up and saw the intricate white arabesque the heavy snow had made on the branches of the pines in the woods along the road. A look of unexpected happiness seemed to come over his face. His blue eyes cut to the side, flashing with great satisfaction and a veritable look of merriment. "This is incredibly beautiful," he said. "Where are we exactly?" I told him we were in Northwestern Pennsylvania. "Beautiful area," he said, "just tucked away in the hills." His fatigue seemed to have ebbed away. Coming to a straight stretch of the road, I could concentrate enough to tell Plimpton that his interview with Hemingway had been a considerable revelation to me.

"Hemingway must have greatly valued your friendship to have talked to you as openly and expansively as he did about his writing," I said.

"Our friendship had its highs and lows," said Plimpton. "I remember receiving a particularly nasty letter from him telling me that I was taking too much of his time with that interview. But toward the end we were in cahoots again."

"But the interview was well worth the effort, I am sure."

"Well, it is somewhat quirky, isn't it?"

"Quirky?"

"Yes,"

"I am inclined to think of it as the best interview of its kind. Of course, he did say some extraordinary things about the nature of writing fiction."

"Yes, but it is sometimes difficult to follow what he has in mind."

Our discussion of Hemingway went on at some length. Plimpton spoke candidly about Hemingway with no hesitation or reservation, and all of it was of great interest to me. Concealed within our talk, however, was my preoccupation also with Norman Mailer, whom I thought occupied an important place in the triumvirate of writers claiming the province of lived experiential imagination in writing in America. Hemingway, Plimpton and

Mailer, all three were preoccupied with the magical transformation of the real into its lingual and scriptural forms.

A truck passed us and splashed mud on the windshield blinding me momentarily. I thought of how fortunate Plimpton had been to know Hemingway, *le maître*, in spite all of the misgivings he had about him. I had a twinge of envy, that inelegant, if indeed not sordid of sentiments, which I later learned was a widespread feeling toward Plimpton. However, all I said was, "Norman Mailer has written about the sorrow he feels for once having come so close to meeting Hemingway and how at the last minute it fell through. Didn't you try to arrange for them to meet?"

"Yes, I did," said Plimpton. "Norman was going wild with excitement. But Hotchner called me aside and said that it wouldn't be pleasant for Papa, and that we should drop it. Norman was very disappointed."

"My God, can you blame him? Was it because Hemingway was experiencing some problems even then?"

"I suspect that he was."

We were getting closer to town. Plimpton was silent. He was looking straight ahead into the gloom of the winter afternoon. He seemed as though he were contemplating an inner vision so absorbing that he freed himself from all that was around him. It was a mood difficult to gauge, and I had the uncomfortable feeling of having already talked too much, that any further attempt at conversation would be boorish.

I interpreted Plimpton's silence as an expression of the nature of his relationship with Hemingway and Mailer as men and writers. It has always seemed to me that all crucial human interactions are dialogic. In a dialogue, one speaks and the other listens and responds in a reciprocal series of give-and-take. If lucky enough, friends carry on this dialogue for a lifetime. So a mutual world of reciprocities rises between them, a world that is a lasting discourse—in the broadest and strongest meaning of the word. Quite often such a discourse might be oppositional, which yields certain dialectical truths, surfacing from the dialogic core of similarities and dissimilarities, agreements and disagreements, amities and hostilities. In his participatory world of actively taking part in and sharing, of getting and giving through action in extreme circumstances, Plimpton also engaged in a lifelong exchange of experiences and ideas with Hemingway and Mailer. In their complex triangular world, I believe, Plimpton seemed to stand firmly at equidistance between Hemingway and Mailer in creating a literary discourse

in which action and imagination coincided and made reality resonate in a new register.

The familiar Holiday Inn sign loomed up ahead and I pulled into the parking lot. Inside, we stopped in the lobby of the Inn for a few minutes.

"Would you care to have dinner with me and some friends before we leave for the auditorium?" I asked Plimpton.

"No thanks, I usually eat very little before I give a talk. Eating a large meal makes me feel bloated. And I don't want to have to entertain a group of people before I talk."

"I understand."

"But if you would like to join me for a cup of soup, that would be fine, and we could talk."

"Thank you. But perhaps it would be best if you rest before your talk and have a cup of soup sent up to your room."

"OK. We can always get to eat something later after the talk."

"Sure. As you wish. I wonder if you would mind if I tape an interview with you."

"No. Not at all. But I have to leave tomorrow."

"Perhaps we could talk tonight or perhaps tomorrow on the way to the airport."

"Right. That would be great. Thank you."

That evening I picked him up. He was dressed in a brown suit and wore brown loafers. He stood out among people coming in and going out all bundled up against the cold outside. He seemed quite relaxed and walked into the frigid night air cheerfully without any protection. I thought of offering him an old army coat that I carried in the trunk of the car and wondered whether it would fit him. He thanked me and told me he didn't need it. He remembered a trip to Green Bay in the midst of winter with the temperature far below zero and the headline that appeared in the local paper the following day, "Plimpton Arrives Without a Topcoat." I could imagine the responses of the readers. "In New York, it saves money not to wear a topcoat," he said, "because you don't have to check it at the restaurants and nightclubs." He looked at the bluish snow and through the car window, and his eyes had that glitter again. He seemed genuinely happy and excited about the possibilities of the evening and meeting people.

Plimpton spoke that night about his participation in professional sports as an amateur. With the light focused on the lectern and with his head almost

invisible in a pool of darkness, he worked magic with the English language. His words created a series of detailed eidetic images, which came out of the shadows where his head was and suddenly became luminescent and concrete events in the audience's mind. He gave the impression of being in control of the immensely thorny problem of the connection between real life events and their intuitive and imaginative components in their absence by intimating that in effect imagination had been primarily stimulated by features embedded in the events itself.

He did join my wife and me and a group of our friends after his lecture that night for dinner at an Italian restaurant. He sipped slowly from a glass of white wine and ate sparingly. He had some trouble getting what he wanted to eat: plain spaghetti with butter. The young attractive waitress with long lustrous black tresses was somewhat confused by the combination. Somehow spaghetti without meatballs befuddled her. He was polite and patient with her. Someone must have recognized Plimpton and told her who he was. She brought him a plate of plain spaghetti with butter, and with a shy smile in a whisper asked for his autograph. Plimpton asked what her name was, happily autographed a paper napkin for her, and his blue eyes flashing complimented her. Then came a contingent of men: the manager, the cooks, and the dishwashers. They all gathered around Plimpton. I watched them listening respectfully first and then talking and laughing, but couldn't hear what they were saying. Plimpton seemed interested in whatever it was they were saying. He gave the impression that he had seen it all before, but his curiosity was still genuine and the contact with potential readers cheered him up considerably. It was pleasant to watch the spontaneous conversation.

The talk at the table also was easy and sprinkled with legendary names. Plimpton in his inimitable accent, broadening the vowels in a combination of cultured New England and Harvard fashion with just a slight touch of an English intonation, reminisced about playing pirates with Jackie Kennedy and her younger sister Lee Radzivill. At my urging, he told us how he had seen a broad-shouldered man leafing through one of the first issues of *The Paris Review* in the lobby of the Ritz hotel in Paris in August of 1953. He had arrived at the Ritz after the wedding of American Ambassador Clarence Dillon's daughter, Joan. Plimpton, feeling high and "ebullient," congratulated the man for his choice of reading material without being able to see his face. The man turned around ever so slowly. Plimpton recognized the face immediately. It was Ernest Hemingway. "I had never sobered up so quickly in

my life as I did when I found who he was," he said laughing. Regaining his composure, Plimpton asked Hemingway for an interview for the review, capitalizing on Hemingway's affection for what he used to call "little magazines." It had been the "little magazines" that had shown an interest in his work in the lean years of early twenties. Hemingway was receptive to Plimpton's suggestion but told Plimpton that he was leaving for Africa the following day. Later, Hemingway wrote Plimpton from Venice, inviting him to join him in Madrid that year. That was the beginning of a friendship that, in spite of its highs and lows, was to last until Hemingway's death and then would remain alive for Plimpton long after Hemingway made his forlorn hasty departure.

The subject of our mortality led Plimpton to tell us that he had written to various writers, asking them how they wished to die. He said he had already received a few answers, among them one from his friend the novelist William Styron, who wished to drown in a swimming pool with a bevy of beauties circling around him in the water.

Then he shook hands with me and left. I watched him cross the street slowly yet with the strange confidence of an athlete, walking on the balls of his feet on the snow. He disappeared around the corner into the darkness of a side street and out of sight.

The following day, December 11, 1975, Plimpton was to fly out of Jamestown, New York airport. We drove through the Allegany State Park. It was a sunny day and the snow glittered so white and bright on the pine trees in the Park that it hurt the eyes. Once again, Plimpton seemed relaxed and didn't mind the accumulation of snow on the unplowed winding roads in the Park. With a tape-recorder between us, we talked about writing and sports, an account of which appears in this issue of *The Mailer Review*. I would like to think of the word interview in its French etymology as the verbal noun *entrevue*, driving from the verb *s'entrevoir*, which richly translates into English as seeing one another momentarily, having a glimpse of one another, or my preferred signification of it, having a *vision* of each other. Plimpton's lucidity and concentration were not affected by the rigorous conditions of driving on the heavy winter snow on secondary roads. His calm was contagious.

We said good-bye at the airport. I wished him well with his work. As I was getting into the car to drive away, I caught a last glimpse of him through the window of the waiting room sitting in a small seemingly uncomfortable looking chair, taking what seemed to be a legal pad out of that satchel of his. I was sure that he was already getting ready to work while waiting for his

plane. Perhaps it was an indication how he worked as a writer, working whenever he was left alone. It was then that it dawned on me how generous he had been with his time and ideas in talking with me.

II
ON PARTICIPATORY SPORTS WRITING

> Our era has been called the civilization of work;
>
> It might as well—perhaps better—be called the civilization of sports.
>
> —Adriano Tilgher, *Homo Faber: Work Through the Ages*

> What . . . I was trying to learn in Chicago in around 1920 and was searching for the unnoticed things that made emotions, such as the way an outfielder tossed his glove without looking back to where it fell, the squeak of resin on canvas under a fighter's flat-soled gym shoes, the gray color of Jack Blackburn's skin when he had just come out of stir, and other things I noted as a painter sketches. You saw Blackburn's strange color and the old razor cuts and the way he spun a man before you knew his history. These were the things which moved you before you knew the story.
>
> —Ernest Hemingway, "The Art of Fiction No 21"
> an interview by George Plimpton

> Like Orwell, Plimpton tried to look straight at the thing and describe plainly what he saw and how it worked and so grasp hold of it for the reader.
>
> —Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost*

I entitled my interview with Plimpton "Reporting with the Inner Eye: George Plimpton on Writing and Sports." On the basis of its conveying inception, in the fullest sense of the adjectival participle, I have come to think of it as a conveyable interview. I hope it will carry, at least to some measure, the spell that Plimpton would often put on with his mastery of the language of storytelling. His participatory reportorial approach, which

within it accommodated the category of sports writing, had some far-reaching and significant implications.

The interview began with Plimpton's response to my question on sports as a subject for serious writers to treat and the dimensions that such writings may possess. To put it somewhat more technically, it pertained to the prosaics of univocal sports reporting in contradistinction to poetics of plurisignificant literary writing. Temperamentally, Plimpton was not predisposed to be an intellectual or a theoretician as, say, Hemingway was often inclined to be, however surreptitiously, and Mailer would be actively and openly engaged in. Yet prompted by my question about the literary dimension of sports writing, he clearly formulated a conceptual framework within which all writers aspired to produce the kind of writing that would possess a horizon of unlimited significations.

He intimated that existence of a new genre of nonfiction, which I think of as creative nonfiction, and which I believe might have had its origin in Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). In his Interview with Plimpton, which appeared in *The Paris Review* ("The Art of Fiction No. 21,"), Hemingway asserted that "*Green Hills of Africa* was not a novel but was written in an attempt to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action could, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination" (233). Implicit in Hemingway's statement is that ***Green Hills of Africa* is the creation of the mutual work of writers and reader's lived experiential imagination. Thus the creative nonfiction would acquire** a **plurisignificant dimension analogous to that of fiction.** Plimpton couches this so-called creative nonfiction in a simple and unadorned language. I interpret it as the mode of writing that aims to elicit unique and different responses from each reader according to the sum of his or her particular lived experiences and culture of reading. Such a text would then not be complete without the reader's imagination being hard at work in rewriting or recreating the text and giving it its interpretive significations. Creative nonfiction therefore demands the mutual participation of reader and writer that in **"Cézanne's** Doubt" (*Le Doute de* **Cézanne**) French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty finds between the painter as the image-maker and the viewer as the animator of the painted image:

> The painter could only create an image. One must wait for others to animate this image. Then the work of art will have joined

> these separated lives. It will no longer only exist in one of them like an obstinate dream or persistent delirium, or even in space as a colored canvas. The image will indivisibly inhabit several minds; potentially it will inhabit every possible mind, as an unending human acquisition. (*Sens et non-sens* 34, my translation)

I would add that such human acquisitions might widely differ from one another so that such works of lived experiential imagination acquire a horizon and will be open-ended. Thus, the energy of dark matter that constantly but invisibly expands the inner time and space of such writing is the livedworld and its coextensive lived experiential imagination. In this way, Plimpton's participatory sports writing becomes another mode of apprehension of nonfiction as the work of lived experiential imagination that will have its own full-fledged hermeneutics. Aside from Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* and the posthumously published *Under Kilimanjaro* and Mailer's *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History*, *Oswald's Tale: An American Dream*, and *The Fight*, Plimpton's *Out of My League*, *Paper Lion*, *Mad Ducks and Bears*, and *Shadow Box* would also qualify as creative nonfiction.

Furthermore, Plimpton made the salient connection between sports and their depiction in sports writing as creative nonfiction with the triangular classical unities of time, place and action. These unities, which Aristotle developed in his *Poetics*, are rigorously maintained and carried out in sports. Sports conceived as dramatic performances then become coextensive with theater and all the characteristics of drama. As such, all the standards, principles and practices of dramatics would apply to them. Sports not only render more exigent the spatio-temporal unities of drama but also enormously intensify dramatic action. They do so by creating extreme circumstances in which athletes distinguish themselves by their skills and courage. The athlete as dramatic performer embodies the phenomenon Hemingway adverts to as "grace under pressure." The pressures of athletic competition either elevate the athletes or defeat them, holding them directly responsible for the consequences of their triumph or defeat. So the way an athlete behaves or acts under nearly impossible conditions, as they occur in boxing, all collision sports, and bullfighting shape and define the reality and identity of the athlete. In this fashion, the true athlete, through consciously freely choosing a difficult profession, enters into the forlorn and occasionally despairing world of freedom and responsibility in Sartrean existentialism. Sports' extreme

moments of physical and possible fatal injuries offer chances for heroism as well as an unforgiving sense of total responsibility making the athlete's original choice thoroughly authentic. According to Plimpton, there is a sense of "illumination," of "nobility" and of "exaltation" of the human spirit in the unfolding of an athlete's authentic original choice of his or her profession. So the course of an athletic career approximates tragic drama in its Aristotelian definition and affects the best of sports writing. This approximation of tragedy situates the best of sports writing within a time-honored literary tradition.

In this context, Plimpton mentions the detective fiction of the Francophone Belgian writer Georges Simenon who depicts human confrontations with the lifeworld by putting them in what German philosopher Karl Jaspers assigns to the category of "limit-situations" (*Grenzsituationen*), situations so extreme that either one is destroyed or emerges as a superior human being—perhaps even "destroyed but not defeated," in the manner of Hemingway's old Cuban fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Incidentally, for similar reasons, both Hemingway and Norman Mailer were exceedingly fond of Simenon's fiction in general and his detective fiction in particular; apparently, so was Plimpton.

Plimpton also considered spectacular athletic skills and their attendant aesthetics to be also noteworthy contributions to the poetics of sports writing. The fascination with superior athletic skills, which at its best borders on the artistic production, deepens our interest in athletics as artistic performance. Plimpton thought that the interest in such skills surpasses the undeniable attraction of violence for some athletes and spectators. Fundamentally, however, he regarded the immense interest in the drama of sports to rise from the depth of a culture as re-enactment of mythological patterns that in reality we experience first as childhood games and later reenact as mimic battlefield games. In the psychological relationship between the spectators and their athletic heroes, who are comparable to war heroes, Plimpton referred to the figures of mythology and drama, such as the Black Prince, who are all trying to come to grips with a difficult and demanding situation with physical and mental prowess as skills and strategies. In an analogous fashion, the spectators may fantasize and feel proud about athletes such as football or baseball players as noblemen and knights in their unusual accoutrements of many colors. In a similar way, in the spectators' imagination the great athletes are princes of the realm, who may have appeared before disguised as paupers among us. Plimp-

ton deemed Muhammad Ali's emergence as the heavyweight champion of the world as a "golden-looking figure" to be out of the "most extravagant mythological construction." Forced unjustly to give up his title as the heavyweight boxing king, ostracized and humiliated, he reemerged triumphant over George Foreman in "The Rumble in The Jungle" in 1974, in Kinshasa, Zaire (currently Democratic Republic of the Congo). Ali's story seemed to partake of and then impart something of the sublime. Plimpton mentioned that he was going to expand on Ali as a mythological prince of the realm of imagination in a book he was then working on (*Shadow Box* 1977). To Plimpton's mind, the power of mythological constructions permeated sports always and everywhere. Perhaps he, too, along with Joseph Campbell believed that

> These bits of information [myths] from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't know what the guide signs are along the way, you have to work it out yourself. But once this subject catches you, there is such a feeling, from one or another of these traditions, of information of a deep, rich, life-vivifying sort that you don't want to give it up. (*The Power of Myth* 2)

III
MAILER AND PLIMPTON

> Action is the true and only divinity of our period.
>
> —Adriano Tilgher, *Homo Faber: Work Through the Ages*

> George's love was uninhibited. It knew no bounds. There wasn't enough space in the world for it, and there weren't enough different ways that he could feel it, for real.
>
> —Freddy Espy Plimpton, *George Being George*

Finally and inevitably, Plimpton spoke about Norman Mailer, who had been an absent presence while I talked to Plimpton. Replying to my query about the intellectual intervention of Norman Mailer from time to time in his ac-

count of the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire and the effect of it on sports writing, Plimpton stated that Mailer knew exactly what he was doing. He emphatically said, "Norman knows what he's doing," which was to use the Ali-Foreman fight "as an exercise, a springboard to the liveliness and exhilaration of his own brain that's always hard at work." I thought it was a splendid explanation of what Mailer did, so perceptive and so concise. He put it benignly, even admiringly, which made it an elegant statement. He looked oddly boyish, somewhat shy, but quietly confident and full of charm as he said it. That was pure Plimpton and it fascinated me no end. The striking thing was that Plimpton's admiration for Mailer as a writer was genuine and it made him appear invulnerable to petty jealously, truly.

There were, of course, many differences between Mailer and Plimpton as men and writers: in appearance, deportment, temperament, and the essence of their imagination and its productions. Yet Plimpton was able to fully and without prejudice recognize the characteristic liveliness and exhilaration of Mailer's mind that enabled him to write highly imaginative novels and essays. Mailer's imaginative qualities as a novelist would often and to various degrees transcend that of lived experiential imagination and engage in what one might relegate to the category of speculative realism, or metaphysical realism, as his extraordinary novel *Ancient Evenings* so amply demonstrates. The fact that Plimpton recognized this aspect of his friend's mind attests to the acuity, vitality, and fairness of his own mind as a writer and editor. These features of Plimpton's mind as writer and editor enabled him to discover highly talented writers such as Philip Roth and Jeffrey Eugenides, whose gifts as writers were entirely different from his own.

One might say that what Mailer used as a "springboard to the liveliness and exhilaration of his own brain" was nothing less than a bodily consciousness of the lifeworld around him in action. I would suggest that bodily consciousness in action that oriented him in external time and space as a man would lead him to more and more elaborate imaginal constructions. Mailer would try to *embody* the reality of an athletic or political event to such an extent that through the exuberance of his mind it became the primary site of a certain knowledge and understanding for him. He appropriated the event through its embodiment to such an extent that it often catapulted his primary perceptions into theoretical and imaginative lingual oral and written pyrotechnics and, yes, often paroxysms. One might say that Mailer's embodied world became the flesh and blood of his writing

in its symbolic and poetic dimensions and then passed on to his readers in its scriptural form.

I asked Plimpton why he thought Mailer had called him a "smokeless Vesuvius" in his book *The Fight*. Plimpton replied that he didn't really know but he thought perhaps Mailer felt that "I don't particularly enjoy the competitive slugging out that he likes." Undoubtedly competitiveness was an obsession with both Hemingway and Mailer. One couldn't, however, easily detect it in Plimpton. It seemed to me he had internalized his competitive spirit and reconciled it with his own vision of himself and he was at peace. The man was so unassumingly self-assured that he looked utterly imperturbable and beyond challenges by others. It made him perpetually gracious. Enviable state of being, by the way! On the one hand, there might very well have been some truth in Plimpton's understanding of what Mailer had said about him. Here is what Mailer had written in the *Fight* about Plimpton:

> 'Plimpton, you have got to come with me,' said Mailer. George Plimpton wasn't sure he would. Mailer knew he wouldn't. Plimpton had too much to lose. With his tall thin track man's body and his quietly buried competitive passion (large as Vesuvius, if smokeless) Plimpton would have to keep on some kind of close terms with Ali or pay a disproportionate price in humiliation. (*The Fight* 67)

On the other hand, however, what Mailer wrote was eventually to carry a different and more signifying kind of truth as well. In retrospect, the central point of the passage turned out to be that Plimpton's pride and fear of failure deprived him of a certain lived experience of the event. Plimpton's own participatory sports writing would have required that he accompany Ali on his nocturnal run. It so happened that Mailer did go jogging with Ali in Kinshasa. He kept up with the champion for a couple of miles and then reverted to his own speed and a solitary slog in the African night. Consequently, it enabled him to go through the tragio-comic consequences it had for him. It so happened that Mailer's solitary nocturnal slogging intimated to him the nature of his own preferred way of dying: being eaten by Hemingway's lion, come back to claim another great American writer. Mailer's intimation of his mortality came to him because he had unmistakably heard a lion roaring and coughing nearby. However, the next day when

Mailer recounted his adventure of the night before to the howling laughter of Ali's entourage he found out that the lion he had heard was harmlessly caged in the Kinshasa zoo just a stone's throw away. Just the same, it had made him fall into the not altogether disagreeable fantasy of being eaten by a lion in the African night.

Plimpton's recollection of Mailer's request to accompany him on his running with Muhammad Ali in Kinshasa in *Shadow Box* is essentially the same:

> Norman Mailer went out running with Muhammad Ali one morning. He asked me to go out with him, but I thought of the long ride to N'Sele [Tshangu district of Kinshasa] in the darkness and thumping along for five miles or so in the wake of the challenger, and besides, I had done that sort of thing before with Joe Fraser. So I begged off. I said I didn't have any equipment to run in. (263)

What Plimpton then missed was Mailer's fantasy of being eaten by Hemingway's lion in the darkness of the African night. When Plimpton did hear about the incident, however indirectly, it appealed to him so much that it inspired him to write to a number of writers inquiring about their favorite way of wafting off into eternity. This reverie of a desired way of dying must have affected Plimpton so deeply that it was on his mind in 1975 when we were having dinner at that Italian restaurant and he regaled us with William Styron's reply. Later, among other responses, was Gore Vidal's, who characteristically wrote, "'When I go everyone goes with me . . . You are all figments of my waking dreams and I suggest that each and everyone of you shapes up and prays that I live long" (*Shadow Box* 274).

Plimpton's refusal to go out running with Mailer and Ali had lasting consequences, which show how significant both Mailer and Plimpton judged the event. In his Introduction to the 1993 reissue of *Shadow Box*, Plimpton wrote:

> After *Shadow Box* was published, Norman Mailer—I believe I must have written him for a blurb—asked me to have lunch with him. He wanted to discuss the book. He had many nice things to say about it, but he felt I had not put enough of myself in its pages. I remember saying that I wasn't much good at introspec-

> tive, self-analytical prose—perhaps my New England background was to blame, and besides, the cast of characters was rich enough to carry everything along quite nicely. (iv)

This is an honest assessment of the relationship between Plimpton and Mailer. Theirs was a friendship between two dissimilar men and writers who generate an amicable discourse that unfolds over a long span of time and ends lovingly. It is a discourse rooted in personal and professional interactions that are scrupulously honest but respectful, urbane but not cloying. Toward the end of their lives and after their tour performances of "Zelda, Scott and Ernest," with Norris Church Mailer as Zelda, what Mailer called his "envy" of Plimpton gave way to a genuinely loving friendship (*George Being George* 131). In *George Being George*, Mailer also says of Plimpton, 'Socialite' is a word that is pinned on upper-class WASPs; but he [Plimpton] was a social light, if you will, because he was a point of focus. I think what is so extraordinary about him was that he was a socialite of the greatest possible inclusiveness " (371). Elsewhere in the same book, Mailer declares:

> You see, this is what I got to understand about him last of all. It was that there was something immeasurably impersonal about George—he wasn't doing it for himself, he was doing it for the spirit of the universe. Or rather he was doing it for the spirit of the occasion, because if you improve the spirit of the occasion, may be that wouldn't be altogether bad for the spirit of the universe. I think that's as close as he came to mystical philosophy. (376)

As I have already pointed out, for me, all that we know about Plimpton situates him as a person and as a creative sportswriter somewhere between Hemingway and Mailer plus a veritable patrician upbringing and what the critic Harold Bloom perceived as inherent "goodness: absolute goodwill" (*George Being George* 373). All three, each in his own way, taught us how our indivisibly unified mind and body can embrace the numinous body and blood of the livedworld, opening up to our imagination a horizon of dazzling mysteries and epiphanies.

NOTE

1. The details in Part I of this essay on my meeting Plimpton are mostly taken from an article entitled "Meeting George Plimpton" that I first published in *Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1. 2 and 3 (1977): 9–16. Print.

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