REPORTING WITH THE INNER EYE: GEORGE PLIMPTON ON WRITING AND SPORTS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIK NAKJAVANI[1]

> Beautifully observed and incredibly conceived, this account of a self-imposed ordeal has the chilling quality of a true nightmare. [Out of My League] is the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty.
>
> —Ernest Hemingway

> He [Plimpton] never failed to provide verbal accounting of an event in his best narrative style so that the work of literature was performed—the story existed for you as he spoke.
>
> —Norman Mailer, *The Fight*

Interviewer: Last night we were talking about Hemingway and sports. It took me a long time to understand what Hemingway had intended to do in *Death in the Afternoon*. First, I thought he was only writing about bullfighting as a sport. Then on subsequent readings I learned how to read that book. I began to find certain dimensions in it which had been absent in my first reading. It is about bullfighting no doubt, but it implies so much more. You've written mostly about sports, but one suspects that one may have to learn how to read your work, too.

Plimpton: I'm really not the one to say so, am I (laughter)? I think that anyone who writes hopes that his writing would have extra dimensions, and that the reader, hopefully, would become aware of them. Just on the surface, sports would appear to have all the dramatic unities of the theater for instance. It concerns characters who are facing highly dramatic confrontations

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in which they're being watched by their peers. The confrontations in sports are not unlike that of war, really. I suppose sports are extensions of war and conflict. Although they consist of games, which are played in childhood, still their impact on the psyche and the time and energy of the participants is highly intense. I am fascinated by sports. I find it a very easy field to investigate. Given the nature of the field, I think it would be very hard not to have an extra dimension to creep into one's writing.

Of course, you mentioned *Death in the Afternoon*; there it is in the title. Hemingway was writing about bullfighting, yes, but he was also writing about something that is considered a *national* sport in Spain. So he was writing about Spain and the *national character* in that country. And that makes for the complexity you were referring to.

Hemingway was very well equipped for that kind of writing. His talent was suited to it. Gertrude Stein's suggestion that he go to Spain to see bullfights was a perceptive one. She knew his style and must have indeed known that someone who had that kind of reportorial eye would be perfectly suited to describe bullfighters and bullfighting. Hemingway could not have gone to Spain to write about a painter or an intellectual, because the capacity of his style wouldn't have been suited to it. And he was interested in the notion which Philip Young was referring to in his interview with you, this phenomenon of "grace under pressure," which is not all that far from what interests me; that is, how people act under pressure. [2]

Interviewer: Hemingway admired very openly *Out of My League,* your account of your participation in professional baseball. Do you think that his praise of your work may indicate that he shared with you the concept of auscultating reality through action rather than through intellectual activity?

Plimpton: I don't think so. I think if it were so, he would not have touched my book with a 10-foot pole (laughter)! He was simply too competitive a person to do anything like that. I just think that he was vastly entertained by the idea of competing at that level. He was a man of enormous curiosity. He always wanted to be a baseball player himself. In fact, in Cuba he used to have a little team behind the hill near his house. I think that he either played on that team or coached and gave money for the uniforms. The Brooklyn Dodgers used to train in Cuba, and they would come around to his house frequently.

I think the very interesting thing that he said about *Out of My League* was

that it was "the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty," which was extremely accurate, because so many people consider what I do as Mittyesque adventure. Actually, it is indeed the dark side of Mitty. One remembers the Thurber character as always successful in his daydreams. He was always performing an operation with a pen, repairing an airplane engine as it flew across the Atlantic. His daydreams were always fulfilled and he was indeed a hero in all of them. Hemingway recognized that what I was doing wasn't Mittyesque but rather a Mittyesque nightmare. What I was doing was that I was entering the profession of baseball and having happen to me what would truly happen to someone who woke up and would suddenly find himself out on the pitcher's mound. He would have a terrible time. So I think that Hemingway was quite accurate in what he had to say about what I had done. But if your question implies that he saw in my work an extension of his own, I would doubt it very much. And I certainly wouldn't see that myself.

Interviewer: I certainly didn't mean to imply that your work is an *extension* of Hemingway's in any way. I thought perhaps that your work, inasmuch as action and experience are concerned, may have philosophical implications in common with that of Hemingway's. If one believes, as do the existentialists, that the reality of a phenomenon in its wholeness can only be revealed to us in experience, in interaction with it, then your approach takes on an enormous philosophical significance.

Plimpton: Well, frankly, I never thought of my work in those terms. These are theoretical considerations which someone else, like yourself, may suggest. As a writer, I think that a great deal about a character is revealed through action. But I don't know whether one consciously starts with a particular approach in mind or whether it's simply that if one is writing about people competing in games he knows *instinctively* that isn't the end result, no matter who the writer is.

Interviewer: It appears to me that the central point you are making about writing on sports is the significance of competition in a situation within which certain fundamental aspects of human personality are revealed to the writer. Last night, you were referring to Georges Simenon's remark that he makes his characters walk out on a limb and then he cuts the limb off and describes their behavior. This is, I believe, very close to what Karl Jaspers calls a "limit situation," a critical situation so extreme in its exigencies that

it pushes man [the human being] to the very limits of his [or her] abilities and endurance. In such a situation, man [the human being] is either annihilated or is reborn into a superior state of being. Would this concept of the "limit-situation" apply to your own writing of athletic competition?

Plimpton: What I was suggesting last night was that all writers, whether they are writing novels or describing people who have been instrumental in the shaping of history, are intimating the mode of conduct of people who usually face some confrontation or encounter, some dilemma which they have to solve. They all find themselves in conditions in which they are called upon to use their faculties to the extreme. Simenon, as you know, does this in all of his detective novels. He puts his characters in *extremis*, as it were, and describes what happens.

This extreme situation is comparable to what happens in sports. A man comes out with three seconds to go and he has to kick a field goal from 45 yards away. He is in exactly the same situation which we have been discussing. Although everything in his professional life has prepared him for his performance at this specific moment, one wonders what that fleeting moment does to his psyche, to his nerves, to his personality. One wonders whether he thinks about this particular moment as he is training and thinks about what will happen to him if he fails, and how his teammates will react to his failure. There are all sorts of ripples from his performance in that particular situation, and all of them have great consequences for him.

What I have been saying is a common enough condition in all forms of literature and art, where characters are put into situations where one is enormously curious about how they will behave.

Interviewer: And the interest in how they behave under such circumstances is that their behavior will determine and define their life and their relationship with all those around them.

Plimpton: Yes. That's it.

Interviewer: The very sense of responsibility in such a situation would seem awesome.

Plimpton: Yes. That's what I have been trying to intimate. Since we're all interested to know how others act and feel in such extreme situations, we are

also curious about what our own reactions and feelings would be if we were exactly in the same situations. What would it be like to be a part of an organization, a troop, a team, which every other week or every Sunday, and perhaps even everyday, [one] would have to face this sort of dramatic confrontation? I think that is why we all go to the ballparks. We not only like to appreciate the skills, but also to see these extraordinary heroes who play in this drama again and again.

Interviewer: It is obvious that man [the human being] suffers in extreme situation of conflicts. He [or she] may be gravely wounded, both physically and psychologically, and he [or she] may well be destroyed. To what element in his [or her] nature would you contribute the profound desire and curiosity to learn how he [or she] may act under extreme situations of conflict?

Plimpton: I think he [or she] sees himself [or herself] illuminated in such conditions to some degree, which is why we like to watch tragic drama, as Aristotle suggested. There is something *elevating* about the human condition when one sees it in a highly dramatic form or one reads about it when it is couched in a dramatic language. I suppose that athletes bear the same relationship to us as the Black Prince or figures of mythology and drama. They all grapple with some sort of difficult condition that has been set before them. In sports, it is easy see what that condition is. One man has to strike the other out or has to throw a touchdown pass. We go and sit in the stands and we wonder at the skill of this man under pressure and tension. We wonder about his preparation for it. We're curious about the background that has produced a man who can accomplish what he's accomplishing in front of us. It's all similar to our interest in the gossip columns. We're curious about the captains of the country who are subject to great pressure and responsibility and want to know how they're bearing up under them. We all have responsibilities, but they are not as dramatic.

Interviewer: What is one seeking precisely in reading about violent acts or watching them performed?

Plimpton: I don't know really. You would have to put that question to a psychologist. I think that people as readers and spectators are interested in violence in sports because they are bewildered by that part of human nature which requires that certain people act violently. I remember that some

of the football players with the Baltimore Colts thought of the game as a place where they could commit violence within the restrictions of the rules. They are no doubt people who go to the football games, to hockey games in order to see violence committed. They get a vicarious pleasure out of seeing violent acts—even when it is simulated as in wrestling where the whole performance is closely allied with the theatre. There really is no violence at all. But some people get enormous pleasure out of seeing these big thugs throw each other around. The whole thing is very carefully choreographed to satisfy this apparent urge that people do have for that sort of thing.

I have written about this in a chapter of my book, *Mad Ducks and Bears*. Being a non-collision man myself, I am interested in why it is that people care to play a collision sport such as football. I think the guy that I talked to about this was a man called Bill Laskey, who simply talked about the pleasure there was in physically beating somebody, setting him up and putting him down on his haunches. He really thought there was tremendous pleasure in that.

Interviewer: It reminds me of General Patton's remark about war, which you quoted last night, "God help me, but I do love it so." Which is an extraordinary statement to make.

Plimpton: Right.

Interviewer: Do you feel that there is a reintegration of the human personality in violent situations which may be all interwoven with feelings of heroism, glory, strength, nobility, and a certain kind of assertive masculinity? Are violent sports a means of reaching a way out of banality of everyday life for athletes and spectators?

Plimpton: These are very difficult questions to answer. Admittedly, I have asked ballplayers similar questions who in turn have heard all these stories before. They look upon them with some bewilderment, because they are incapable of answering them. I've been to seminars in which I have seen very learned people at *Sports Illustrated* sit around and talk about the philosophical and psychological ramifications of sports, and why people watch sports. I always sit there in absolute awe of these people, because I don't understand one word of what they're saying. Nor is it particularly important in the kinds of books that I concern myself with. Because I never start writing with sets of preconceived ideas as a framework and then pour everything into it in the way that you pour in concrete.

These questions are no doubt important to philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists. But as I have pointed out, I work quite differently. My own feeling is that if you take a cross-section of people watching football, there will be a wide variety of reasons for their being there. You may find that a number of them are in love with a girl and want to impress her with the game and give her an afternoon of booze. There will be, I'm sure, many reasons of this sort.

Interviewer: Would you care to discuss why you go to the ballgames?

Plimpton: Sure. I go to the ballgames to see superior skill. You talked briefly about nobility. I think that's a good point to make. The players are better than we are, in a sense. That's why they're down there in their unusual accoutrements. They are really dressed up as noblemen or knights. The thing that a kid envies is the uniform that a baseball player has. That's why he fights for a cap. It's not simply another souvenir. He wants to put that cap on his own head. One of the great feelings that one can experience in sports is that of pride—which even I who enter these things as an amateur experience—the pride of putting on a bona fide helmet or a pair of gym shoes and boxing gloves when one goes into the ring. One suddenly feels himself to be an exalted person. One's daydreams seem to be coming true. One finds oneself among heroes who are larger, are swifter, are more skilled, more keen of eyes, and who are put into a particular situation where they have to excel or face intolerable disgrace and disdain. The very crowds which have put them on the pedestal can desert them. That is why a man like Joe Namath is a great hero one day and a paltry villain the next. The relationship between the fan and exalted heroes is very interesting. I think that is why my books have been popular, because one envies these heroes, but one does not know too much about them. The readers are fascinated by the idea of one of their flock, one of them disguised entering into this world, somewhat like the Prince and the Pauper, a man sneaking into the great halls to see how these extraordinary heroes who occupy so much of their time behave.

Interviewer: One would feel somewhat like a man among supermen in such a situation, I would imagine, with all the implications that it would have.

Plimpton: Right.

Interviewer: Is the emphasis here on reporting what you find out to be true in your experience, a sort of situation report?

Plimpton: That's right.

Interviewer: Do you think there is any inherent danger in the kind of dazzling intellectual act that Norman Mailer performs in his work on boxing?

Plimpton: No. Norman knows what he's doing. His book on the Ali-Foreman fight in Zaire [*The Fight*] is a good example of the kind of thing he does. He uses it as an exercise, as a springboard to the liveliness and exhilaration of his own brain that's always hard at work. The point is that he doesn't pretend to suggest that he is doing anything rather than that.

I think, however, that you can intellectualize sports to death and eventually find yourself with a corpse with no trouble at all. Did you see what Garry Wills wrote for *The New York Times Review of Books* last week?

Interviewer: Yes, I did.

Plimpton: What did you think of it?

Interviewer: I found it extremely detailed, rich in that sense, but perhaps on the whole not very pertinent.

Plimpton: Well, three-fourths of the review was given to a learned description of boxing gloves. He really was showing his erudition. That sort of stuff belongs to an encyclopedia.

Interviewer: On the other hand, writers without an intellectual orientation write much on professional sports that is really worthless, wouldn't you agree? It is just somebody's fantasy packaged for sale.

Plimpton: Yes. That happens quite frequently. It usually has the form of the dishonesty of a book written by a quarterback "as told" to some hack writer, which is fantasy, isn't it? I mean there is no suggestion in such a book that the quarterback has done anything else but come out of a rags-to-riches experience. I think of a book by Roman Gabriel, *The Golden Arm*, and it is the kind of book you find hidden in a box of Wheaties. There is absolutely nothing in that book that suggests football has been anything more for him than a golden staircase going higher and higher.

Interviewer: What in your opinion makes a great athlete and accounts for his [or her] superior performance at a particular time in his [or her] life?

Plimpton: Really have no ideas about that myself. I can understand why and how boxers go through endless exercises, physical and mental, to prepare themselves for that primal contest. But one can see at times that a youngster just doesn't have it, that he is never going to make it no matter how much he exercises, that he is not one of these killers and shouldn't be in it. There are others, however, curious-looking people who apparently do have the attributes and will become great fighters.

What is more puzzling is that two people may have exactly the same physical dimensions in the same sport and perform quite differently. One will be the champion and the other won't. What makes the difference is what Billy Talbert, the tennis player, used to refer to as some sort of X-quality. Which he went on to describe as some kind of extraordinary determination and energy; but where it all comes from, I really don't know.

It's quite mysterious what happens in a fellow's apparatus that makes him reach his highest potential at a particular time, as for one extraordinary moment every single department of his body and psyche combine to propel him toward a new achievement.

Interviewer: One of the greatest pleasures that I have drawn from reading your work is your delightful sense of humor. However, I have also discerned an undercurrent of a certain kind of seriousness and perhaps even sadness permeating your work. It is maybe more apparent in *Mad Ducks and Bears* than it is in *Out of My League* and *Paper Lion*. A sense of irreversible loss, something very fine and noble and wonderful coming to an end appears to lurk behind the undeniable hilarity of it all. What is the source of this brooding quality in your work?

Plimpton: Well, I think the first thing that you realize when you enter the society of athletes is that it consists of a very transient group of people. Their span of activity at the height of their powers is a very short one. In football it's not more than ten years. Their skills erode very quickly. They know this. And it isn't only that, but it is a society where people are cut at the slightest slackening of their prowess. It is also a society where enormous sacrifices are demanded of one, not only physically but psychologically as well. One has to concentrate so much all the time on this business of winning that to compen-

sate for that there is always a great deal of tension and cynicism, a lot of criticism, self-evaluation, and self-inspection. And if things are going badly, there is much criticism of the coaches and the management. All that means that it is a society infused with a sort of inner life that is at times very dark and uncertain. That is all rather sad and gives the behavior of the athletes a quality of doomed men. It is a glorious profession that they're involved in, but it is also a frighteningly short one. Their life is truly entrancing but always a little forlorn, too. At times they're rather desperate. Their condition is one that is foisted upon them by the fact that they have to be so extraordinarily physically and mentally able. This is a condition which at best can last a very short time. I think anybody who has spent much time with a football club or baseball club or hockey club would become aware of the fact that none of the qualities which he so admires in the players is going to last very long.

Interviewer: That is indeed tragic, when one considers that to be a professional one equates one's life with his [or her] profession, as Hemingway was fond of pointing out.

Plimpton: That's right.

Interviewer: So with all the glory that the athlete derives from his [or her] profession, it really is a "*métier triste*" because of its exigencies.

Plimpton: Precisely.

Interviewer: There is a poetic quality and resonance in your writing about sports. Do sports lend themselves easily to that dimension of writing?

Plimpton: I think you can write poetically about any subject. Poets have dealt with a wide variety of subjects. But, it seems to me, sports are rather easier to write about poetically, if that is the right word to use. Because what one is describing is an activity which involves much beauty and skill. Skill always possesses an aesthetic quality of its own. And, of course, one is writing of something we have all looked at over and over, something we're familiar with. So the subject really requires that the writer bring a new dimension to it that's going to make the reader say, "Oh, yes, that is indeed what it is like!"

Roger Angell, who writes about baseball, manages to sit in his seat and describe a world series. Even though the reader may have seen the same game, he [or she] finds in Angell's description of the game a quality, a dimension,

which he [or she] might have missed himself [or herself]. And that is no more than the poetic dimension that you are suggesting.

Angell described Luis Tiant, who was an elderly pitcher for the Boston Red Sox [1971–1978], who was nearly a hero of the World Series, and who had a very strong pitching motion. Angell spent a very delightful three or four paragraphs describing his weird pitching style, doing it as a poet would do looking at an object and succeeding in giving it wholeness in words. And it worked, in spite of the fact that all of us had watched this guy throw over a hundred pitches each game. You wouldn't think that there would be any need to sit down and describe that particular familiar pitch. Obviously most sport writers don't. They want to get on to the statistics. But writers who have a lot of space to fill and who are the milers rather than the dash-men of daily papers can afford to dwell on something like that. Because there is truly a poetic phenomenon in sports that cannot be captured in statistics. Any activity that is watched by a host of people with appreciation seems to me almost invariably to be a subject not only for poetry to but also for art in general. You spoke of bullfighting in relationship to *Death in the Afternoon*. As you know, some of the greatest art has come out of that particular spectacle.

A spectacle is always material for art. Consider its relationship with photography, which is having a field day with sports, and painting. It is the same with poetry I believe.

Interviewer: You have spoken at some length about competition as the essence of athletic endeavors. Norman Mailer in his latest book, *The Fight*, in a reference to you writes about your "quietly buried competitive passion." Have you been following a particular personal code of ethics within which you restrain your competitive spirit in relationship with people in the world of sports?

Plimpton: I don't know what Norman meant by that, I really don't. I remember he wrote somewhere in *The Fight* that I was a "smokeless Vesuvius," or something like that (laughter). I remember also talking to a great friend of his, Buzz Farber, and I said, "What on earth is this thing of Norman calling me a "smokeless Vesuvius"? Farber said, "Oh hell, George, he is just telling his readers that you don't *smoke*!" Lovely excuse (laughter)! Then Norman became really upset about that. I think he wrote to *Time* magazine about it (laughter). But I truly don't know what he means by my "quietly buried competitive passion." Is that what he wrote?

Interviewer: I'm fairly sure I have it right.[2]

Plimpton: I believe Norman feels that I don't particularly enjoy the competitive slugging out that he likes. He really loves to brawl in the street, knock heads in your living room, arm wrestle, and get into a staring contest, a whole group of little games like that. He can barely wait to get down in the dirt with you. He knows that I don't particularly like that sort of competition at all. But maybe he thinks that my competitive strains are not necessary loftier but are on a different plane. Could it be that? I have really never asked him (laughter).

Interviewer: I don't really know either. But having met you confirms the impression that one gets from your work that your relationships with people have been extremely pleasant and based on mutual respect.

Plimpton: I think that's so. I have never really gotten into the ruck of it, not particularly.

Interviewer: It seems to me that you have always written with great sympathy and courtesy toward the people you write about and have interviewed.

Plimpton: Well, I do intend to put the best possible light not only on the people I meet but also on their activities. I can't imagine sitting down and consciously vilifying someone. I can't think of a villain in anything that I have written. Perhaps that's wrong, because God knows there are many of them, entirely too many.

Interviewer: I remember Hemingway's injunction against asking a writer questions about his [or her] work-in-progress. I would ask you a question about your present writing, only if you would permit it.

Plimpton: Certainly.

Interviewer: What may we expect from George Plimpton in the near future, aside from the pieces that appear in *Sports Illustrated*?

Plimpton: Well, I'm trying to finish this book on Zaire and Mr. [Muhammad] Ali, which I was talking to you about yesterday [*Shadow Box*,1977]. The book is giving me a lot of trouble, because everyone under the sun, including Mr. Ali himself, is writing about it. But the book is not about Ali, really. It is about the fight game. It is an attempt about the knowledge and the

friendships which I have developed during 15 years that I have been sent by *Sports Illustrated* to cover fights, and try to explain why the fight in Zaire and Ali's winning back his championship were such extraordinary emotional experiences for me.

There is this idea of nobility of sports which we were talking about, and which I hope will work out in the book. Because Ali is a figure out of the most extravagant mythological construction: the deposed Prince losing his title. All the words describing a heavyweight champion are associated with that. The heavyweight champion is the king. Ali had his title taken away from him quite unjustly. He became a terribly unpopular man in the country, despite being a golden-looking figure who should have been loved. He made an extraordinarily difficult and unpopular decision for a man who loves the plaudits and the adulation of the crowds, because he knew they would be turned against him. Not only that, but losing three or four years when he should have been at the top of his career must have been incredibly difficult for him. Then, finally, starting his comeback, which ended up in Africa of all places, and that extraordinary night when he destroyed George Foreman, whom everyone was sure was going to beat him, once again regaining his championship. There is something unbelievably dramatic about all that. Perhaps after finishing this book, I will be able to answer more sensibly the complicated questions of the nature you have been asking me.

Interviewer: I wish you well with your present work, and I thank you for your generosity with your valuable time.

Plimpton: Not at all. My pleasure.

NOTES

1. This interview itself was first published in *Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1. 2 and 3 (1977): 18–34. Print.
2. Philip Young. "Of Strength and Vulnerability." Interview with Erik Nakjavani. *Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 1.4 (1973): 5–22. Print.
3. "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." See Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (New York Bantam Books, 1976) 67.