MAILER'S BOXING JOURNALISM

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I OFTEN SAY THAT NORMAN MAILER GAVE ME LICENSE TO WRITE two books about boxing, but I've forgiven him.

I first read Mailer's sentences at the age of sixteen when I picked up a copy of *Life* magazine in my grandparents' apartment. On its cover was Frank Sinatra's photo of Joe Frazier battering Muhammad Ali. The headline read: "NORMAN MAILER ON THE FIGHT." Inside was "King of the Hill," Mailer's 1971 account of the first Ali-Frazier fight. It's a measure of how much the country has changed in the last four decades that it is almost impossible to imagine a mainstream glossy today running a lengthy story by a writer of Mailer's stature. Would *People* magazine publish a long, thoughtful piece by, say, Jonathan Franzen?

Boxing was important to Mailer because, during his lifetime, boxing was important to America. From the twenties through the seventies, boxing was arguably as popular as professional football is today. But boxing occupied a more central place in the national psyche: it raised racial and political issues thanks to such irresistibly complex figures as Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Floyd Paterson, and Sony Liston. And Mailer was always at his best when taking on historical forces.

I will focus here on Mailer the boxing journalist rather than Mailer the novelist who often worked a bit of boxing into his fiction. Much of what is written about Mailer's fascination with the sport dwells on his thinking about masculinity, violence, and race—a trifecta of Mailer obsessions. But I am interested in the ways that writing about boxing allowed Mailer to make sometimes subtle, sometimes overt claims about his own career as writer. I will also argue that reporting on boxing played to Mailer's literary strengths while keeping his shortcomings from view.

Take plot, never a strength of Mailer's. I remember Mailer, shortly after

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the publication of *The Fight,* telling a television interviewer that a novelist could never invent a plot as unlikely as Ali's stunning upset of George Foreman in their 1974 championship *fight* in Zaire. Yet in boxing, the storyline comes ready made: there's a winner and loser, a story with a beginning, middle, and end. There is also a standard format to championship boxing matches: training, media hype, and then the fight itself that, of course, provides a definitive climax to the story. This simple, satisfying structure, gives Mailer a fine frame for his estimable powers of description and characteristically discursive thoughts.

Writing about boxing also allows Mailer to avoid two of his weaknesses as a writer: dialogue and female characters.

Defenders of Mailer's ability to create fully realized women may point to Elena in *The Deer Park* or even, perhaps, Kittredge in *Harlot's Ghost.* But it would be hard to argue that women characters are one of Mailer's strengths. And boxing—at least during the period when Mailer was writing about it—was an almost exclusively male domain. So the issue becomes irrelevant.

As for dialogue, well, Mailer didn't always have a great ear for the way people actually speak. (Witness the stilted conversations between Modene Murphy and her girlfriend/confidant in *Harlot's Ghost*, flight attendants who often sound more like sixties-era grad students.) But any fight camp provides an abundance of memorable, self-invented personalities with idiosyncratic verbal gifts. When recording the rants of Ali in his prime or the quasi-philosophical musings of the boxing manager Cus D'Amato, Mailer—like countless journalists before and after him—pretty much could not go wrong.

On now to deeper questions, which come to us courtesy of Joyce Carol Oates in *On Boxing*, her 116-page consideration of boxing as "America's tragic theater." For Oates, Mailer's boxing writing is "as good as anything ever written on the subject" because the fighters are, in the end, unknowable:

> Mailer's strength lies in his recognition that the boxers are *other*—though he does not say so, even in the long extravagant meditation of *The Fight* . . . it seems clear to this reader at least that Mailer cannot establish a connection between himself and the boxers: he tries heroically but he cannot understand them and so he is forever excluded from what, unthinkingly, they represent: an ideal (because unthinking, unforced) masculinity be-

> yond all question. It is this recognition of his exclusion . . . that allows for the force of Mailer's vision. (54)

It is a convincing argument, but after rereading much of Mailer's reporting on the sport, I reach a different conclusion.

For one thing, Oates misses something when she asserts that Mailer does not say that boxers are "other." Mailer actually states it plainly in "King of the Hill":

> [W]e have to recognize that there is no way to comprehend them [boxers] as men like ourselves—we can only guess at their insides by a real jump of our imagination into the science Ali invented—he was the first psychologist of the body. (19)

But I take a skeptical view of Mailer's words here; they seem like something of a pose. Even as Mailer expresses his deep and sincere respect for boxers, he is preemptively disarming critics who might doubt the abilities of a middle-aged Jewish novelist to understand men as obviously different from him as Ali and Frazier. On many levels, however, Mailer implies that he does understand Ali because—as Mailer hints again and again—Ali is to boxing what Mailer is to writing. For Mailer, then, Ali becomes a man whose physical gifts matched Mailer's intellectual gifts, a not-so-secret sharer whose outsized ego matched Mailer's own.

In the passage cited above, for example, when Mailer writes that Ali is "the first psychologist of the body," Mailer is also implying that he—Mailer—was the first psychologist of the body, or that at least he could share the title with Ali for the simple reason that Mailer the novelist was the psychologist who could best interpret Ali's psyche.

In "King of the Hill," Mailer somewhat notoriously writes that heavyweight champions "begin to have inner lives like Hemingway or Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust" (21). The assertion exhibits Mailer's gift for provocative exaggeration, though he does equivocate somewhat by including the phrase "begin to have." Mailer's notion, however, contains a serious claim: if the inner lives of great boxers are comparable to those of great novelists, who is more suited to understand champions than a great novelist like, say, Norman Mailer?

In *The Fight*, Mailer again suggests the parallels between boxing champions and novelists:

> Of course, to try to learn from boxers was a quintessentially comic quest. Boxers were liars. Champions were great liars. They had to be. Once you knew what they thought, you could hit them. So their personalities became masterpieces of concealment. (43)

Here again, beneath Mailer's acknowledgement that boxers are unknowable, is an implied kinship between the novelist who, of course, tells lies when he invents stories, and the boxer whose feints are intended to deceive an opponent. But like the novelist's fictions, the boxer's lies—his feints—serve a larger, deeper purpose. And like the novelist, the gifted boxer creates "masterpieces of concealment." The writer of fiction, after all, dons many masks and poses, though his personality is never fully revealed.

"King of the Hill" begins with a word long associated with Mailer himself: Ego. Mailer goes on to define ego as "that extraordinary state of the psyche which gives us authority to declare we are sure of ourselves when we are not" (15). Is that not exactly what a writer with Mailer's bravado—and underrated sense of irony—constantly does in his boldest sentences? Describing Ali, Mailer writes:

> He is *fascinating*—attraction and repulsion must be in the same package. So, he is obsessive. The more we don't want to think about him, the more we are obliged to. There is a reason for it. He is America's Greatest Ego. ("King" 15)

Again, I find something coy here—or perhaps it is coyly revealing. If Ali were America's greatest ego, wouldn't another contender for that title be Norman Mailer? And didn't much of the reading public contemplate Mailer with a mixture of attraction and repulsion?

Mailer famously remarked that he did not want to be a great Jewish writer, there were already enough of those. But there is something quintessentially Jewish in Mailer's identification with Ali. Mailer was only the latest in the long line of Jewish American writers intrigued by boxing. It is a list that begins with Nat Fleischer, founder of *Ring Magazine*, and extends on-

ward to A. J. Liebling, Budd Schulberg, and David Remnick, the *New Yorker* editor who has written a book on Ali, as well as an enlightening profile of Mike Tyson.

In *The Fight*, Mailer himself notes how many boxing writers are Jewish:

> It was striking how many of the Jewish writers . . . had affection for Ali, a veritable tropism of affection, as if, ultimately, he was one of them, a Jew in the sense of being his own creation. Few things would inspire more love among Jews than the genius to be without comparison. (161–162)

Of course, Mailer himself has often been spoken of as a genius without comparison. Thus the connection between writer and fighter grows deeper.

Mailer makes the connection even more explicit in *The Fight* when he contemplates the prospect of Ali defeating the highly favored, younger, stronger, undefeated champion, George Foreman:

> That would be a triumph for everything which did not fit into the computer: for audacity, inventiveness, even art. If ever a fighter had been able to demonstrate that boxing was a twentieth century art, it must be Ali. It would certainly come off as a triumph for the powers of regeneration in an artist. What could be of more importance to Norman? (162)

So while Mailer may still feel that on some level—as Oates maintains—boxers are inevitably "other," he also suggests that Ali is fighting for all the same things that Mailer has been fighting for his entire life: ego, audacity, and art. Like Mailer, Ali is also combating the alienating aspects of technology—that is, "everything which did not fit into a computer." And like Mailer, Ali may have squandered his great gifts over the years, but Ali also possesses "powers of regeneration" that Mailer hoped to equal in his own career as a writer. I would even argue that Mailer's late novels—*Ancient Evenings*, *Harlot's Ghost*, and *The Castle in the Forest*, were his own attempts to pull the literary equivalent of knocking out George Foreman, achieving a large victory few thought possible.

The parallel is made plain again in the description of Ali's encounter with his wife in the dressing room following the unlikely knockout of Foreman:

> Husband and wife looked at each other silently as if a question of long standing was at last being resolved. They kissed. . . . There was something so tender in Ali's regard, so mocking, and so calm, that the look appeared to say, "Honey, my ways got to be curious to you, and we both know I am crazy, but please believe me when I try to tell you that I am, my darling, by all scientific evidence a serious fellow." (Or is that the way Norman would have spoken if he had ever won anything that well?) (*Fight* 212-213)

Here the kinship between Ali and Mailer is in full view with Ali again embodying a sort of idealized Mailer self. Both men lived life in the public eye, were often thought of as being "crazy," and both hoped to prove that they were masters of their chosen arts, serious fellows. Mailer's final parenthetical statement feels like a bit of false modesty: if Mailer, in his later years, could pull off the masterpiece he'd been promising for so long, that surely would have been the literary equivalent of Ali's greatest comeback victory.

Mailer's powers of description are abundantly on display in his boxing writing in passages that strike me as Mailer at his very best, making unlikely connections that allow the reader to see more deeply into the individuals and phenomenon described.

Start with Mailer's concise portraits of the sparring partners, trainers, boxing writers, and hangers-on that people the boxing world. There's Mailer's quick sketch of Angelo Dundee, Ali's trainer, who "offered Sicilian concentricity; himself in the first circle, family in the second, friends and associates in the third (*Fight* 155). Yancey Durham, Frazier's manager at the time of the first Ali fight, displays "the quick-witted look of eyes which could spot from a half-mile away any man coming toward him with criminal thought" ("King" 31). Other examples abound.

Mailer is, if anything, more inspired when it comes to writing about champions. From "10,000 Words," this is Mailer's take on Rocky Marciano's knockout of an aging Joe Louis: "It was a little like the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: something generous had just gone out of the world" ("10,000" 222). And here is Mailer's description of Marciano, now a former champion, making an appearance prior to the first Liston-Patterson fight: "He [Marciano] had gotten very plump, his face was round and no longer lumpy, he was half bald, a large gentle monk with a bemused, misty, slightly

tricky expression" ("10,000" 222). Portraying another champion, Mailer writes that George Foreman exhibits a "big look, heavy as death, oppressive as the closing of the door of one's tomb" (*Fight* 176). In each of these examples, Mailer uses unlikely analogies—comparing Louis' knockout to FDR's death, likening Marciano to a "gentle monk"—to portray champions as men whose lives bespeak profound truths.

Mailer is equally evocative in his account of fighters in action in the ring. And it is interesting to note how, in each of the following three passages, Mailer uses the word "man" to describe what he is seeing. This is Mailer on Foreman returning to his corner after a tough round with Ali:

> For the few extra seconds it takes Foreman to go to his corner, his legs have the look of a bedridden man who has started on a tour of his room for the first time in a week. (*Fight* 192)

When, finally, Ali lands the knockout blow, Mailer's attention focuses on Ali's victim, humanizing the falling champion, once again summoning unlikely and surprisingly gentle images to evoke a brutal scene:

> Foreman's arms flew out to the side like a man with a parachute jumping out of a plane, and in this doubled-over position he tried to wander out to the center of the ring. All the while his eyes were on Ali and he looked up with no anger as if Ali, indeed, was the man he knew best in the world and would see him on his dying day. (208)

As Michael Spinks is quickly dispatched by Mike Tyson in their 1988 championship bout, Mailer's sums up the victim's expression in a simple sentence: "He had the look on his face of a man who had just been washed overboard in a squall" ("Understanding" 42). Mailer then succinctly describes the cruelty of championship boxing with one short sentence: "Spinks had beaten his fear on every day but the most important day of his life" (42).

Thus fighters are likened to a "bedridden man," "a man with a parachute," a "man . . . washed overboard," and a man who had failed to conquer his fear. Well, boxing is, after all, often called "the manly art," and it was definitely that for Mailer: both manly and an art, but also the occasion for Mailer to display his art.

Mailer is equally inspired when portraying his hero, Ali. But, after Ali's victory of Foreman, Mailer likens Ali not to a man, but to something perhaps grander: "Light twinkled in those eyes all the way back to the beginning. Truth, he looked like a castle all lit up" (*Fight* 212). Again, Mailer makes an unlikely comparison—an imaginative leap—that, rather than drawing attention to itself, serves to make us see anew.

"Sooner or later," Mailer wrote in "King of the Hill," "fight metaphors, like fight managers, go sentimental" (31). But it is a saving grace of Mailer's boxing journalism that it never does quite "go sentimental." Nowhere is this more apparent than in his well-known description of the welterweight Benny Paret dying in the ring after a brutal onslaught from Emile Griffith during their nationally televised 1962 championship bout:

> Paret died on his feet. As he took those eighteen punches something happened to everyone who was in psychic range of the event. Some part of his death reached out to us. One felt it hover in the air. He was still standing in the ropes, trapped as he had been before, he gave some little half-smile of regret, as if he were saying, " I didn't know I was going to die just yet," and then, his head leaning back but still erect, his death came to breathe about him. He began to pass away. As he passed, so his limbs descended beneath him, and he sank slowly to the floor. He went down more slowly than any fighter had ever gone down, he went down like a large ship which turns on end and slides second by second into its grave. As he went down, the sound of Griffith's punches echoed in the mind like a heavy ax in the distance chopping into a wet log. ("10,000" 244–245)

This passage avoids sentimentality because it finds nothing noble in Paret's death. Mailer merely describes it as best he can. Or, I would add, as only Mailer can.

And while Mailer might flirt with a sentimental impulse in his descriptions of Ali, he never loses sight of boxing's brutality and the terrible price the fighters pay for all the blows they take. For Mailer, observing a great champion in action may be a pleasure, but it is ultimately something of a guilty pleasure—and Mailer does not back away from the culpability of the boxing fan and the boxing writer who enjoy the sport.

In Mailer's final written piece on boxing, he observes an ailing Ali in the ring prior to the Tyson-Spinks championship bout in Atlantic City:

> Ali now moved with the deliberate, awesome calm of a blind man, sobering all who stared upon him. He looked like the Shade of the boxing world. "I, who gave you great pleasure for years, now ask you to witness the cost of your pleasure," he could as well said. ("Understanding" 40)

So, in the end, Mailer understood the cost paid by great champions for his enjoyment. I will let that stand as his final comment on the sport.

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