SPLIT DECISIONS: AN ASYNCHRONOUS DISCUSSION ON NORMAN MAILER AND BOXING

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The following discussion took place over the course of several months through email, phone calls, a shared Google Doc, and hotel room conversations. Hopefully, this version will provide a reasonably smooth experience for the reader.

What was at the root of Mailer's boxing persona?

Bill: It may have been based in insecurity. Or, possibly, a reaction to having been brought up as a pampered Jewish kid by a doting mother. For Mailer, the boxer persona was a role to play. He didn't need to fight his way out of the ghetto the way many "real" boxers had to. He took on the part when he was an adult. He had graduated from Harvard, fought in World War II, published *The Naked and the Dead*. He was the most famous writer in America when he was introduced to boxing by Adele's father, Al Morales, and began to spar and learn about the history of the sport.

Ron: I agree with Bill. I hadn't thought of it, but playing the role of a fighter or a boxer was a kind of mask that Mailer put on. It was a role he played in the same way that he took on various accents when speaking: his Texas accent, his Irish accent, his Harvard accent, and sometimes the whiff of Brooklyn would get stronger than usual. His walk was also something of an invention, the boxer-like roll of the shoulders. I really do miss seeing that on TV or on stage at the YHMA in New York.

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What else in Mailer's life accounts for his attraction to boxing?

Ron: I've always felt that Mailer liked boxing because he was bullied as a child. Men who were bullied in their youth—as Mailer admitted he was—love boxing because it presents the thing they fear most: a fight acted out. They can watch in fear and trembling, though unlike a classic Greek tragedy, a boxing match provides no true catharsis. I used to go to a lot of boxing matches, and I was struck by the fact that the crowd seemed to divide into two types: those who might otherwise be spending the evening beating someone up and those who were quite relieved that someone else was getting beat up for a change.

If we accept that Mailer was a child who was bullied and feared being beat up, then any true Mailerite would know Mailer was always compelled to do the thing he most feared. He was afraid of heights, so he created a circus acrobat construct in the upper floors of his Brooklyn apartment. And, of course, he wrote the famous window-ledge scenes in *An American Dream* and *The Fight.* Thus, as Mailer was afraid of fights, he felt compelled to pick fights until they no longer frightened him.

Understanding that doing the thing one most fears is key to the way Mailer approached his own neuroses. Rojack says towards the end of *An American Dream* that Freud is wrong and fear may be the source of neuroses. I think that Mailer agreed. In *The Big Empty*, he says, "timidity kills." So he fought against his own innate timidity. Of course, foolish courage also kills, but that's not something Mailer wanted to worry about.

Barry: I agree about kids who were bullied enjoying boxing as spectators for the reasons you give. There are obviously similar reasons for those kids to learn to box. The use of heights as a motif also appears in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (the Provincetown Monument), *Harlot's Ghost* (rock climbing, which Mailer took up in his fifties), *The Naked and the Dead* (Mt. Anaka), and *The Gospel According to the Son* (when Satan transports Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple), etc.

Bill: Also I think Mailer was attracted to boxing simply because it was *the* sport for "real men," to identify with in his youth. Aside from his iconoclastic, sometimes polemical thinking and writing, Mailer was in some ways a mainstream guy. He was no Timothy Leary, who exhorted, "Turn on, tune

in, drop out"; Allen Ginsberg, the queer vegetarian visionary, or Abbie Hoffman, the anarchist who skipped bail and lived on the lam for several years. Unlike those contemporaries, who advocated radical alternatives to the status quo, Mailer wore three-piece suits and ate a meat-and-potatoes diet (this analysis coming from a vegan who believes food choice to be an indicator of political and spiritual consciousness). Norman attacked the establishment, but was also linked to it. He conspicuously socialized with the rich and famous. He celebrated his fiftieth birthday at the Four Seasons. Boxing was at its peak of popularity during his youth and young manhood, so it's completely understandable that he identified with it.

Is Mailer's fascination with boxing somehow characteristically Jewish?

Ron: Mailer is, among other things, in a long line of Jewish guys who write about boxing. Nat Fleischer, the founder of *RING* magazine was Jewish. A.J. Liebling, who famously wrote about boxing for *The New Yorker*, was Jewish. So was the late Bert Sugar, sometime editor of the *RING*. Likewise, Thomas Hauser, Ali's biographer; David Remnick, the *New Yorker* editor who wrote a book about Ali; David Margolick, the *Vanity Fair* contributor who wrote a book about the Louis-Schmeling fights.

Mailer, to his credit, didn't fall into the trap that so many Jewish boxing writers succumb to: he didn't romanticize the great Jewish boxers of the 20s and 30s such as Benny Leonard and Barney Ross. In fact, I don't think Mailer ever mentions them. To borrow a favorite Mailer phrase, I'd *go as far as to say* that Mailer somehow *didn't* equate Jewishness with boxing. To Mailer, I'd guess, boxing—physical violence—was the opposite of how Jews were expected to behave. (Hence the Jewish fascination with boxing. Hence Mailer's fascination with boxing.) And while Mailer didn't identify with Jewish fighters, he might be accused of identifying with and sentimentalizing black fighters. Now that I think of it, though, Mailer did crown Ali something of an honorary Jew in *The Fight*, and he argued that Ali's gift for self-invention made him appealing to Jewish boxing writers.

If Mailer had not identified with boxing, given the environment and home culture in which he grew up, what would have been the alternatives?

Bill: I don't think any other sports would have served the purpose. Mailer was a city kid and did not grow up hunting, fishing, and spending time in

the outdoors the way Hemingway did. He wasn't a gifted natural athlete and aside from proudly making the house football team at Harvard, didn't participate in team sports aside from casual softball games in the Provincetown area.

He also wasn't, for lack of a more elegant term, a military groupie the way Hemingway was, so a military persona would not have worked for him. In fact, once home from World War II, Mailer became a prominent critic of the military-industrial complex.

Despite Mailer's anti-authoritarian nature, I'll go out on a limb and say that if it hadn't been boxing, without the outlet of writing to channel his aggression, express his masculinity, and provide opportunities for creative problem solving, Norman might have become more deeply involved with politics. After reading Joe Flaherty's entertaining book, *Managing Mailer*, I concluded that Mailer's 1969 run for mayor of New York City was roughly one-third serious. Flaherty, who was Norman's campaign manager, noted that Mailer's running mate, Jimmy Breslin, regarded the campaign as an opportunity to accept free drinks in his favorite haunts on Queens Boulevard.

What other writer of Mailer's or Hemingway's standing personally identified so closely with any sport?

Bill: David Foster Wallace was a competitive tennis player and tennis was an important element in *Infinite Jest* and elsewhere in his work. John Irving was a collegiate wrestler and continued to train with wrestlers for years, writing about the sport in *The World According to Garp* and other works.

According to A.J. Liebling, who wrote eloquently about boxing for the *New Yorker* in the 1940s and 1950s, Albert Camus had been an amateur middleweight. Liebling also relates that "between cantos . . . " Lord Byron "liked to hang out at the Fives Court . . .the Stillman's gym of his day . . . when all of his mistresses' husbands were in town at the same time." (*Just Enough Liebling*, North Point Press, 2004, p. 385)

Barry: Hemingway, though, has to be awarded the bragger's championship belt for his statements. In addition to saying "A champion [writer] cannot retire like anyone else," he said, "I trained hard and beat Mr. Turgenev. . ." and went on to say he was training to beat Tolstoy.

To Hemingway's credit as a novelist, however, don't forget that his real

boxer, Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises,* is presented as a chivalric anachronism, an armed (with his skilled fists) romantic who foolishly tries to fight for the honor of a lady who has no honor. When he beats Romero the bullfighter, Cohn is really defeated because Romero's spirit won't break. This is parallel to Rojack beating Shago in *An American Dream,* which I discuss below.

What other writers have used a sport as a story device or metaphor?

Barry: Thom Jones' three short story collections: *The Pugilist at Rest, Cold Snap,* and *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine,* are filled with boxing stories and knowledgeable boxing lore.

Bill: William Kennedy's use of the Depression era Albany sporting scene in the *Ironweed* trilogy comes to mind. Billy Phelan, Kennedy's protagonist in two of the books, was a hustler at bowling, darts, pool, and cards. Francis Phelan, the tragic hero in *Ironweed*, another title in the trilogy, was an ex-baseball player. John Updike's *Rabbit Run* series features protagonist Harry Angstrom, a former high school basketball star. References to it appear throughout the series, although less in the later books.

Bullfighting was major for Hemingway, but he also identified strongly with boxing. He actually participated more in boxing than bullfighting. I don't think that he did any real bullfighting. We would have all read about it if he had killed a bull. He was quick to boast about all of the other animals he'd killed and claimed in his letters of killing 58 Germans while leading irregular forces in World War II.

Ron: Martin Amis wrote a hilarious tennis scene in his novel *Money*, and he's reported on Wimbledon. Updike is also associated with baseball, but it's largely because of his famous piece about Ted Williams. Cheever claimed to be a Red Sox fan, but a friend of mine went to a game with Cheever, and Cheever didn't really seem to know much about the game.

What sort of boxers was Mailer attracted to and what did this say about his prejudices and interests?

Ron: Boxing was hugely popular when Mailer was growing up during the Depression and after WWII. Joe Louis was the most celebrated and histori-

cally significant fighter of this era. But Mailer never wrote about Louis that I know of. Perhaps Louis wasn't sufficiently rebellious or outspoken to capture Mailer's imagination. Given Louis' status as the first black man allowed to fight for the heavyweight title after the controversial champion Jack Johnson, Louis couldn't afford to be anything but humble and solemn in public.

I think Mailer liked boxers who seemed to work on the basis of some sort of intellectual construct. Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres, for example, were trained by Cus D'Amato and they personified D'Amato's boxing "philosophy," specifying the need for fighters to conquer their fear. This notion, along with the D'Amato's bobbing-weaving "peek-a-boo" defensive stance was later adapted by D'Amato's protégé Mike Tyson. Mailer was also interested in Tyson, though to a lesser degree than he was interested in Liston, Patterson, Frazier, Foreman, and Ali.

Speaking of Patterson, one of the odd things about "10,000 Words a Minute," is that Mailer is rooting for and identifying with Floyd Patterson, the "good," establishment Negro. Patterson was white America's notion of what a good Negro should be: a polite, humble, reformed former juvenile delinquent who never seemed angry. (I think that Patterson was also a Republican, as was Jackie Robinson.) Whereas Liston was the very embodiment of the outlaw. You'd think that Mailer, who conceived of himself as something of an outlaw, would have preferred Liston. Perhaps it was just Mailer's allegiance to D'Amato that kept him rooting for Patterson.

Relating to the earlier question about boxing and Jewishness, I'd say Mailer liked Jewish-*style* fighters—by which I mean those who—like Benny Leonard, the ultimate Jewish boxer, believed in "brains over brawn," outthinking the opponent who may be physically stronger. This might explain why Mailer rooted for the strategic Patterson over the physically stronger Liston.

Barry: He writes that the black people were tired of ". . . a pimp's logic," and thus repudiated Liston and favored Patterson, but I'm not sure he entirely adopts that posture himself. He divorces himself from such partisan cheering by his dispassionate but exciting reportage.

Bill: I don't see a strong tendency as far as the type of boxers Mailer paid attention to and analyzed. He wrote quite a bit about both Joe Frazier and George Foreman, neither of whom is regarded as a "thinking man's fighter."

Regardless, each fought with a distinctive style: Frazier's head never stopped bobbing and his left hook felled many an opponent, including Ali. Foreman had a deceptively good jab and his uppercut actually lifted both of Frazier's feet off the canvas in his 1973 title victory in Kingston, Jamaica.

After losing first to Frazier, which Mailer wrote about in the essay, "King of the Hill," for *LIFE* magazine, Ali defeated Frazier in two rematches. Then he beat Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, which Mailer detailed in *The Fight*. Besides his friendship with Jose Torres, Ali was the only fighter in whom Mailer maintained an interest. Ironically, in the history of boxing, Ali—a convert to Islam—is the ultimate (to use Ron's term) "Jewish-style fighter."

What can be said about Mailer's fascination with boxing relating to his general willingness to engage in an argument, debate, or physical altercation—whether in his family affairs, personal relationships, or literary circles?

Bill: I'm glad that this question came up, because boxing is so ritualized that it has limitations as a channel for understanding Mailer. The boxing metaphor needs to be expanded to connect with other aspects of violence Mailer wrote about and, sometimes, physically acted out. I don't think boxing's connections with the bigger picture have been thoroughly explored.

Norman was a guy who liked to mix it up. He thrived on conflict. I remember reading in one of the biographies that Norman would sometimes play devil's advocate in a conversation, just for the sake of exploring another person's mind as well as his own. Like a gambler, *action* was what mattered. Winning or losing was not always the object. Sometimes what mattered was to learn through being *engaged*.

Like boxing, literary feuds can be viewed as a type of ritual. One writer badmouths another at a party or in print. Drinks are thrown. Letters cross paths in the mail. The press gets involved. Variations on the pattern have been around for as long as there have been writers. I think that people unthinkingly take part in this kind of nonsense because feuds fill a lot of voids. They provide an excuse to not do your work and to not fulfill your responsibilities. They serve as a way to avoid grappling with existential angst.

Sometimes the nonsense makes sense in an unintended way. Mailer headbutting Gore Vidal in the green room prior to their appearance on the Dick Cavett show stemmed from Vidal comparing Mailer to Charlie Manson in

an article. Once out on stage, Norman's shenanigans continued, culminating in Cavett directing him to "fold it (a piece of paper containing Vidal's remarks) five ways and stick it where the sun doesn't shine." By "losing" in that moment, Mailer had, in another sense, achieved a victory. It was his behavior, not Vidal's, which would be remembered.

Every public school teacher (I've been one for 35 years) can testify there's at least one student each year, almost always a boy, who so badly needs the attention of *anyone* in the classroom that it makes little difference whether he's getting it for bad behavior or good. Such kids are often highly intelligent and are bored, so they turn the classroom into a personal laboratory where they conduct experiments in human behavior. This scenario is also a type of ritual. Ironically, in Norman's case, from the accounts I've read, he was a brilliant student and not a behavior problem while in school. *But Norman became this kid when he grew up and entered the literary world.* By some standards—mine anyway—it amounts to a form of de-evolution. But it isn't unusual for those who achieve fame at an early age.

Instead of becoming more empathetic, throughout early adulthood and middle age, Mailer seems to have grown increasingly self-centered, even narcissistic. This is interesting, because to my way of thinking, the author of character-based fiction needs to be deeply empathetic. But in Norman's case, besides being a product of fame, maybe it can be explained by saying that his thirst for life experience required him to engage in all types of relationships, sometimes without regard to the potential negative consequences. And through the consequences, whether positive or negative, he gained a deeper understanding of others and of himself. The risk, apparently, was worth it.

In another example of leading with his chin, in 1959, years prior to his Dick Cavett appearance, Mailer published an essay in *Advertisements for Myself* entitled "Evaluation: Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room." In it, he assessed twenty-one writers of the day, some of them severely, and others, including many female authors, in a dismissive fashion. The fallout took decades to settle. In some cases, it never did. (For a detailed account, please see *A Double Life*, pps 247–252).

Ron: I agree with Bill that a novelist needs empathy, at least the capacity to imagine with empathy. But in their lives, novelists are often cold and cruel, selfishly chasing after experience and letting their friends and families fall like

bowling pins around them. I also think Mailer became empathetic as he aged. At least he seemed to become a pretty nice fellow.

Barry: Yes, Bill, I think that all of the forms of ritual conflict you cite, whether intellectual or physical, are applicable here. I find particularly interesting the very valid statement that "Norman became that kid," the one seeking attention even if it has to be through bad behavior. You suggest that he "became increasingly self-centered, even narcissistic," a statement with which I agree as far as his transition from youth to middle age goes. Later on, in at least some arenas of life, he was more mature, a senior statesman of American letters.

In another parallel between boxing and writing, Jose Torres said in an interview that boxers, like writers, are by definition liars. The boxer is out to feint and thus deceive his opponent while the writer is drawing the reader into a fictional construct. I would add that even in "non-fiction," the author tries to convince us of his own views, as in *Oswald's Tale*. Erica Jong once wrote that it is a mistake to insist that autobiography and fiction are different genres. She called them "sliding forms," because one is always sliding into the other.

Mailer condemned violent actions by the state, such as the war in Vietnam and police actions against civil rights marchers. However, he romanticized and glorified violence on the personal level such as boxing and fistfights outside of the ring. What might have been his rationalization for not supporting the line often attributed to Gandhi: "be the change you wish to see in the world?"

Bill: To me, this is the most interesting thread of our inquiry on Mailer. It could also be applied to Muhammad Ali, the fighter with whom Mailer identified most closely. Ali—who made his living hitting other people with his fists—chose, for religious reasons, not to serve in the military after being drafted. Later in life he developed a reputation as a diplomat and a man of peace. But, like Mailer, Ali often treated people in his personal and professional life badly—even sadistically. He taunted challenger Buster Mathis during their 1971 match, yelling "What's my name?" as he pummeled Mathis while deliberately carrying the fight in order to inflict as much punishment as possible. Later, in preparing for his matches with Joe Frazier, in the media

Ali repeatedly referred to Frazier as an Uncle Tom and a gorilla. Frazier never forgave him.

Despite a lifetime of constant self-reflection, I don't recall Mailer ever writing about his own—or Ali's—contradictions in this area, so we're left to speculate. I'm surprised no interviewer ever asked either man about it. I think it would be an interesting point of departure for future Mailer or Ali research. *A Double Life* proves to be the perfect title for Norman's biography.

Barry: Yes, I think some personal commitment to peacemaking on an individual level would have become Mailer, but I can't think of or imagine an example other than that as president of PEN, he advocated that fifty noted writers support Salman Rushdie by volunteering their own names as targets for homicidal Muslims.

RON: One thing that's so odd about boxing and Mailer's habit of picking physical fights is that hitting someone you disagree with proves nothing. When you think about it, it's an absurd notion. Mailer was mad at Vidal, so Mailer—a grown man!—head-butted Vidal. What did that prove? Did it prove that Vidal's essay "The Miller, Manson, Mailer Man" was incorrect? No. Vidal's essay was unkind and unfair, but a head butt didn't prove that point. It actually made the opposite argument: that Mailer could be a bit atavistic at times.

Why did Mailer write so much about Ali?

Bill: Ali was one of the major public figures of his time—possibly *the* major figure from roughly the mid-Sixties to the mid-Seventies. Mailer wasn't attracted to inconsequential characters. He was interested in people who played big roles in society. He wanted to be in the spotlight along with them and he certainly deserved to be there, because no one else could chronicle the times and provide the depth of insight he has left for posterity. How fortunate we are to have passages like the following from Mailer's essay, "King of the Hill":

> Muhammad Ali begins with the most unsettling ego of all. Having commanded the stage he never pretends to step back and relinquish his place to other actors—like a six-foot parrot, he keeps screaming at you that he is the center of the stage. "Come here

> and get me, fool," he says. "You can't, 'cause you don't know who I am. You don't know where I am. I'm human intelligence and you don't even know if I'm good or evil."

Ron: As I argued in my earlier piece in *The Mailer Review*, Mailer identified with Ali on a number of levels. There's Ali's narcissism, Ali's very modern understanding of celebrity and publicity, and Ali's physical grace, which I'm sure Mailer envied. (Well, who didn't?) But I'd like to focus on two other points.

For starters, Ali's career in the ring—like Mailer's literary career—was filled with comebacks. Ali often seemed to be washed up as a fighter, yet he continually beat the odds: first by defeating the heavily-favored Liston, then by coming back from a three-year layoff to regain the championship by defeating the odds-on favorite George Foreman. And Mailer, of course, was thought to be washed up after the critical reaction to his second and third novels, yet Mailer managed to come back and, as it were, win two title belts . . . I mean two Pulitzers.

Then there's the boasting. Ali claimed to be the "greatest of all time," while Mailer claimed to be the heavyweight champion of novelists. In both cases, the boasts seemed designed as much to convince the speaker as his listeners.

I'd also say that Mailer identified with Ali's improvisatory style. As detailed in *The Fight*, against Foreman, Ali saw after the first round that he couldn't defeat Foreman by "dancing," as Ali called it, constantly moving, striking quickly, and dancing away. So Ali improvised the famous "rope-a-dope" and managed to exhaust Foreman by lying against the ropes and absorbing Foreman's best shots. Mailer favored a similarly improvisatory style in his writing. He said—in *The Spooky Art*, I think—that the best sentences are born when a writer doesn't know where a sentence will end when the sentence is begun. For better or worse, Mailer took this approach to constructing plots. He thought a novel would feel dead if the author knew exactly how the story would end when starting work on the book.

Barry: Mailer found out what he was thinking by writing. He often didn't know where he was going until he got there. Like Ali, he did this with brilliant success.

Bill: I agree with Ron's other points of comparison between Mailer and Ali, but disagree that Ali's rope-a-dope strategy was improvised after the first round of the Rumble in the Jungle—even discounting the legend that Angelo Dundee, Ali's trainer, loosened the ring ropes prior to the fight. (Thomas Hauser's biography, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, provides eyewitness testimony to dispel the story.) I think that the rope-a-dope was a shrewd, calculated strategy. For years Ali had used the tactic in training camp as a means of toughening up his body and extending the number of sparring rounds to build up his endurance.

In my late twenties and early thirties, I trained as an amateur boxer in Easton, Pennsylvania. My mentor was Earnee Butler, who had been Larry Holmes' original trainer. Possessing no potential for competitive advancement, I served first as a sparring partner and later as Butler's assistant trainer and muse. Thanks to Earnee's teaching and protection, I emerged from my six-year study with my faculties sufficiently intact to continue a career in public education. I also came away with many stories. I learned that Butler took the young Holmes numerous times to work as a sparring partner at Ali's camp at Deer Lake, Pennsylvania. This was long before the Ali-Foreman match. Years later in our conversations, Butler told of Ali frustrating his sparring partners, including Holmes, by leaning back on the ropes, then lashing out in a brief flurry of activity at round's end. Later, when Holmes was champion, I often had the opportunity to observe him spar and he used the rope-a-dope tactic that he'd learned from Ali.

I agree with Ron that Ali had the critical ability to learn as a fight went on and adjust his style to exploit the flaws he discovered in his opponents. All master boxers and elite athletes have that intuitive knack. It may be what sets them apart from competitors with equal or better physical talent. Ali and Mailer were both masters at sizing up the shortcomings of their rivals. By capitalizing on them, sometimes Ali did only enough to win and some of his matches were lackluster. Other times, against formidable fighters like George Foreman, he took extraordinary measures. In Zaire, Ali absorbed tremendous punishment in order to exhaust Foreman and set him up for a knockout. Mailer, too, has been accused of the literary equivalent of taking a fight for the money: his books about Marilyn Monroe, graffiti, and the novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, are three examples.

Adaptation to new experiences drove Mailer's writing—and living. No piece of writing was ever, apparently, in final form. Mike Lennon once told

a story of Norman making changes in a manuscript while in the taxi and on the elevator going to see his publisher. Lennon also related that Norman would be at home, pick up one of his books that had been released years earlier, and begin editing it with a pen.

Ron: One more similarity between Mailer's writing and Ali's boxing is a certain masochistic quality. Especially after the triumph of the "rope-a-dope," Ali often trained by lying on the ropes and letting his sparring partners beat on him. It sounds odd, but it's true. And—to use that Mailer phrase again—I'd go as far as to say that Mailer often did something similar when in public he said something that he had to have known would generate bad publicity. Examples abound: his takeover of the press conference after the first Patterson-Liston fight; insulting the audience at the Village Gate rally for his mayoral campaign in 1969; insulting the audience during the celebrated confrontation with Gore Vidal on "The Dick Cavett Show"; telling Orson Welles on television that women should be put in cages. Etc. From the point of view of his reputation, these were all "rope-a-dope"-like moves: Mailer seeming to deliberately put himself in a position to be pummeled by his critics.

It's funny, but thinking about NM's fondness for the phrase "old club fighter," I'm sure NM was aware of the irony, understood the false modesty of it, almost as if he knew that anyone who knew anything about Mailer or literature or boxing would know that Norman Mailer was nothing like an old club fighter . . . a punch drunk former champion at times, maybe.

Let's discuss the larger version of Mailer's friend, light-heavyweight champion Jose Torres' position that boxers and novelists are both by necessity liars. That is, boxers try to trick their opponents by feinting, drawing leads in order to counter, etc. Fiction writers, obviously, make stuff up.

Bill: The larger version of it from my point of view is that Mailer lived his whole life this way. The best example is his being untrue to every one of his six wives. Extramarital affairs require maintaining an aura of lies and deceptions.

Barry: Yes, this parallel (feinting and fiction) is one that I read by Torres in an interview. As to James Jones, who doesn't remember the scene (recounted in *A Double Life*) of Mailer encountering Jones in a bar and inviting him

outside to fight in order to reestablish their friendship, and Jones responding that he was too sick with congestive heart failure to oblige him? It was with Jones more than any other contemporary that Mailer subscribed to the sentimental notion, adored by Hollywood in such movies as *The Big Country*, that two men who fight out their disagreements (Mailer vs. Jones; Gregory Peck vs. Charlton Heston) become intimates, or at least friends.

Compare Mailer's boxing journalism with boxing in his fiction.

Ron: I expressed my admiration for his journalism in the previous issue of *The Mailer Review*. But I find the uses of boxing in the fiction far less imaginative. In the fiction, I'd argue, boxing serves merely as a shorthand way of making a character seem tough or masculine. Whereas the portraits of Ali, Patterson, Frazier, and Foreman together with Mailer's incidental comments about less well-known fighters are always subtle and idiosyncratic.

In *The Deer Park*, for example, we discover that Sergius O'Shaughnessy has been a boxer. But what does that tell us beyond that he's tough? Since we've read Mailer, we know that Mailer liked fighters, so we think: we're supposed to like Sergius because Mailer likes boxers.

When Mailer makes a character a boxer, he's also indulging, I think, in one of his weaknesses as a fiction writer: he's creating a character as a kind of idealized self. I sense that Mailer wishes he'd been a war hero and a boxer like Sergius O'Shaughnessy. The same is true of Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream*, though Rojack isn't a boxer. Like Mailer, he played intramural football at Harvard. Rojack, however, beats up the jazz musician, so that makes him, if not a boxer, at least a fighter. And let's face it, Rojack beats up a black guy. In Mailer's world—and maybe mine and maybe yours—that makes you a very tough guy indeed.

At the risk of being terminally discursive, I'll ask the group how we're supposed to interpret that fight in *An American Dream.* In Mailer's world, is Rojack's physical victory meant to suggest anything beyond superior physical strength and skill? Is it somehow a triumph of character?

Barry: I, who in the past wrote of boxing as a moral paradigm in Mailer's work, must agree with Ron (and Bill) that Sergius O'Shaugnessy, Tim Madden, and Rojack are not primarily boxers: Rojack's fight with Shago Martin is reminiscent of Cohn's beating Romero in *The Sun Also Rises*: the "victims'" spir-

its won't break. Rojack also has several living room sparring bouts in his exposition, and has fought Deborah physically in the past. He has a mangled ear that everybody thinks that he got in the ring, but in reality Deborah gave it to him. I agree with Ron that with the POSSIBLE exception of Rojack, the protagonists' boxing pasts are largely wish fulfillment frills from Mailer.

Ron: Why is Rojack an exception?

Barry: If he is, it may be because he represents the most autobiographical protagonist in Mailer's fiction. In his biography, Mike Lennon calls him a "Mailer cousin." Mailer himself did, I believe, have living room sparring bouts with men, and physical fights with Lady Jeanne Campbell. Further, the fight with Shago has an allegorical value in that Shago is the only adversary who shows true nobility ["I don't hate, man. Never."]. Thus, Rojack in bullying Shago (holding him from behind, kicking him down the stairs) is forced to grow less frightened ["a hard-lodged boulder of fear I had always felt with Negroes went with him down the stairs"] and more merciful, as when he declines to kill Barney Oswald Kelly on the parapet.

Bill: Mailer's use of boxing in his fiction doesn't interest me, for the reasons that Ron mentioned. But his nonfiction writing about boxing is the most interesting I've ever read. (For sheer entertainment, though, nobody beats Liebling.) Most impressive to me is that Mailer wrote his accounts relying solely on his ringside notes and memory. According to Mike Lennon, Mailer never reviewed film or videotape of the fights he wrote about. Just consider that for a minute. I've watched the Ali-Foreman fight probably twenty times, and except for missing a very subtle boxing technique Ali used to set Foreman up for the 8th round knockout, Mailer gets the description of the action *exactly right.*

When I read Mailer's boxing journalism and his other New Journalism, especially *The Armies of the Night* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, I feel like I'm inside his head. More than any other writer, Mailer's observations and insights have helped me to understand the place of boxing in modern culture.

Is there an example of Mailer making use of what he's observed in his boxing journalism in his fiction?

Ron: Cus D'Amato, who is always described as the "legendary" manager of Floyd Patterson and Mike Tyson, is treated as something of a comic charac-

ter in "10,000 Words A Minute." He comes off as a blowhard, pontificating about why Floyd Patterson can't lose—until, of course, Patterson loses in embarrassing fashion. Early in Mailer's career, he seemed to see D'Amato as the author of his own legend—and Mailer seemed to think that D'Amato was overdoing it, laying it on too thick.

But in later years, once Mailer became friendly with Cus and Cus was nice enough to let Mailer's Saturday boxing club use his 14th Street gym—Mailer took D'Amato's rhetoric more and more seriously. Put less generously, you could say Mailer fell for Cus's line of bullshit—or rhetoric, if you prefer—hook, line, and sinker.

All of this is leading up to a comparison of Mailer—in his own voice—speaking about Cus in an interview with his son John Buffalo in *The Big Empty*, then co-opting Cus's boilerplate ideas in *Tough Guys Don't Dance.*

This is Tim Madden's description of his first Golden Gloves fight from *Tough Guys:*

> For one thing, you walk in half naked, and nobody has prepared you for that. Five hundred people are there. Some of them don't like you. They're for the other guy. They're very critical when they stare at you. Then you see your opponent. He looks like dynamite.

Now, compare the above with Mailer talking to his son John Buffalo in *Big Empty.* This is Mailer quoting Cus D'Amato:

> When I get them [young boxers] ready for their first fight, I'd say, "You're going to look across the ring and you're gonna be a little embarrassed because you're half-naked and it may be in your family that people don't walk around that way. But there you are; half naked. Strangers are looking at you. Strangers who may not even like you. And you're looking at the guy you have to face. He looks so strong, so powerful. You're scared stiff when you eye him.

Very similar passages, right? I just cite this as an example of how unexamined Mailer's use of boxing is in his fiction, as compared to the incredibly subtle thoughts on boxing throughout Mailer's boxing journalism.

Barry: All three of us are intensely interested in the large role of boxing in Mailer's life, fiction, and sports writing. I think that in our brainstorming, we've come to the unanimous conclusion that the nonfiction overshadows the novels when it comes to boxing.

As I've written elsewhere, in *An American Dream* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, as in so much of Mailer's work, combat with adversaries is most pivotal as an external manifestation of the true central struggle within oneself against the ignoble, ignominious emotions of cowardice and moral sloth. Courage, personal discipline, stoicism, the definition and celebration of the existential self: these values are not outmoded, and never will be.

Yet not every boxer in the fiction applies his ring skills to life and to these larger moral issues. The professional boxer in *An American Dream*, Romeo Romelozzo (based on Jake LaMotta), plays the angles ["The odds were not firmly established in his favor."]. So does Roberts, the detective, and I've written that their names, similar to Rojack's, indicate that they represent allegorical aspects of himself that he must purge: timidity, caginess, etc. Tim Madden beats up Stoodie despite the latter's tire iron, and kicks Spider Nissen around after the latter knifes Tim's dog, Stunts. But I don't remember Sergius having any important fights in *The Deer Park* or "The Time of Her Time."

Was Mailer's interest in and commitment to boxing lessened by the Benny Paret vs. Emile Griffith fight, or only later, when it was evident that Ali had been severely damaged by boxing?

Barry: After the Griffith/Paret fight, he wrote that in watching a boxing bout, "it was more like someone in your own family was fighting." When I asked him, in a 1987 interview, about the effect of Ali's Parkinson's disease on his attitude, he deflected the question by saying "[one reason I'm less interested in boxing] is that he [Ali's] out of it."

Ron: Mailer certainly continued to write about boxing after the Griffith/Paret fight, so I'd say it didn't diminish his interest at all. It may, however, have colored his interest, made him more aware of the dangers that Joyce Carol Oates insists—correctly, I think—that boxing isn't really a sport.

Bill: His interest may have been diminished temporarily, but certainly not in the long term. All of his writing about Liston-Patterson, Ali, and Tyson followed his witnessing of the death of Benny Paret. In fact, I think that the in-

cident informed Mailer's later boxing writing and perhaps all of his writing to some degree. Watching from nearby as a man dies as a result of eighteen successive blows to the head is an incredible experience.

Is the American public's interest in boxing waning because the heavyweight division is no longer dominated by American boxers?

Ron: One reason that the interest in boxing is waning is because there's no Mailer (or Liebling) to chronicle the sport, thus making it interesting to a wide audience. Joyce Carol Oates writes brilliantly about boxing, but not in a widely accessible fashion. Her writing on boxing appears often in *The New York Review of Books* whereas "King of the Hill," Mailer's account of the first Ali-Frazier fight, appeared in *LIFE* magazine, which seemed to be in everyone's grandparents' house and every doctor's waiting room back in the Seventies.

It must also be said that the reason for the waning interest in boxing might be the good taste of the American public: boxing is horrifying. The object is to cause neurological damage to your opponent—that's what a knockout is . . . it's a concussion. With increased awareness of the neurological problems caused by football and even soccer (from "heading" the ball), it gets harder and harder to watch two guys beat each other up for your entertainment. Read boxers' obituaries and you find: Parkinson's disease, dementia, paranoia, drug abuse, poverty, spousal abuse, and murder. It's pretty consistent. Almost no boxers enjoy a good old age, and good retirement years are rare. The spectral image of the speechless Ali also haunts the conscience of anyone contemplating enjoying a good fight. Mailer mentions seeing Ali in the ring prior to the Tyson-Spinks fight and dubs Ali "the shade of boxing." Personally, I haven't watched a boxing match in years.

I know that Mailer, in *The Big Empty* and elsewhere, argues that boxing provides a container for men who would otherwise be violent in their daily lives. It's a fair point. And many boxers are humble and well-behaved, men with no need to prove their toughness. And yes, boxers sometimes achieve a certain gentleness and humility.

Also, when there's a charismatic fighter, especially a heavyweight, the sport gets revived. Even an aging Mailer couldn't resist writing about Tyson. His short piece on the Tyson-Spinks fight contains some of his characteristically brilliant descriptive passages. But it's a measure of the sport's decline

in popularity that the piece appeared in *Spin*, a rock 'n' roll magazine published by the son of *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione.

Bill: I have far less confidence than Ron in the taste of the American public. Have you ever watched a mixed martial arts match? I don't think there's very much "art" involved at all. It's just a fight—but people are crazy about them. What's next? I think that people would fork over big bucks to attend fight-to-the-death gladiator games if Congress legalized them. Think of the pay-per-view potential if the FTC allowed them on the air. A century from now, some version of *The Hunger Games* may be a reality. The rich will always need their kicks. The poor will always need a payday and a symbolic status ladder to climb. As the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, what passes for sport and entertainment is going to get uglier.

My take on the fall of boxing's popularity is that it coincides with the tremendous rise of revenue and salaries in "corporate" sports: the NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball, and NASCAR, not to mention the so-called "amateur" NCAA. Corporate sports generate much more money for team owners, municipalities, and sponsors, than boxing can provide. However, according to a July 2012 *Forbes* article by Kurt Badenhausen, while boxing is lagging behind team sports, it isn't completely dead yet. In fact, boxers Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao ranked first and second on *Forbes*' list of the world's highest-paid athletes, earning $85 million and $62 million, respectively, in the previous year. Two other boxers, Wladimir Klitshcko ($28 million) and Miguel Coto ($19 million) were also in the *Forbes* top 100. By comparison, according to mma-manifesto.com, a mixed martial arts fan website, the combined career earnings of the ten highest-paid UFC fighters is roughly $35 million. Boxing will be around for a long time.

Is attention to Mailer's writing, like boxing, on the wane? Will it ever make a comeback?

Bill: I'm hopeful that the success of *A Double Life* will help to restore the attention to Mailer's writing that it deserves. I'm a high school librarian and do what I can to promote his work, but Mailer isn't taught in high schools and I don't believe that he's widely taught at the university level. We as educators and writers need to work to make that happen. I think it should become a central mission of the Norman Mailer Society.