MAILER AND ALI:
EXISTENTIAL AFFINITIES

JEANNE THOMAS FUCHS

This essay is dedicated to my beloved sister, Patricia Ann Thomas Stubis, my own personal hero and an avid Mailer reader.—JTF

DESPITE WHAT ON THE SURFACE APPEAR TO BE MULTIPLE DIFFERENCES between Norman Mailer and Muhammad Ali, from an existential perspective (mostly Sartrean), they possess qualities that are identical.

While it is not unusual for a Jewish boy from Brooklyn to make his mark as a writer, nor for an African-American boy from Louisville to become a prize fighter, both are united in the ways they overcame their minority (and often despised) status on the route to becoming known and, indeed, celebrated throughout the world.

On the world stage, there is probably no sports figure more famous than Muhammad Ali. Even in that regard, Mailer holds his own next to the champ—always contending that among contemporary American writers, he was the heavyweight champion (*New York Times,* Nov 10, 2007). Essentially, Mailer was there to tell the tale; and he told it with dazzling brilliance. His writing on boxing remains a veritable tour de force. It is not an exaggeration to state that Ali became Mailer's alter ego in the narratives he composed about Ali, as a man and as a fighter. Mailer's descriptions of Ali's fights transcend the moment and yet remain *in* the moment, often with staggering lyricism.

Armed with superior talent, existentially speaking, through sheer force of will both men *created* themselves. They became the sum of their acts and defined themselves, and were ultimately defined by others through their intense struggle to attain personal freedom. They accepted responsibility for

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their destiny because they had forged it. There is nothing ordinary, standardized, or expendable about either man. Each can stand alone and face the judgment of history based on his own merits.

Both combatants used their minds as well as their bodies to achieve renown. The physicality and muscularity of Mailer's prose are mirrored in the obvious physical beauty and strength of Ali, not to mention their nimble minds, dark sense of humor, and basic grasp of the ugliness of existence. Both also shared an understanding of the absurdity of the situations in which they found themselves.

Striking parallels exist even in the choice of vocation: Both boxing and writing are essentially solitary professions, requiring intense labor and discipline. Admittedly, after a hard day's work, a writer can go out and get drunk, fornicate all night, go fishing or *all* of the above. But the task at hand has caused more than one boxer to hang up his gloves, or more than one writer to renounce the pen or the typewriter, or the computer in the monklike regimen required of them in pursuit of their art (and they are both arts). The isolation imposed on both can become a source of anguish because of the choices involved and the awareness of their ramifications. This condition has caused much ink to flow and is paramount to our understanding both men.

A major tenet of existentialism is revolt, so it is important to focus on it to show the nature of the links between Mailer and Ali. Revolt is perhaps their single most important shared trait. Each chose freedom over thralldom to the establishment: society, tradition, background, parents, education, religion; they both *challenged* the United States government. Although Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad, he never allowed his affiliation with the Nation of Islam to deter him from attaining his personal or professional goals. Rather, he absorbed the teaching of Islam into his own being and used it as a platform to fight from. Ali transformed himself. He refused to be the White man's fighter, as he considered Joe Louis and others to be. He was deliberately abrasive regarding his "place" in the boxing world. His braggadocio annoyed and angered many in the boxing and larger establishment. In the beginning, countless tickets were sold to those who wanted to see him beaten.

Similarly, Mailer was determined to shed his boyhood skin of being a clean cut modest young man. He enjoyed the reputation for arrogance, pride, confidence, and egocentricity that he had cultivated over time (Boddy

351). Said reputation was earned the hard way through brawls, head butts, and assorted acts of violence.

Revolt on both physical and metaphysical levels demands courage. It is not easily come by. The will to act or not to act, and the freedom that it implies, remains at the root of the anguish felt because of the awareness of that same freedom. The Sartrean notion that man is "condemned to be free" (Lavine 349) is the cornerstone of existentialism, although "cornerstone" is a poor choice of words in this context. Movement, fluidity, flow *ergo* action, comprise the essence of existential thought. Its opposite—solidity, immobility, fixedness, objectification—suggests states anathema to existentialism. Actually, the perfect verbal construct for existentialism is the gerund: Acting, being, becoming, fighting, writing, realizing, witnessing –all connote movement and continuing motion. Lack or loss of movement is equated with death—nothingness.

A further distinction bears underscoring: Both Ali and Mailer, for all of their egocentrism and narcissism, ultimately cared about the collective—about people, about Americans, about people of color. In Sartrean terms, they were *engagés,* involved. They embraced solidarity along with the imposed solitude of their life work. Their choices never lacked risk nor the anxiety that accompanies it. Accepting freedom, as opposed to conformism, is emblematic of the authentic individual, and both men, despite numerous obstacles, personal and professional, accepted the consequences of their actions. They are authentic in the noblest meaning of the term.

Two astute critics have noted the existential links between boxing and writing. Interestingly, both are women: Kasia Boddy, no stranger to this society, and Joyce Carol Oates, a heavyweight in her own right.

In the opening sentence of her impressive study, *Boxing: A Cultural History***,** Boddy cites Albert Camus in the very first sentence, "The symbolism of boxing does not allow for ambiguity: it is, as amateur middleweight, Albert Camus put it, 'utterly Manichean'. The rites of boxing simplify everything. Good and evil, the winner and the loser" (7). How appropriate that the author of *The Myth of Sisyphus* presents such a clear distinction. Camus' celebrated essay provides the perfect metaphor for the tasks of both writers and prizefighters. The unending grind of the work, the endurance it requires, and the will not to be defeated by it, all the while remaining conscious of the absurdity of the task—its futility, and, yet, Camus' famous concluding

sentence remains: "*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux*," "We must imagine Sisyphus happy" (166).

In the other corner, Joyce Carol Oates, in her profound investigation of the sport *On Boxing*, pushes the lines of demarcation even further, makes them even more philosophical when she calmly states that "life is a metaphor for boxing" (4). The entire passage bears repeating:

> I can entertain the proposition that life is a metaphor for boxing—for one of those bouts that go on and on, round following round, jabs, missed punches, clinches, nothing determined, again the bell and again and you and your opponent so evenly matched it's impossible not to see that your opponent *is* you: and why this struggle on an elevated platform enclosed by ropes as in a pen beneath hot crude pitiless lights in the presence of an impatient crowd?--that sort of hellish-writerly metaphor. Life *is* like boxing in many unsettling respects. But boxing is only like boxing. (4)

Perhaps, without intending to, Oates' notions in the passage parallel those of Camus in the quiet desperation boxing presents, in the recognition of the "enemy" as the self, in the unsettling nature of being a witness to the quotidian or rather eternal struggle.

Indeed, Oates points to the number of serious writers who have been attracted to boxing and boxers (no need to repeat them here). She esteems that they excite the writers' imagination and the need to bear witness (51). In addition, she notes, boxing is "wordless, lacking language" and "requires others to define it, celebrate it, and complete it" (50). Regardless of the duration of a fight (and the Liston/Ali rematch lasted only 45 seconds), the lead up to the fight, like the publication of a book, requires a grueling, arduous, and frequently despairing period of preparation (26). The pain and humiliation that the writer and the boxer risk are self imposed and not dissimilar.

A case in point: In an interview with the *Paris Review* in 1963, Mailer gives an astonishing account of the suffering he experienced while writing both *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*. What he describes is truly an existential crisis, a prolonged anxiety attack that took a mental and physical toll on him. He says: "I'd wake up and push the typewriter in great dread, in literal terror, wondering when this curious and doubtful inspiration was going to

stop" (5). For the first time in his life, he became aware of the unconscious mind and that he had no conscious control over what he was writing—he "ground out" three pages a day. He speaks of "birthing" the book. That was *Barbary Shore.*

As for *The Deer Park,* the crisis continued. Mailer states flatly, "It was agony" (5). He felt blocked on the typewriter and shifted to longhand and typed what he had written in the morning in the afternoon. Again he slogged along at four or five pages a day. He tells the interviewer: "But I found it an unendurable book to write because I'd finish each day in the most profound depression; as I found out later it was even a physical depression. I was gutting my liver" (6). The last image recalls yet another mythic figure with a punishment of colossal proportions—Prometheus. His sentence, for either having created the human race from clay or having saved it from starvation and death by providing fire, was to be chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where his liver was eaten every day by an eagle. Later in the interview, Mailer confesses "that the first fifty pages of *The Deer Park* are the best writing I have ever done in fiction" (9). His suffering bore fruit!

Somewhere in the unconscious mind of the writer, who was experiencing pain and agony in the writing process, which even he compares to birthing, there had to be a connection between the arduous task of writing and the consciousness of his own being or of his new awareness of the self as a being, as a free being, literally condemned to tell the truth in his writing. His own vocabulary reveals the depth of the experience: "agony" and "birthing": opposites, the end and the beginning. Mailer's experience during this period is mirrored in some passages in Sartre's novel, *La Nausée,* when the main character, Roquentin, experiences episodes of nausea when he becomes aware of his existence in an almost hallucinatory and primal way. The awareness makes him physically ill—nauseated.

So, in examining the connection between boxing and writing (and by extension, literature), the inevitable moment comes, as already suggested, when boxing can be considered not a sport at all, but rather something much more profound. Oates states from the outset that boxing is NOT a sport; it is not fun and there is nothing "playful" about it. It is not a game (18). She likens the ring to an altar and the ritual within akin to the "bloody fifth acts of classic tragedies" (60). The masochism in boxing cannot be overlooked either. It is more about being hit and accepting pain than about hurting the other. While I do not agree that that would be the case with a fighter like Jack

Dempsey or Rocky Marciano, it definitely applies to one like Jake LaMotta. But if the opponent is the self, as already noted, then the pain has a self-inflicted quality to it. While physical injury and even death do not usually await the writer (Salman Rushdie excepted), they provide added fascination to the writer when it comes to the arena. It is important to note that when writing about boxing, Mailer did not experience writer's block. He was in his element, submerged and saturated with his topic . . . even intoxicated with it.

Many critics and writers agree that some of Mailer's most dazzling writing was done in his essays. In "King of the Hill," which recounts the first Ali/Frazier fight, Mailer discusses the various weight classifications in boxing and makes these observations: "It can, in fact, be said that heavyweights are always the most lunatic of prizefighters. The closer a heavyweight comes to the championship, the more natural it is for him to be a little bit insane, secretly insane, for the heavyweight champion of the world is either the toughest man in the world or he is not, but there is a real possibility that he is. It is like being the big toe of God" (20). Mailer sees heavyweights as a rare and exotic species and treats them accordingly. His respect for them is unlimited, and he endows them with psychic and psychological qualities that he delivers like a barrage of punches. For example:

> If they [heavyweights] become champions, they begin to have inner lives like Hemingway or Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust. Hemingway is the example above all. Because he wished to be the greatest writer in the history of literature and still be a hero with all the body arts age would yet grant him, he was alone and he knew it. So are heavyweight champions alone. Dempsey was alone and Tunney could never explain himself and Sharkey could never believe himself nor Schmeling nor Braddock, and Carnera was sad and Baer an indecipherable clown; great heavyweights like Louis had the loneliness of the ages in their silence, and men like Marciano were mystified by a power which seems to have been granted them. With the advent, however, of the Black heavyweights, Patterson, Liston, then Clay and Frazier, perhaps the loneliness gave way to what it had been protecting itself against—a surrealistic situation unstable beyond belief. Being a Black heavyweight champion in the second half of the twenti-

> eth century (with Black revolutions opening all over the world) was like being Jack Johnson, Malcolm X and Frank Costello all in one. (21)

Muhammad Ali, on the other hand, did not appear to have the "loneliness" nor the "silence" that Mailer speaks of. He like Mailer was more of a trickster. Both had a combination of characters from *Commedia dell'arte* and the Marx Brothers in them. Boddy, in her article in *The Mailer Review* comparing Mailer and Hemingway, refers to Mailer's "humor, and his self-mocking presentation of manliness as an elaborately constructed masquerade" (140). The writer's often public demonstrations of competitiveness with other writers whether at parties, at demonstrations, or on television underscore the trickster aspect of his personality—his unpredictability. And the word "masquerade" evokes the mask worn by the *Commedia dell'Arte* characters.

In the same way, Ali's aggressive braggadocio, always very public, merited him such epithets as "the Louisville lip." He harassed and harangued his opponents not just before but *during* a fight. He was relentless in his verbal attacks and shameless in his imagery, calling them monkeys, gorillas, and bears—all part of a calculated strategy to undermine the opponent and definitely to elicit anger and cause the irrational side of the opponent to emerge (not to mention to stir up interest in the fight). Not unlike Mailer's shenanigans, these ploys proved effective in creating an unusual image in the main event.

Boddy links the "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" side of Ali's public persona to a cultural phenomenon traced by numerous African-American writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Louis Gates, and Kimberly Benston. Ali's rhyming and boasting narrative, known as "the toast" has its roots in black verbal rituals and includes threats, predictions, and boasts (346). Ali's behavior provided the voice that most prizefighters lacked—the words and the music. He succeeded in goading not only his opponents in the ring but the public at large. He demanded attention, received it, and in addition, delivered the goods pretty regularly. His lifetime record of 56 wins and 5 losses attests to this.

The specific behaviors of Mailer and Ali outlined above illustrate an important action of the existential hero—that of delivering a challenge, throwing down the gauntlet in a deliberate provocation, an act of bravado, designed to confront the opponent, in most cases the status quo and the

comfortable, complacent classes. Mailer and Ali succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams in this quest. No one in their orbits was lukewarm about them.

In this regard, the idea of voice is all important. At a given moment, the boxing ring and the studio are left behind and the national and international forum entered. At the height of his career, as heavyweight champion of the world, Ali was stripped of his title, denied a license to fight, and his passport revoked because he refused to be drafted into the U.S. army and go to Vietnam. The story is common knowledge and does not need elaboration here. The recent HBO film, *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight*, a dramatization of the behind the scenes Supreme Court discourse (if you can dignify it with that word) reveals how deeply rooted the desire to crush his voice and imprison him was in high places in this country. Miraculously, the court reversed the decision by the lower court and Ali prevailed.

Similarly, in *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer recounts the chaos and discord of the march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. He was an active participant and describes the event with Pulitzer Prize winning brio. There is a convergence of goals between Ali and Mailer that is consistent with the preoccupations of the nation during this tumultuous period. Both of their voices were heard and continue to echo in our midst. They are the products of a particularly tumultuous epoch and they represent it on many levels.

At the end of his life, Jean-Paul Sartre was steeped in composing his multi-volume, yet unfinished, analysis of Flaubert, *L'idiot de la famille.* In the simplest terms, Sartre demonstrates the notion that history is multiple and recursive and the history of a single epoch is as much as we can grasp at one time. He states that history depends on the availability of what he calls an "oracular life" which follows the same curve as the epoch which it embodies (440). For Sartre, Gustave Flaubert was exactly that person and served that purpose concerning the Revolution of 1848, or the end of the July Monarchy and the beginning of the Second Republic. Here, the fiction writer is the privileged individual capable of elucidating the inner workings of the group of beings that make up an epoch. In both *L'Education sentimentale* through Frédéric Moreau and in *Madame Bovary* through Emma, Charles, and the others, Flaubert provides an intricate understanding of that

epoch by taking "dispersed elements of historical becoming and making them coherent again" (Caws 263).

In many similar ways, Mailer's presence in his particular epoch and his ability to represent it in both the microcosm and macrocosm, allows him to be viewed in the role (as well as others) of the person with the "oracular life." To the extent that Mailer, in both his fiction and non-fiction, was able to digest and refashion lived experiences into a coherent or incoherent mass (depending on the event), to that extent, he fills the Sartrean bill as representing the writer with the oracular life, the oracular vision, and the oracular voice.

At the end of that long ago interview in the *Paris Review*, when asked what it means to be a writer, Mailer waxes quite philosophically when he says: "Well, at best you affect the consciousness of your time, and so indirectly you affect the history of the time which succeeds you. Of course, you need patience. It takes a long time for sentiments to collect into an action and often they never do. Which is why I was once so ready to conceive of running for mayor of New York" (21).

I think that Sartre would nod to these sentiments and see in them parts of the paradigm he proposed for such a mission.

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