

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Hedin, Michael Waters, eds. *Perfect in Their Art: Poems on Boxing from Homer to Ali*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. xxii + 221 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8093-2531-3; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2530-6.

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Published on H-Arete (March, 2004)

Who will be the best readers of this anthology? Obviously, readers steeped in poetry and fascinated by what wise Homer (Englished here by Richmond Lattimore) calls "the painful boxing." And they will be readers eager to savor the rousing and rowdy, graceful and grotesque, excruciating and exalting encounters between the sweet science and the essence of literature.

And, I suspect, they will be disappointed readers. But they should not be ungrateful. Robert Hedin and Michael Waters have given us a book for every substantial library, public and private. It's a book many of us will go back to again and again when pugilism or poetry or their homage and agon call out to us from our bookshelves.

Here in one volume are 119 pieces, almost all of which do indeed take boxing as either their subject or central metaphor. Not all are verse, and, despite the book's subtitle, certainly not all are poetry, if by poetry we mean Coleridge's "best words in the best order." A number of pieces not only wallow in clichés but in their earnest, abstract telling seem incapable of concrete showing. In *Perfect in Their Art* we have, yes, a fair amount of very prosy stuff. Some of the poets appear here, sometimes necessarily, lineless. Lucilius's hard-boiled Latin epigrams, difficult to translate, are rendered by Humbert Wolfe as serviceable English prose. We have intriguing excerpts from Lord Byron's 1813-14 letters and journals and a pious prose analogy by St. Paul (I Corinthians 9:25-27). William Heyen's "KO" is a pleasing two-paragraph conceit that's no doubt intended as a prose poem. Among the best modern and contemporary poets, the typical forms are varieties of free verse, many taut and perfectly expressive, many slack, clumsy, imprecise. The volume has no terza rima, no villanelles or sestinas, one Italian sonnet, a pair of envelope-rhymed quatrains, some respectable couplets. Can't boxing be addressed in the full range of forms available in English? Yes, but evidently it hasn't been.

But all the non-poetry or non-verse in this anthology

is not prose or even prosy. *Perfect in Their Art* dances a tango for Angel Firpo (complete with musical score); sings out Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy's "Hurricane," Warren Zevon's "Boom Boom Mancini," Leadbelly's "Titanic," and Paul Simon's "The Boxer" (all sans score); and shouts and mutters a number of other pieces that qualify qua boxing but not really as poetry.

Editors Hedin and Waters present a fair amount of doggerel, much of it in ballad forms. Happily, some of it is inspired doggerel. Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali's "Clay Comes Out to Meet Liston" (alas, only "recited by Cassius Clay," because written, we learn, by one Gary Belkin) gives us the following delightful passage after Clay's astronautic uppercute of Sonny Liston:

... the punch raises the bear Clear out of the ring. Liston is still rising And the ref wears a frown For [For?!] he can't start counting Till Sonny comes down. Now Liston disappears from view The crowd is getting frantic But our radar stations have picked him up He's somewhere over the Atlantic. Who would have thought When they came to the fight That they'd witness the launching Of a human satellite. Yes, the crowd did not dream When they laid down their money That they would see A total eclipse of the Sonny.

If the editors seem to be scrounging for material, well, I'm guessing they are. Boxing has been a mesmerizing, revolting, inspiring, sometimes tragic form of entertainment and achievement for about four millennia. So why have so few great writers written about it? With its rigor, risk, inescapable suffering, and mechanical (ergo, aesthetic) elegance it would seem to be a natural subject for poetry. And certainly we see here that Homer, Pindar, Virgil, Lucilius, and others have found it so. But even the extant material from those ancients is dishearteningly skimpy. And why didn't, say, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Wordsworth, Keats ever give us at least a stanza? (No, fencing doesn't count.) Even the muscular Christianity of the Victorians offers surpris-

ingly little. The staggeringly prolific Kipling published nothing at all about prize fighting? Nothing? Luckily, Arthur Conan Doyle and John Masefield fill the Kipling gap with two memorably Kipling-esque narratives.

>From the era of the great modernists, we have Horace Gregory's slipshod "Dempsey, Dempsey" and a number of popular songs (including "That's What the Well-Dressed Man in Harlem Will Wear" by Irving Berlin, born the same year as T.S. Eliot), but what about Eliot? And Pound, Frost, Stevens, Lawrence, Williams—or at least the populists Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay?—If this sounds ridiculous, remember that Alexander Pope wrote a truly major poem about a game of ombre. Among fine contemporary poets we do hear from Philip Levine, Dave Smith, Donald Hall, James Merrill, Robert Hayden, James Tate, Joyce Carol Oates, and others. But we don't hear from Ted Hughes, William Matthews, John Ashbury, Charles Simic, Richard Wilbur, Charles Wright, David Bottoms, just to mention a few obvious names. Perhaps some permissions were not forthcoming. Still, as far as I can tell, the editors have found most of what's findable.

Homage and elegy predominate, with elegy, that balanced complex of grief and love, clearly the most successful stance. Joe Louis is the hands-down winner in the homage-elegy category with some thirteen poems. Next comes Jack Johnson with a half dozen. Ali and Liston elicit five each. Other fighters commemorated or mourned include Mike Tyson, Joe Frazier, John L. Sullivan, Jake La Motta, Max Baer, Evander Holyfield, Ken Norton, Jack Randall, Hurricane Jackson, Billy Conn, Boom Boom Mancini, Kid Paret, and other celebrated names, as well as a number of anonymous dreamers and thugs. Poems of homage generally disappoint if not disgust; their celebrations tend to be simple-minded and their ironies trite. It is notable that unknown scrappers have often inspired better poems than famous boxers.

Many of the poems in *Perfect in Their Art* are properly tender, some are satisfyingly tough, some are luridly brutal, and at least one is transcendently morbid (see Ana Istaru's "The Man Who Boxes"). The excitements, sorrows, and humiliations of sexual love and social injustice find natural metaphors in boxing. Kim Adonizio, Wayne Dodd, Joseph Duemer, and Michael Waters best represent the former; Elizabeth Alexander, Cornelius Eady, Michael Harper, Calvin Hernton, Langston Hughes, Yusef Komunyakaa, Phil Levine, Wole Soyinka, Richard Wright, the latter. If amorous conflict tends to bring out the sentimental and paradoxical in poets, social conflict tends to bring out the plain pissed-off and

the way-too-preachy. Calvin Hernton's at times Ginsbergian "Ballad of the Life and Times of Joe Louis, The Great Brown Bomber" indicts and bellows and sprawls for nine and a half pages; thank goodness it creates at least one memorable moment when it finds Joe Louis to be the "hero of all time / for all black men and women whirlwinding within the / gift outraged."

*Perfect in Their Art* is in fact full of memorable moments. Alan Dugan presents a vivid image of a battered fighter in his corner: "[T]rainers whisper into his mouth while one ear / listens to itself, clenched like a fist." Yannis Ritsos's "No, No" (translated from the Greek by Scott King), with its final image from a sculptor's studio in which athletes earn money posing as (one assumes) gods and demigods, manages simultaneously to deflate and yet pay tribute to the heroic as it shows us "that mangy dog, covered with ticks and scabs, / drinking dirty water out of the wash bucket / at the base of the half-finished statues of dead heroes."

The anthology's most effective contemporary poems come from Phil Levine and John Skoyles (three each); Dave Smith, Eric Trethewey, and William Trowbridge (two each); and Charles Harper Webb and Paul Zimmer (one each). Their moving, funny, unforgettable poems deserve reading and rereading—aloud and to friends, as many as will sit still for them. The fifteen short lines of Skoyles's "Sonny Liston" hauntingly conjure the primitive, frightening mystery not only at the heart of one man but also his—our—species. Trowbridge, too, remembers Liston (and Ali):

We loved the chill

he gave us, our glowering pit bull we sicced on all contenders, our looming shadow, our two-time loser from Castle Frankenstein,

until the "phantom punch," when he sat down wobbly as a dowager, leaving the floor to the lippy punk from Louisville. We felt

betrayed, diminished, tongue tied by that prattling dancer with the couplets and pretty face. We wanted blood, teeth. Nothing fancy.

Webb's "Boxing Lesson" concludes by persuasively generalizing some of what the sport can teach:

Civilization means overruling instinct: embracing the counter-intuitive, knowing the world, that seems so flat, will curve if you sail far enough, that massive hunks of steel can fly, that staring death straight in the eye can save your life.

Trethewey speaks evocatively of fighters who "dance away from darkness / wrapped up tight into fists." Zim-

mer's hilarious, touching narrative "Suck it Up" gives us an unheroic, self-deprecating speaker disgusted by and riveted to "These televised Tuesday Night Fights." It is pure alphabetic luck that Zimmer's poignant, comic poem closes the volume so well.

About half way through the volume, the nonpareil Philip Levine manages to be both physiologically intimate and convincingly cosmic, both clinical and archetypal as he speaks of "the perfect right cross":

They say it's magic. When it lands you feel the force of your whole body, even the deeper organs, the dark fluids that go untapped for decades, the tiny pale microbes haunting the bone marrow, the intricate patterns that devised the bones of the feet, you feel them finally coming together like so many atoms of salt and water as they form an ocean or a tear, for just an instant before the hand comes back under the chin in its ordinary defensive posture.

And Dave Smith's "Blues for Benny 'Kid' Paret" nearly weeps as it punishes us with:

They smacked your chest and crossed your arms because you fell down while the aisles filled with gorgeous women, high heels pounding off like Emile, the Champion, who planted his good two feet and stuck, stuck, stuck until your brain tied up your tongue and your breath.

The primal and the sorrowful ripple out to us from the men in a boxing ring. From the time of the ancient Greeks, terrible mutilation and risk of death have been boxing's intimates, and poets have honored and documented the courage, endurance, cruelty, and suffering of boxers. By comparison, the typical war poem and even antiwar poem can seem doctrinaire, deluded, simplistically romantic. Homer, supreme poet of war and of sport, had it right from the beginning. In Book 23 of *The Iliad*, the trash-talking Epeios visualizes the detailed anatomy of the face when he says, of his opponent, "I will smash his skin apart and break his bones on each other." Of course this is intimidation, not atrocity, but it seems only one short step from the grisly tactile knowledge of physical damage of King Lear's "Bind fast his corky arms" and "Out, vile jelly! / Where is thy lustre now?" And here is Homer's concise, pitiless image of Euryalos, Epeios's opponent, after he's been knocked out: "[H]e spat the thick blood and rolled his head over on one side." As Kenneth Patchen says, "Ho! My hungry dogs ... / Inspect my savage house" ("Boxers Hit Harder When Women Are Around").

Of course, prize fighting, like most sports, can encourage the ponderous pun and the preposterous hyper-

bole. One poet in this volume refers us to an old fighter "boxed in by loneliness" and tells us that knocked-out sailors landed on the deck "with a thud louder than the 16-inch-gun's blasts." The best boxing poets, though, seem to agree with Joyce Carol Oates's comment in her book *On Boxing*: "[B]oxing isn't really metaphor, it is the thing itself." It is significant that all attempts in *Perfect in Their Art* to create epic scope and sweep are disappointing, if not catastrophically bathetic. Even Homer and Virgil recalibrate when they present their boxing matches; they close down to the small scale of two men with their hands in the air, both about to suffer, one about to fail.

It goes without saying that readers who scorn mime-sis will undervalue much that is magnificent in this (and many other) books.

The ritualized violence of boxing, its disciplined savagery, moves and pleases us in complex, unsettling ways, ways that perhaps only the delicate grandeur of genuine poetry can illuminate, commemorate, articulate, examine. From the ancients to Lord Byron to Phil Levine we see that boxing has always been somehow both wholesome and disreputable, both deeply shocking and oddly comforting.

But *Perfect in Their Art* could have been a much better book. Budd Shulberg, author of *What Makes Sammy Run* and the screenplay for *On the Waterfront*, has generously contributed a good-hearted foreword, but it's a foreword that seems oddly ill-informed. It begins, "You would have to look long and hard to find any poetry dedicated to football, baseball, track meets, hockey, or polo. Except perhaps [perhaps?] for baseball, no sport has inspired such a quantity and quality of poetry as boxing." The editors' Introduction provides some welcome historical information. We learn that "the first sport to be filmed was boxing, in 1894" and that "British Lads and Black Millers" is about "Tom Molineaux, an ex-slave from Virginia who gained wide renown in England in the nineteenth century" and "is perhaps the first poem ever written in which a boxer of African American heritage is mentioned." But the introduction is, finally, rather cheerfully superficial.

The book's default alphabetical organization is particularly unfortunate. Chronological sequencing (with dates cited) would not only reveal the surprising gaps in the tradition (not a single poem from the Renaissance or from the Romantic period?) but would allow readers to detect and appreciate influence and implicit argument between poems, to intuit sly parody and surreptitious allusion, to sniff out both reverence and repudiation.

I suspect that this book's best potential readers generally prefer their art nearly raw, their anthologies lightly

annotated. But *Perfect in Their Art* needs more scholarship to showcase its poems. Let us hope for a second edition of this worthy anthology. We need a fuller edition, an edition that provides key biographies and historical data. One that also overtly acknowledges and briefly, intelligently comments upon Virgil's debt to Homer. One that, say, not only glosses Lucilius, but even identifies Gary Belkin.

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**Citation:** Ron Smith. Review of Hedin, Robert; Waters, Michael, eds., *Perfect in Their Art: Poems on Boxing from Homer to Ali*. H-Arete, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9106>

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