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Three Views of the Fistic Summits  
from College Hill

Lafayette College is on College Hill, overlooking the rest of Easton, Pennsylvania, a large town wedged into the junction of the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers. It is a standard arrangement of college and town, although the hill is steep and Third Street bends significantly where it becomes College Avenue at the hill's base, the effect being to separate college from town with particular emphasis. Lafayette looks like a college, which means that its buildings and grounds speak in appropriately reserved ways of accrued time and money; most of Easton, which tends toward the low-rise brick styles of the industrial era, has the quiet, stark feel of Edward Hopper's paintings.

There is no boxing on College Hill. If you have cable, you can watch a fight on television, which since the 1950s has been most people's principal avenue to the ring, but there is a school of thought that argues you ought always to feel a little bad for doing it: television is a villainous agent in the narrative of boxing's decline as craft and institution (of which more to come). On a typical day, there is probably no boxing on TV anyway.<sup>1</sup> If you desire daily access, whether to

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fight or to watch, your principal avenue to the ring runs through town to the Larry Holmes Training Center.

Anybody who has seen the introductions before a Larry Holmes fight can tell you there is boxing in Easton. Holmes, introduced by ring announcers as "The Easton Assassin," was heavyweight champion of the world from 1978 to 1985. To get to his gym from College Hill, you drive down the hill, negotiate the traffic circle in the town's central square, cross Larry Holmes Drive and the Lehigh River, then take a right onto Canal Street, a stretch of road separated from the river to your right by railroad tracks behind a screen of overgrown weeds. The gym, a long, low building among several facing tracks and river, is on your left after the auto-body place. Inside, there is a red, white, and blue ring with a couple of rows of folding chairs arranged on two sides of it; there are pairs of heavy bags and speed bags and a wall of mirrors for shadowboxing; two other walls are hung with rows of fight posters and framed photographs. In some photographs, a stone-faced boxer presents a fist; in others, a smash-nosed man in street clothes offers what seems to be a genuinely happy smile. The pictures have the feel of history: in the whiff of horse-and-wagon antiquity surrounding the stylized "fistic" poses, and in the dated dandyism that informs the fighters' taste in clothing. Until recently, life-size cutouts of Holmes and Muhammad Ali in action squared off across the room from one another, standing among the smaller photographs like two heroes leading armies to battle. (The cutouts were taken down and moved to Holmes's new nightclub, leaving a pair of blasted-looking silhouettes in dried, yellowish glue on the gym's wall, after Holmes lost to Oliver McCall in April 1995.) In the afternoons there are a few young men and kids learning the craft with various degrees of diligence and skill, perhaps a couple of older ones just working up a sweat, and sometimes an older gentleman in street clothes, with his shirttail hanging out, who knows everything. Holmes trains there weekdays at 5:00 P.M.; when he has a fight coming up, increased numbers of wanderers-in give the place the air of a crossroads. For \$35 per month you can train there too.

Or you can read a good book. From College Hill, the other route providing reliable daily access to fights and fight people goes through representations of the ring in various texts—essays, journalism, novels, poetry, cultural criticism, paintings, movies. My path to the textual ring runs through the boxing essays of A. J. Liebling (1904–1963), collected in *The Sweet Science* and a posthumous companion volume entitled *A Neutral Corner*.<sup>2</sup> The

*Sweet Science* was not the first writing on boxing I read—it was probably one of Robert E. Howard's blood-soaked pulp allegories of Anglo-Saxon regeneration through beefcake—but I read Liebling at an impressionable age and his essays have served ever since to organize and clarify for me a central problem that gives shape to boxing literature: What meanings can be found in a fight? Liebling crafted an oeuvre around showing his own path to the ring—the people he met, the books he read, the cities he traversed, the bars in which he idled, what he knew and how he knew it—and the problems and the pleasures of his style have to do with explaining what that education prepared him to see in the ring once he got there. His prose shows him running all over the cultural map—from Stendhal to Archie Moore, from the *New York Journal-American* to the scholarly quarterlies, from Gertrude Stein to Philadelphia Jack O'Brien, from the nineteenth-century British journalist Pierce Egan to the fourteenth-century Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldūn—as he assembles the mix of idioms needed to articulate the range of meanings at play in a fight. Students at Lafayette typically want to know what the hell Liebling is doing when, in his account of the Moore-Marciano fight, he compares light-heavyweight Archie Moore not only to the great lightweight Benny Leonard, but also to Margot Fonteyn, Arthur Rubinstein, Orson Welles, Faust, Ahab, and Sisyphus, as well as to a Japanese print entitled “Shogun Engaged in Strategic Contemplation in the Midst of War” and to intellect itself confronted by naked force (in the person of Marciano).

In those comparisons, Liebling shows how ripples of meaning spread out from particular forms and usages of the ring. The fight world has useful ways of analyzing the pattern of ripples: a good big man beat a good little man; a fighter stepped back when he should have stepped in to avoid the hook; a recent fight repeated or varied the lessons of another fight that happened long ago; quality of training will find a way to display itself in the ring. Any reader of the fights must know what fight people know, but there are, of course, other ways of reading a fight. The ripples extend in all directions, into other ways of knowing: pursuing an extended tail-and-dog analogy between the ring and the world outside it, Budd Schulberg asserts that boxing, “the most basic and complex of all our sports,” forms a richly signifying “appendage to the various dog-shapes civilization has assumed over the past five thousand years.”<sup>3</sup> All manner of interpreters have found in pugilism a simple binary structure capable of carrying a

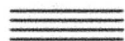
variety of meanings that extend far beyond the fight world's boundaries: rituals of gender, maps of morality or psychology, allegories of all stripes; social, economic, and cultural orders violently parsed; epic, tragedy, comedy, history; aesthetics, science, craft. I will not review them here; others have made necessarily partial lists.<sup>4</sup>

Because the pattern of ripples spreading out from fighters' ring styles embraces both the fight world and the world beyond it, the problem of reading the fights entails resolving the tensions among different orders of meaning. You can choose to see just a fragment of the pattern—you can reduce a fight to a technical boxing problem, and you can reduce a fight to a poetic or political or moral artifact—but you will have given up on seeing the relationships among fragments that suggest a larger whole. In *Beyond a Boundary*, Liebling's contemporary C. L. R. James makes the same point about reading cricket. He sees all manner of "social passions . . . using cricket as a medium of expression," and his readings of the game's "significant forms" invest cricket with a social, cultural, and aesthetic history embracing the rise and fall of British Victorianism and colonialism; but James insists that all bridges of logic extending beyond the boundaries of the game must be anchored in the technical details of the game itself. Declaring that "any extended cricket analysis which is not based on historical facts or the technique of the game tells more about the writer than what he is writing about," James then details W. G. Grace's batting and bowling styles in order to prove that Grace both embodied everything worth knowing about pre-Victorian England and invented modern cricket.<sup>5</sup> The book's opening image—James as a child climbing up a chair to get to both the bookshelf and the window from which he could see the cricket ground—sets a pattern for James's pursuit of the meanings of cricket into Thackeray and Trotsky and colonial history, but all of his arguments are also rooted in the game itself and in the cricket world's own analytical traditions.

What follows here, then, goes to and through the ring: it begins in the techniques and history of boxing, but goes well beyond the ring into literature, the social landscape of Easton, and post-World War II cultural and social history, in asking what meanings can be found in a fight. The answers are based in readings of style: how Liebling assembles an essay on boxing; how Holmes fights his fight. Liebling tells us about the relation of boxing to "culture" in both the anthropological and the Arnoldian (Matthew, not Schwarzenegger) sense, and his signature style—prodi-



giously digressive and allusive, extravagantly juxtaposing various registers of speech, structured around mapping his own path to the ring—dramatizes the problem of reconciling fight talk with the kinds of talk available to literary critics, historians, social scientists, and the conventionally “cultured.” Holmes tells us about the relation of boxing to the social landscape beyond the ring, and *his* signature style—built around the left jab, good defense, subtle footwork, a solid chin, and the conservation of resources—dramatizes the negotiation of asset and liability that characterizes boxing, business, and the texture of life in an industrial town at a postindustrial crossroads. Read together, the two stylists, Liebling and Holmes, suggest the dimensions of a larger relation between the ring and the social and textual worlds that contain it.



There was no doubt that the fight had caught the public imagination, ever sensitive to a meeting between Hubris and Nemesis, as the boys on the quarterlies would say, and the bookies were laying 18-5 on Nemesis, according to the boys on the dailies, who always seem to hear.<sup>6</sup>

Liebling wrote almost all of his boxing essays for the *New Yorker*, a weekly magazine nicely suspended between the daily papers and the scholarly quarterlies. He was proud of having learned his craft by writing for the dailies, which were strong on reporting but strictly limited in prose style and in the range of interpretive response to the news they pursued. Those limitations were—and still are—especially evident on the sports page. (He liked to tell a story about being fired from a menial job at the *New York Times* because he tried to relieve the drudgery of the sports pages by putting some private jokes in the box scores of high school basketball games.) Liebling sampled the quarterlies, on the other hand, as a reader with esoteric enthusiasms rather than as a professional scholar. (He was also proud of having been thrown out of Dartmouth for missing mandatory chapel services.)<sup>7</sup> The quarterlies were weak on reporting and on making sense of the urban world in which Liebling’s authorial persona usually moved, and their language and interpretive repertoire could be limited or obscure, but they did engage with a range of literary and historical matters that were off-limits to the dailies. The *New Yorker* of the 1940s and 1950s

valued good reporting and an insider's perspective on things beyond the direct experience of its readership, while also offering poetry, conventionally "serious" literary prose that eschewed "popular" formulas, and critical connection to the world of high culture (literature, drama, music, opera, dance, painting). One of Liebling's favorite tactics in writing for the *New Yorker* about subject matter fit for the dailies—and, more generally, about the social strata that Harold Ross, his editor at the magazine, described as "lowlife"—was to make authorial theater out of behaving as if he were writing about it for the quarterlies.

If Liebling wanted to establish that he was a good reporter who could work on the dailies, an insider with the know-how to make sense of transactions in the ring (always knowing the odds because, like the boys on the dailies, he knew all the right fight people), he also wanted to establish that he was not just another hack filing copy for the *Journal-American*. He could speak the stylized cant of the dailies, but he always did so in the ironic mode: for example, "Rocky Marciano, the reigning heavyweight champion, scaled the fistic summits, as they say in *Journal-Americanese*, by beating Jersey Joe Walcott."<sup>8</sup> He had an equally distanced sense of how the boys on the quarterlies might cover the fights: Liebling used mock-heroic and mock-scholarly diction to show himself reading into a boxing match a set of cartoonishly "cultured" meanings appropriate to the quarterlies. In "Ahab and Nemesis," he describes the moment when Rocky Marciano (Nemesis) got back on his feet after being knocked down by Archie Moore (Hubris): "I do not know what took place in Mr. Moore's breast when he saw him get up. He may have felt, for the moment, like Don Giovanni when the Commendatore's statue grabbed at him—startled because he thought he had killed the guy already—or like Ahab when he saw the White Whale take down Fedallah, harpoons and all."<sup>9</sup> Sandwiched between Don Giovanni and Ahab, the pointedly unscholarly "killed the guy already" reminds us that Liebling is mixing registers for effect.

The effect, here and elsewhere, is to foreground his efforts to find and communicate the meanings to be found in a boxing match. Each essay makes a secondary narrative out of Liebling's self-appointed task of assembling the language needed to represent the ring, language that he shows himself gathering not only from fight people and the dailies, but also from a bookshelf stuffed with texts both standard (Homer, Melville, Stendhal, Camus) and not so standard (Pierce Egan, Ibn Khaldūn). The drama of writ-

ing the ring sometimes parallels and sometimes plays against the drama in the ring, but the relation between the two—between strategies for making meaning in books and the meaning to be found in the strategies and transactions of the ring—creates a productive tension that dominates the inner life of Liebling's boxing essays. In addition to telling the stories of fights and fighters, his essays meditate upon how to write those stories and how the writer of the ring places himself among other literary figures.

Liebling therefore makes a literary spectacle out of dragging in language from all over the cultural map in an effort to represent and interpret the details of a fight. In some of his paragraphs, the various registers pile up so rapidly that the potential unwieldiness of the combination and the smoothness with which he masters it threaten to become the point of the exercise. Here, for instance, is the aftermath of Moore's knockdown of Marciano in "Ahab and Nemesis":

After being knocked down, Marciano had stopped throwing that patterned right-and-left combination; he has a good nob. "He never trun it again in the fight," Whitey [Bimstein, a trainer] said next day, but I differ. He threw it again in the fifth, and again Moore hit him a peach of a right inside it, but the steam was gone; this time Ahab [i.e. Moore] couldn't even stagger him. Anyway, there was Moore at the end of the second, dragging his shattered faith in the unities and humanities back to his corner. He had hit a guy right, and the guy hadn't gone. But there is no geezer in Moore, any more than there was in the master of the *Pequod*.<sup>10</sup>

The "good nob" comes direct from Pierce Egan, the great journalist-impresario of the nineteenth-century London prize ring; almost all of Liebling's boxing essays make reference to Egan's mannered prose. Whitey Bimstein, whom Liebling calls his "private eye," contributes technical analysis of Marciano's tactical adjustment in the dialect of fight people ("trun" for "thrown"), allowing Liebling's own expertise to be displayed through a corrective gloss in a gentler register ("but I differ," as opposed to, say, "the hell he didn't"). Ahab appears twice, extending Liebling's reading of the fight as a parallel to *Moby-Dick* in which the "cerebral and hyper-experienced" Moore's educated faith in self and intellect leads him to glorious ruin at the hands of large, impersonal forces, embodied in his "White Whale"—the stronger, younger, far less polished Marciano. Lieb-

ling also liked to imagine boxing as a kind of academy—Stillman's Gym in New York was for him "the University of Eighth Avenue"—dedicated to promulgating eternal truths both historical and artistic. Thus Moore's "shattered faith in the unities and humanities" describes the foundations of ring tradition being shaken by the "gauche" Marciano rising from the canvas: the classically trained Moore cannot believe that there can be an exception to one of boxing's structuring truisms—that every guy will go if you hit him right. "If a boxer did not believe that," Liebling explains, "he would be in the position of a Euclidian without faith in the hundred-and-eighty-degree triangle."<sup>11</sup> (Later, he speculates on the explanation that Moore's "Faustian mind" might have come up with to explain Marciano's seemingly miraculous recovery: "He may have thought that perhaps he had not hit Marciano *just* right; the true artist is always prone to self-reproach."<sup>12</sup>) Finally, the "geezer" of ring talk and the epithetical reference to "the master of the *Pequod*" (unless you know *Moby-Dick*, you won't know that Liebling is still talking about Ahab) together balance the registers of the daily and the quarterly. Liebling maintains that balance throughout the essay: describing Moore's fading chances of victory later in the fight, for instance, he writes, "It was in the fourth, though, that I think Sisyphus began to get the idea he couldn't roll back the Rock."<sup>13</sup> The "Rock" gets the capital-R treatment not only as an inflated Symbol appropriate to the quarterlies (Moore becomes Camus's existential hero struggling against history), but also because the dailies and the kind of people who read them often called Marciano (born Rocco Marchegiano) "the Rock."

All this ironic distance, serving to position Liebling as familiar with but not native to the various strata of language and culture through which he pursues the meanings of a fight, makes it seem as if there are invisible quotation marks around most of what he says. That jokey, needling quality can make Liebling hard to take: there is something about his prose, to borrow a phrase from Jim Thompson, that's like biting down on tinfoil. But it is precisely where a literary cutey-pie (to borrow a boxing term for a deceptive, trap-setting fighter) like Liebling seems jokiest that one should look for his most serious claims: that boxing is great art (an argument made by James for cricket); that boxing is a fit subject for great artists and critics (an argument akin to the one made by Ishmael for whaling, and done via a similarly audacious survey across the cultural spectrum); and that Liebling's uniquely comprehensive expertise as a writer of boxing, displayed in



his eclectic command of idioms, subsumes and exceeds the reach of both writers who don't know any better than to use "fistic" and those who know all too well how to use "hubris."

The same set of impulses drove Liebling's tendency to write about boxing as if he were reviewing poetry. The processes of literary culture are put into burlesque motion around the subject of boxing when he reviews fighters as artists, offering evaluations of major and minor figures in the canon: Cassius Clay's early work indicates a major new talent on the make, for example, while the classicist Archie Moore has been underappreciated in an age of declining technical virtuosity. Liebling's essays continually trace and reinforce a network of intertextuality binding texts (e.g., his own to those of Egan, Malory, and Homer), themes (e.g., the perpetual struggle of classically trained boxers to keep the "sweet science" from being dragged in the mud by rough brawlers), and characters (e.g., underappreciated poets, overvalued goons, colorful supporting players). Liebling also lampoons the world of secondary texts: he cannot devote his full attention to the artists and the primary texts (the fighters themselves and their fights) because, like a critic obliged to tangle with other critics, he is constantly interrupted by know-it-all secondary figures—trainers, managers, hangers-on—who compete to purvey their own interpretations of primary texts. Most of the fighters, like poets, are too immersed in their craft to bend his ear.

One sign that Liebling's treatment of fighters as artists adds up to more than an exercise in cleverness, however, lies in his reversing rather than repeating the usual writer-fighter analogy. Typically, writers use fighters to think about what it means to write. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, suggests that the writer's sense of "kinship, however oblique and one-sided, with the professional boxer" proceeds from parallels between training for a fight and writing for publication: "That which is 'public' is but the final stage in a protracted, arduous, grueling, and frequently despairing period of preparation."<sup>14</sup> Her list of "serious" writers on boxing includes Swift, Pope, Byron, Hemingway, and Mailer, but does not include Liebling, whom Oates finds "relentlessly jokey" (i.e., insufficiently serious).<sup>15</sup> Liebling, on the other hand, uses the language of literary criticism to think about what it means to fight. His habit of treating fighters like artists provides a way to get at what matters to him about boxing as well as a way to get at the problem of chasing ripples out from the ring into the textual world.

What matters most to Liebling is mastery of style in the ring and the well thought out content it expresses: "The boxer who interests me is the *reasoner* in the ring," as opposed to the slugger, more "popular with the unthinking crowd," who rushes in "to occupy the other fellow's gloves with his face while he slugs away at the face in front of him."<sup>16</sup> In his essays, Liebling always goes to a fight "hoping to see art vindicated" over slugging (punching without science) and showy "prancing" (energy wasted in superfluous motion); in a fight crowd, he is a person of discernment besieged by coarse uninitiates howling for the wrong kind of action. Liebling's favorite fighters, then, are craftsmen and stylists: Archie Moore, whose subtlety earns him the relatively obscure status of "a boxer's boxer, as Stendhal was for a long time a writer's writer"; Floyd Patterson, whose "driving earnestness . . . transcended pugnacity" to become a devotion to reasoned pugilism that evoked "the rage of a literary stylist trying to get something down on paper";<sup>17</sup> and Cassius Clay (not yet Ali and not yet a champion when Liebling died in 1963), who showed in his early genre work the promise of maturing into a major artist of pathbreaking originality.

A boxing match, then, means an opportunity to see the logic and traditions that undergird the sweet science as an artistic discipline dramatically enacted: the violent contrast of styles, new practitioners compared to old masters, genius and training and will challenging the limitations of the form (limitations of body, mind, and circumstance). Liebling looks forward with a sense of incipient plenitude to visiting a dedicated fighter's training camp or to seeing a good fight: "Not only rivers and the life cycle have a continuous quality that gives a fellow something to hold on to. The processes of art, too, are self-renewing."<sup>18</sup> He is not overly disturbed, therefore, when the self-taught Swedish puncher Ingemar Johansson knocks out the artist Floyd Patterson in their first fight because the self-renewing processes of art can be seen at work in Johansson's victory. After all, the puncher has exercised reason and craft to exploit in textbook fashion a flaw in the boxer's style: Johansson knocks Patterson down the first time with a classically short, straight right thrown inside the arc of Patterson's left hook. But in a subsequent essay, Liebling becomes the traditionalist aghast when Johansson prepares for the rematch with Patterson by guzzling milkshakes, bringing his fiancée to camp, and otherwise contravening boxing tradition in ways that speak of chaos rather than innovation. Johansson then repre-

sents "the seed of the dissipation of authority and the germ of the disintegration of discipline,"<sup>19</sup> a crisis resolved when Patterson diligently adjusts his style and demolishes the profoundly limited Johansson in the rematch.

Liebling entitled his essay on the rematch, a paean to the capacity of boxing to dramatize its artistic self-renewal, "A Blow for Austerity." However, it is not austerity in and of itself, but rather Patterson's austere genius that Liebling wishes to see vindicated for the good of boxing. He also roots vigorously in more than one essay for the anything-but-austere Cassius Clay, whose "amplitude" in and outside the ring Liebling sees as the mark of a potential genius capable of leading the sweet science into another heroic age. Liebling was charmed by Clay's reasoning in the ring and by the tongue-in-cheek self-importance with which he both advertised and mitigated his overweening ambition. Other fight people were not so taken with Clay's semi-ironized hubris, and some were especially put off by his habit of concocting rhymed assessments of his adversaries. "Anti-Poetry Night," an account of Clay's victory over Harlem heavyweight Doug Jones before a Madison Square Garden crowd that booed the decision, makes an extended defense of Liebling's "fellow-littérateur" Clay, "the heavyweight poet from Louisville, Kentucky," whose latest work has met with a loutish response from a public that fails to appreciate his gift.<sup>20</sup> In fight-commentary that doubles as literary criticism, Liebling describes Clay's advantage in reach over the much shorter Jones as a critic would evaluate a rising master's early genre work: "The poet towered above his chosen subject."<sup>21</sup> The genre in this case is the marquee fight against a tough young heavyweight with only average speed and ring sense, and the rising master's successful rendition of Jones portends future greatness for Clay even as it exposes his present lack of polish.

One can see why a witty, articulate boxer like Clay would have appealed to Liebling. Not only was Clay a young heavyweight with preternaturally fast hands who showed promise of ruling the fight world; he could recite original poetry while doing sit-ups (a trick that Liebling wanted "to see T. S. Eliot try").<sup>22</sup> Much as Liebling reversed and resisted the writer's habit of using boxing to think about writing (never saying that writing is like boxing, but frequently saying that boxing is like writing), one is tempted to read his paralleling of boxers and literary artists the other way around: his mock evaluations of boxers as artists also consider his own status as

a writer of literate boxing essays, among other generic miscellanea. His hero, after all, was Archie Moore, a great artist who, like Liebling but unlike Clay, did his best work in a minor genre, the light-heavyweight division.

Liebling, whose oeuvre spans a range of light-heavyweight genres, wants to make literature out of marking the path that leads down from his middle-class origins through "lowlife" and then up into "high culture." He aspires to go conventionally low in order to get to the conventionally high—an aspiration common among literary students of urban culture and sports, and, more generally, among children of the middle class who find themselves drawn to both the street and the library.<sup>23</sup> Liebling developed a literary anthropology of lowlife that documented the world of fight people, saloon people, Broadway types, racetrack touts, and seedy reporters. These hustlers led lives that resembled those of artists—usually austere, sometimes inspired—and that emphatically did not follow his family's upward-curving social trajectory from the Lower East Side to middle-class security in the Rockaways. He also wanted to write his way into the highbrow canons of literary culture and criticism, albeit as a disruptive and parodic force wielding a cultural authority acquired in parts of the social landscape that his *New Yorker* readers avoided in person.

Liebling's model in this project was Pierce Egan, "a hack journalist, a song writer, a conductor of puff-sheets, and, I am inclined to suspect, a shakedown man," as well as "the greatest writer about the ring who ever lived."<sup>24</sup> He introduces Egan with a new heroic epithet in each essay (the Sir Thomas Malory of the London Prize Ring, the Edward Gibbon, the Homer, and so on); slipping into Egan's voice becomes another running gag. The introduction to *The Sweet Science* concludes with a pitch-perfect Eganism that links Liebling's book to Egan's journal *Boxiana*: "I can think of nothing more to say in favor of the Present Extension of the GREAT HISTORIAN'S Magnum Opus."<sup>25</sup> Egan, who seems to have been at every boxing match, dog fight, and bar brawl in early nineteenth-century London, has been described elsewhere as "a first-class journalist and . . . an important figure on the lower slopes of literature" who provided Dickens with authoritative material on the bottom third of England's social strata, and romantic slummers like Byron with an insider's guide to the world of pugilism.<sup>26</sup> Egan offered, as Liebling describes it, "a panorama of low, dirty, happy, brutal, sentimental Regency England that you'll never get from Jane Austen." Austen and even Hazlitt ("a dilettante" whose essay





Figure 1. A. J. Liebling (January 1963). UPI/Bettmann News-photos. Reproduced by permission of the Bettmann Archive.

"The Fight" visits Egan's bailiwick) were marooned too far up the slopes of literary culture to get a good view of the action down below. Liebling sees Egan as positioned to link high and low, largely cutting out the uninteresting social and cultural middle, a role emphasized in his accounts of "that curious pattern of good fellowship and snobbery, not mutually exclusive, that has always existed between Gentleman and Player."<sup>27</sup> Egan, slangy and distinctive, gave Liebling a model of literary writing that could smoothly shuttle between high and low.

Fittingly, Liebling made a place for himself on the lower slopes of American letters that was roughly analogous to Egan's. Picture Liebling (Figure 1), a gouty fat man, typing away between meals in a modest bungalow which overlooks the trailer parks of popular literary culture (home to pulp writers like Robert E. Howard, best known as the creator of Conan the Barbarian), but stands significantly downhill from the neat rows of ranch houses and tudors that house critically respected novelists and poets, reputable critics, and the relatively few essayists and academics who achieve a

general readership. As Fred Warner, one of the editors of *A Neutral Corner*, points out in trying to explain Liebling's marginal place in American letters, "It is still strangely difficult in this country to evaluate properly a writer who didn't chiefly write fiction, poetry, or plays, and in the academy there are still not many people who know and esteem Liebling's work."<sup>28</sup> Liebling was a reporter, and a kind of cultural critic (although of a genus that does not encourage a rush to his work among readers of C. L. R. James or Roland Barthes, to name two of Liebling's contemporaries with things to say about sports and culture), and he wanted to be known as a literary man. However awkward a problem of evaluation he might present, Liebling was clearly a literary figure in several senses: he had a terrifically eclectic command of language and letters, and what he wrote drew life from its connections to literary artifacts major and minor; he published in the *New Yorker*, cheek by jowl with some of the most widely esteemed poets, fiction writers, and critics of his day; and he made it his business to evaluate critically the work of poets who gave significant form to the everyday materials available to them. One must include under this definition of "poets," as he did, though, not only litterateurs but also welterweights, chefs, and reporters.

Liebling's literary resumé ranges across genres, always with one foot in reporting and the other in something else—history, aesthetics, literature. He was one of the great press critics, unrivaled in slicing up bad journalistic writing and reasoning, but ready to defend competent reporters and writers hamstrung by the corporate imperatives and impoverished political culture of the news business. Among the best war correspondents of the World War II era, he was the most sophisticated reader and writer, the most committed to framing that war on the human scale of individual people and daily life, and one of the least sentimental (except regarding the French, for whom he had a terrible weakness). *The Earl of Louisiana*, his 1961 portrait of Earl Long, is still one of the most engaging American political biographies. With fellow *New Yorker* essayist Joseph Mitchell, he mapped midcentury New York in ways that established a pattern for American nonfiction: his influence can be traced in the writing of the *New Journalists*, in practically any contemporary issue of the *New Yorker* and other high-end cosmopolitan magazines, or, for that matter, in *Sports Illustrated* or the daily paper. He contributed mightily to the haphazard effort in American letters to represent what happens in those interstices of urbanism that do not fall neatly into the generic realms of upper, middle, and

lower class. He wrote about food more than a decent person should; and he wrote great essays on boxing.<sup>29</sup>

Being the best multiple-threat press critic, the most literate war correspondent, and the best lowlife essayist, food writer, and fight writer around is kind of like being the light-heavyweight champion of the world: an enormous achievement of craftsmanship but a relatively minor distinction. The light-heavyweights are overshadowed on one side by the middleweight division, with its own deep tradition of boxing excellence—Sugar Ray Robinson, still considered by many to be the best pound-for-pound fighter of all time, was a middleweight—and, on the other side, by the heavyweights, who always capture the lion's share of the public imagination. Many great middleweights and heavyweights have fought as light-heavyweights, but few have enjoyed great renown on the strength of their light-heavyweight bouts. Liebling was like a classic light-heavy who finds himself too heavy to box comfortably as a middleweight and too light to join the heavies; he was a fine essayist and reporter in whose rotund breast beat the heart of an expansive, digressive novelist.

After Liebling wrote what he called "a favorable review" of one of Archie Moore's victories, the light-heavyweight champion sent him a note of thanks signed "the most unappreciated fighter in the world, Archie Moore."<sup>30</sup> Moore yielded to the light-heavy's classic temptation: he challenged heavyweight champions, who beat him. Fight people always want to know if the light-heavy champ is going to "move up" to the big time and seek the heavyweight title. Only one has done it successfully: Michael Spinks won a close decision against Larry Holmes (although many think Holmes was robbed). Moore, probably the greatest light-heavy of all time, lost to heavyweight champions Marciano, Patterson, Ezzard Charles (three times), and even to the future champion Cassius Clay. A true light-heavy, who does not grow naturally into a heavyweight as he ages and who reaches the optimum balance of speed and precision with power at a fighting weight of 160 to 175 pounds, usually ends up distorting his body (by beefing up), his style, or both when he takes on a significantly bigger man—but the temptation to go after the heavyweight crown is powerful.

Liebling certainly had good material with which to move up in the conventional hierarchy of literary genres: during his years as a reporter he had done the "research" for a series of novels in the manner of his urban-realist heroes—Dickens, the French masters, Crane—and he entertained

thoughts of embarking on such projects, but he only dabbled in prose fiction. He also started and abandoned a play based on his war reportage. Once he had found his mature essayistic style, Liebling did not make any sustained attempts at publishing fiction, poetry, or drama. Perhaps he no longer had any interest in them; perhaps he realized that the change in genres would distort his style and undermine the balance of good humor and elegant diction that made it work. When "a literary friend" criticized as "too obvious" an image of blood mixed with milk that appeared in Liebling's war reportage, he pardoned the friend for "mistaking me for a creative writer."<sup>31</sup> Liebling did not necessarily feel uncreative as an essayist, nor did he feel unappreciated (except possibly by the part of himself that aspired to write fiction and drama), but nobody seemed eager to recognize him as a literary heavyweight.

Instead of forcing the issue by trying to "move up," Liebling made a virtue of his light-heaviness. Both in style and in substance, his boxing essays present him as uniquely positioned across the lines that divide culture into high and low, literary and popular, and thus as well placed to draw a uniquely broad range of meanings—technical, historical, literary, dramatic, aesthetic, sociological, political—from a boxing match. His cultivation of a necessary distance from any one way of knowing or articulating the fights, as well as the exclusiveness of his claim to expertise, irritates some other writers on boxing—like Oates and Gerald Early, both of whom pass over Liebling as a patronizing joker in their reviews of boxing literature.<sup>32</sup> Oates can say, with an utterly straight face, things like "in the brightly lit ring, man is *in extremis*, performing an atavistic rite or *agon* for the mysterious solace of those who can participate only vicariously in such drama: the drama of life in the flesh. Boxing has become America's tragic theater."<sup>33</sup> Early tends to reduce boxing to racial theater. Both may, then, feel themselves unfairly subsumed and dismissed by Liebling's pervasive contention that he can read the spreading pattern of meanings proceeding from a fight more expertly than those whose path to the ring is more circumscribed or less coolly mapped than his own—the boys (and girls: Liebling was narrow-minded on that score, among others) on the quarterlies, the characters who frequent the fight clubs, illiterate (for all their expertise in the history and technique of boxing) fight people, and literate dilettantes slumming in lowlife.



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A. J. Liebling lives on College Hill—the library has eleven of his books, and at least one professor on campus teaches “Ahab and Nemesis”—but boxing has a textual rather than a physical presence at Lafayette. As at most pricey, exclusive colleges, there is an occasional drunken fight (not to be confused with boxing), usually between chesty young men who allow the knowledge of how much they stand to lose curb an already inexpert animosity toward one another: they do not want to get expelled; they do not want to get into trouble with their parents; they do not want to get sued; they do not necessarily know how to hit each other correctly; and deep down they do not really want to risk ruining their own or their adversary’s placid and class-appropriate physiognomy. They mostly shove one another with theatrical vehemence and yell hard, wounding things. Art Statum, who won an NCAA heavyweight boxing championship at North Carolina A&T, used to instruct Lafayette students in the manly art of self-defense (no sparring, just drills and conditioning). The college stopped offering those lessons some years ago, and Statum, having retired from coaching and teaching at Lafayette, now volunteers as a roving peacekeeper (“verbal intimidation,” he assures me, “nothing physical”) at a nearby middle school. Statum looks back with fondness on the college boys he instructed in the craft of boxing—they worked hard, he says, even if they lacked “the killer instinct”—but he thinks that some of Lafayette’s administrators were glad to see him leave College Hill. I asked Statum if they were uncomfortable with the idea of a large Black man teaching a violent craft to young White men. He said, “What do you think?”<sup>34</sup> (Other faculty members have suggested that Statum was “not perky enough” or was “too old-fashioned” to teach recreational sports at a college.)

While Statum was telling me this over lunch in a restaurant fronting Easton’s central square, Larry Holmes walked in with a lawyer, who waited, not too patiently, as the two warhorses did some preprandial cutting up. Statum offered, with broad irony, to buy lunch for Holmes, who is a millionaire several times over. Holmes responded, with mock concern, that he did not have change for a dollar—an insult of unclear import, but apparently a reference to the fact that amateur champions do not make any money. Statum, twenty-one years older than Holmes, said, “I can still take

you," to which Holmes answered, "I'll check back with you when I'm sixty-five." "Six," said Statum, "I'm sixty-six." He seemed to feel that that settled the discussion; Holmes and his lawyer went away.

Holmes, who is still active as a fighter at this writing, won the heavy-weight title in 1978 (taking the WBC title from Ken Norton) and held it over a remarkable seven-year span of nineteen defenses until he lost the controversial decision to Michael Spinks in 1985. When Holmes beat a depressingly diminished Muhammad Ali (who had once employed him as a sparring partner) in 1980, he put an end to the era of Ali and ushered in the five-year period of his own undisputed ascendancy. After losing a second close decision to Spinks, Holmes retired in 1986, then came out of retirement to fight Mike Tyson (who knocked him out) in 1988. After retiring, Holmes came out of retirement again in 1991 and lost a title bout by decision to Evander Holyfield in 1992. Having beaten less distinguished opponents in 1993 and 1994, Holmes, then forty-five years old, positioned himself for yet another title shot, against Oliver McCall on 8 April 1995. He fought well against McCall, but lost again, bringing his lifetime record to 61-5.

When he came into the restaurant that day in April 1995, Holmes still had under his left eye the mark of a deep gash opened ten days before by McCall during an unlovely but decisive series of punches in the ninth round of their fight. Holmes had been ahead on most cards until the ninth, fighting in his signature conservative style: wasting no energy, scoring with his still-potent left jab, slipping punches with subtle head movements, foiling his much younger opponent's attack with punch-entangling arms and a knack for crossing up McCall's predictable footwork. Holmes often looks awkward, as when he retreats to erase an attacking opponent's advantage in position, blinking furiously (he has had eye troubles) and pawing with his long arms to smother punches; then there are moments when he looks improbably smooth, as when he stands in the middle of the ring with his hands low and evades a series of punches with unexcited three-inch repositionings of his chin.

The pawing and slipping, as well as the jab-heavy offense and impeccable, unhurried footwork, are aspects of a style shaped to conserve his resources. That measured style, exaggerated in the last ten years as he has gone from a mature to an old fighter, reconciles two sometimes conflicting imperatives: Holmes protects his physical assets, the fighter's brain and its

bodily frame, with superb defensive technique, but he must also protect his record and especially, when he held it, the heavyweight title by winning the fight, which means risking damage in order to damage his opponent. Every fighter has to work through that calculus, but Holmes's solution—defensive boxing and low-risk offensive maneuvers leading toward victory by decision (unless his opponent makes a big mistake and gets himself knocked out)—has become increasingly rare among heavyweights. Since the advent of television, promising young heavies have been rushed along, with minimal seasoning, toward the chance of big-money fights and thus place their confidence in offense—which paying customers have always valued more anyway—rather than in their underdeveloped defensive skills, which take longer to learn and require more experience and expert instruction. Holmes throws twenty left jabs for every right hand, the ratio of a defensive specialist looking patiently for an opening. Between rounds of sparring in the gym, a trainer massages and pummels the muscles of Holmes's left shoulder and arm so that they will not stiffen up; he does not attend similarly to the right side.

Still, for all his anachronistically sound craftsmanship, Holmes lost the McCall fight. McCall is not a particularly skilled boxer, but he is a bruiser, and he won a close but clear decision over a much older man whose resources have dwindled. Holmes, whose increasingly friable and avoidable right hand has lost most of its utility as a punching instrument, could not hurt McCall. He spent too much time on the ropes trying to sucker the skeptical McCall in close, where Holmes hoped to score with that suspect right hand, and he faded in the late rounds as McCall came on with vigor. Holmes was in excellent shape for a man of forty-five, but it was apparent to all that he had lost a great part of his speed and force: even at thirty-five he could still have cut to ribbons a literal-minded musclehead like McCall without getting hit much in return. The loss to McCall drastically reduced Holmes's chances of regaining the championship and securing big-money battles against George Foreman (a year older than Holmes, and the last of Ali's notable opponents still in action) and Mike Tyson. (When he came out of retirement to fight the latter in 1988, Holmes accurately predicted that Tyson would go to jail; in 1995, as Tyson's jail term drew to a close, Holmes angled unsuccessfully for a bout with him early in his post-incarceration comeback, "so I'll get him when he's rusty like he got me."<sup>35</sup>) Before the McCall fight Holmes had promised to retire for good if

he lost, but everyone knew he would fight again (and he has): he believes that he can protect himself from injury, and there are too many beatable champions out there. By the time this essay is published in 1996, Holmes ought to have retired once more, but he will probably still be active. If he can line up the right flawed champion and the right ringside judges, he may have even won himself a piece of the fragmented heavyweight title by then. That I can even suggest such a possibility is a measure of the heavy-weight division's disarray, of the lasting virtues of Holmes's style, and of the marketing value of fight fans' nostalgia: an ex-champion from the era of Ali still draws television viewers and can make decent money in the ring.

The money is not just an excuse. Holmes has always been a businessman—rather than a wild man—in the ring where he made his fortune, and in the last decade he has become a businessman who fights rather than a fighter with some businesses on the side. Back before he hit the big money, Holmes once went up the hill to fight at Lafayette, stopping one Joe Gholston by TKO in the Kirby Field House in 1976. "I made \$1,500 when I fought at Lafayette. That's it," he told me, characteristically going straight to the bottom line. Since then, Holmes has made a great deal of money in the ring, kept much of it, and learned how to manage his financial assets in the same belt-and-suspenders way he has managed his resources in fights. In April 1995, a few days after I saw him in the restaurant, he talked to me about money, life in Easton, and the ring. We were sitting in his office on the fifth floor of L&D Holmes Riverside Plaza, an office building he put up in the 1980s. He paid cash for it, he said, not to flaunt his millions but to avoid paying interest on a bank loan. (He will slip punches with his hands down not to flaunt his skills, but because he does not need to block those punches and can therefore save his energy for something else.) From a suite of offices here, with panoramic views of Larry Holmes Drive and the river junction around which Easton grew as a mill town and nexus of waterways, he manages a portfolio of holdings that includes the building we sat in, another one (known in good developerese as "Phase Two") just completed next door, a new nightclub in Phase Two, another nightclub (for sale), a parking lot, his gym just across the river on South Side, a big house on the edge of Easton (with a fancy security system, a boxing glove-shaped pool, and a garage full of handsome cars), various promotional enterprises, and whatever else he has in the works. He also donates money and time to local charities, especially those dedicated to helping children.



Holmes sat behind his desk, facing his view. He wore a black shirt, leather vest, and off-white pants. The cut under his eye had healed, but the mark remained. When he is not fighting or training, he wears glasses, which perch slightly askew on his broad face. Small, hard eyes and a patient, evaluating manner give him a stony presence, only slightly disarmed by the glasses and a gap between his front teeth. Holmes is a big heavyweight, at 6'3" and a current prime fighting weight of about 240 pounds. He has long arms and legs, making for a long reach. Stripped for action, he never looked like a bodybuilder and looks even less like one these days: although he has always been big and strong enough to move his adversaries around in the ring, his muscles are massy and smooth rather than blown up and well defined, his torso rounded rather than chiseled, and he is solid through the middle rather than extra-wide at the shoulders. He is, in short, a man of substance built to defend himself with a minimum of fuss (Figure 2). Some big athletes look grotesque when they do normal things, like sit at a desk, with their abnormal bodies, but Holmes looked comfortable in his office.

He also seemed to enjoy his work. While we talked he occasionally excused himself to take business calls, murmuring decisive-sounding phrases like "ask her how much can we get it for," and "I'm on another long-distance call . . . give him to Dick," in a mellow phone voice. As we stood at the window to look at his view, he was full of plans scaled to a big developer's imagination. He would like to see pleasure boats come up the Delaware to Easton from Philadelphia, with the river and riverfront developed to bear the traffic and profit from it. He would like to see Easton's rivers spruced up, in any case: "See that log in the river? They should get rid of it, clean it up. See that island there? No, over *there*. Get rid of it! It's a *eyesore*! This could be a nice place." He would also like to see people park their cars more decorously on Larry Holmes Drive so that drivers pulling out of the driveway of his building can see both ways down his street. He enjoys his work, but he seems disappointed at the world's failure to arrange itself as he wants it: he does things the right way, thrifty and reasoned both in the ring and outside it, but neither fight people nor his neighbors always appreciate that kind of virtue.

Life in Easton has been rewarding for Holmes, who has gradually shaped his relationship to the town to suit his wealth, if not his expectations. He moved to Easton from Georgia with his mother when he was five and grew

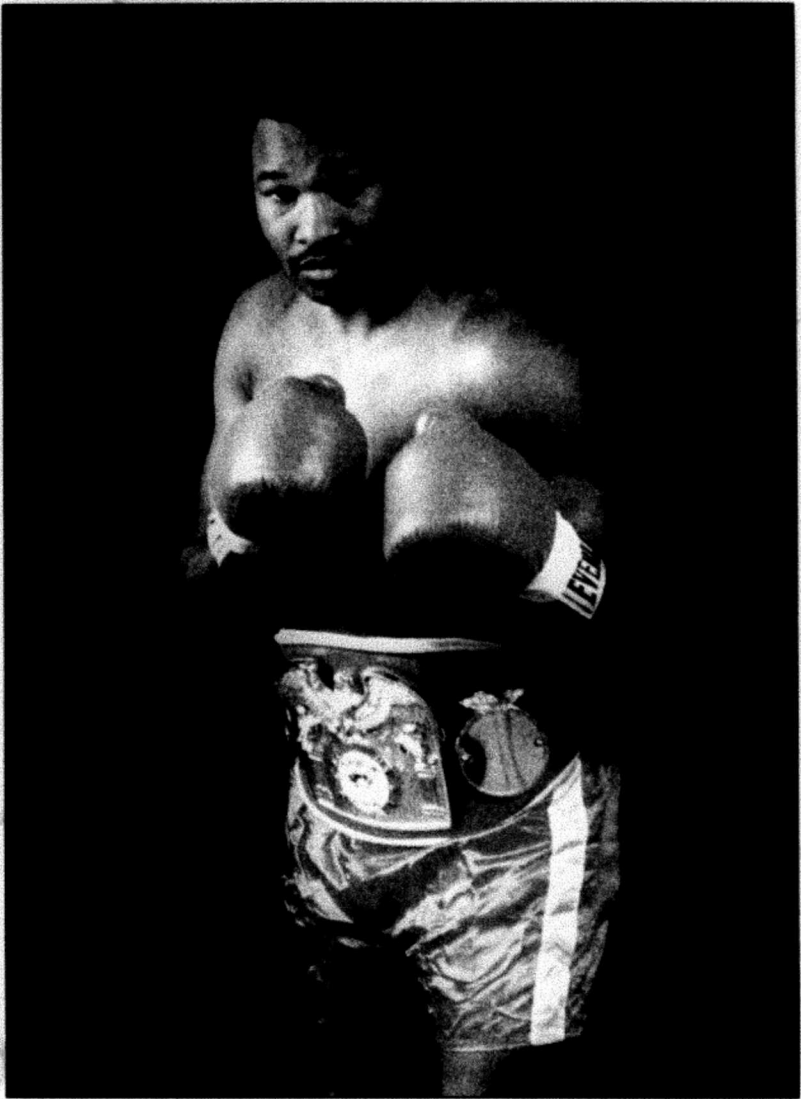


Figure 2. Larry Holmes, undisputed heavyweight champion of the world, in 1984. Reproduced courtesy of Larry Holmes.

up in a housing project, a position of maximum exposure to the harshest forces at play in the social landscape. He has arrived, in middle age, at a position of relative insulation from those forces: rich and secure, owner of a fine house, with an office built to command one of the Lehigh Valley's most picturesque and historically resonant vistas. And yet he began our talk by saying, "Why do you want to talk about Easton? *Fuck Easton*"; then he offered a wide chilly smile and said he was just kidding. It suggested a complicated relationship of fighter to town.

On the one hand, Holmes has often said that his decision to remain in Easton, even after he had won the title and made his fortune, was good for both himself and his family. Easton is a "quiet, beautiful" town where he can raise "regular kids" who "don't think they are better than other people," and he credits the town's traditional calm with keeping his attention on training hard and saving his pennies. "You can go out for a beer or whatever, but most nights after ten o'clock it's time to go home. . . . Plus there are no Joneses to keep up with." At a press conference held in Easton before the McCall fight, a reporter asked Holmes why he did not consider himself washed up at the age of 45, given that the 38-year-old Ali had been sadly over the hill when Holmes destroyed him in 1980. "Ali burned the candle at both ends," Holmes answered. "I never did. Thanks to Easton, my lifestyle has been at a minimum."

On the other hand, Holmes feels that many of his neighbors and local government officials have never given him the credit he deserves for staying when he could have moved away; for spending his money in town, supporting local charities, and putting Easton on the map. (It is hard to imagine the national press sending reporters here en masse except to interview Holmes.) The town did rename an avenue in his honor, boosters do tout him as a civic asset, and there are people here who speak proudly of Easton as the "home of Holmes," but he feels underappreciated, especially in comparison to the region's other world champion, race-car driver Mario Andretti. Holmes senses a coldness in Eastonians, even those who show him off to visitors: "They just like to say 'Hello, Larry'—because I'm famous—and I say 'hello' back, but there's nothing in it." Solicit opinions of Holmes around town and many people, especially those who do not know him and who speak under cover of anonymity, say that he is "rich and arrogant," that his buildings are "ugly" and "hog the best spot" in town, that the criminal behavior of his brothers, Jacob and Mark, reflects badly

on him. One woman told me, with strong emotion in her voice, that "a lot of people around here" take offense at the red and white color scheme of Holmes's ring equipment because he is "using the colors" of the local high school, from which he did not graduate. Eastonians in local bars said they would not watch the Holmes-McCall fight because the pay-per-view fee was too high. (It is hard to imagine them attending an out-of-town fight in large numbers and rushing the ring after the hometown fighter's victory, as Liebling describes Rocky Marciano's rooters from Brockton doing in New York.) Holmes also thinks the town's government and business community should be more inclined to reward him for investing in—and attracting money to—Easton. In particular, it galls him that his plans to develop the riverfront encountered local opposition.

Holmes thinks the problem is rooted in race: like Statum at Lafayette, he is a Black man in a largely White community. "If I was White, nobody would oppose me putting up a five-million-dollar building. . . . I bring fame, but I get no credit." Especially since he became champion, Holmes has been willing to air his ideas about race. His blunt rhetorical style is less suited to building a following among White people and the press than, say, Ali's witty theatrics, and he probably did not further endear himself to even his local boosters by bringing Al Sharpton to Easton several years ago to support him in accusing the police department of having beaten and harassed his brother. It is hard to judge, though, how much the opposition to Holmes's riverside buildings was motivated by racial animosity and how much by anti-redevelopment traditionalism. In design the L&D Holmes Plaza gestures cordially toward the town's brick architecture and homey scale, but it also stands as a sign of postindustrial redevelopment at the river junction from which sprang a town still resolutely industrial in its self-conception.

It is, as I said, a complicated relationship between fighter and town. Holmes sums it up by saying, "As fair as they haven't been to me, let me say this: without them knowing it, Easton has been great to me."

Easton has not been the source of Holmes's wealth; rather, it has been the space in which he stored it (in real property, above all) and the forum in which he expressed it: "The ring generated all my money," he says. "I haven't made a penny out of Easton." The fame and especially the money Holmes won in the ring have allowed him to significantly reconfigure the form of Easton and his position in it. The blank square of the ring, to



which he has made his way almost daily for twenty-seven years, has been a kind of money-making machine—training, will, and accrued ring acumen go in, money comes out—and the practiced moves he still makes in the ring's circumscribed space have enabled the much more expansive set of moves he has made in the social landscape: to the secure house outside town, to the well-appointed office downtown. Pretty good, as he says, for a seventh-grade dropout. As he tells it now, he has gone into each fight with a clear sense of how his path would carry him through the ring and back into the world beyond it:

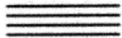
I fought for one thing: money. For instance, I knew I couldn't beat Tyson: I wasn't ready, I was two years rusty. I was confident, though, that I could protect myself, not get hurt. I fought him for three million dollars. I'm always thinking, "I'm fighting to get money for something"—my wife and kids, a house, a pool, a car. I wrote it on the wall. Every fight had a goal. The Tyson fight—the goal was money to pay for this building we're sitting in.

Sports sentimentalists, a group that includes almost every sportswriter and most fans, will never gush over Holmes as they did over Marciano or Ali, and students of culture will probably not flock to him as they have to Ali and Joe Louis. Holmes fights in a style that does not galvanize the popular or critical imagination; rather, it seems designed to galvanize the imaginations of bankers who make small business loans. It is a style suited to the principles of upward social mobility as pursued by the striving poor rather than the fortuitously gifted. Holmes accepts risk when he has to in order to realize gain—he risks getting hurt when he goes in to hurt an opponent—but he is careful to do so only when a plausible opportunity presents itself. He conserves his resources and protects himself, always looking to get ahead, to build up points, to build on what he has.

Sustained upward mobility from the lower classes through sports is supposed to be a cruel lie—and almost all of the time it is, especially for boxers—but Holmes has followed the cliché's improbable curve all the way up. He seems at once bemused and inspired by the difficulty of being a Black millionaire. Americans tend to think of a million dollars as the amount it takes to definitively insulate one from our sharkish social processes, but Americans also tend to think of being Black as inevitably exposing one to social processes at their most annihilating. For Holmes, the ring has been

a public arena in which he risks physical and professional annihilation for a carefully calculated return—enough money to redefine and secure his place in the social landscape.

“The worst thing in the world,” said Al Sharpton, speaking at Lafayette in February 1995 during Black History Month, “is to endure pain and to adjust to it.” He meant that American Blacks must not stop demanding justice even in the present climate of backlash against their proper sense of a historical grievance requiring redress. Holmes, then in training for the McCall fight, sat on the podium behind Sharpton, who said he was happy to have his old friend watching his back on College Hill. Holmes, who tried not to look as if he were thinking about McCall’s footwork during Sharpton’s talk, nodded slightly in affirmation during the best parts. If asked, though, Holmes might well have qualified Sharpton’s point about pain. When he rode down from College Hill in the dark after lending his good name and considerable presence to the occasion of Sharpton’s talk, his route took him through a landscape bearing the imprints of the fortune he acquired by enduring and adjusting to pain, as well as by inflicting it.



Now, as for why you should feel bad about watching the fights on television, it has to do with a story of decline that embraces both Liebling and Holmes, both boxing and Easton.

There is nothing like a story of decline to flatten, interpret, and explain complexity, and an argument for present decline also establishes the credentials of its purveyor because it implies an understanding of and association with a past golden age. Since decline gives narrative coherence to the overlap of persisting older orders and succeeding newer ones, we tend to use it to understand all kinds of things—cities, politics, movies, kids, sports, and anything else of which anyone can say that it used to be better but has since gone to hell. (Oddly enough, academic scholarship, which purveys declines of all stripes, has managed to sustain the idea of its own processes of supersession as intellectual progress, even while calling into serious question the very idea of progress.) The continuing story of the sweet science’s postindustrial decline, like the story of Easton’s postindustrial decline (to which I will soon turn), identifies the 1950s as the moment when the old order began visibly to collapse.

The story of boxing’s decline took lasting form in the 1950s, molded by

Liebling and other members of the ring intelligentsia. Liebling made that story a thematic building block of his oeuvre: he never missed a chance to say how much he hated television. In his most extended disquisition on why you should go to the fights in person rather than watch them on TV, Liebling argues that the pleasures of being there include telling the fighters what to do and analyzing the fight for the benefit of everyone else within earshot. He then gives a hypothetical example of how you can demonstrate expertise by offering extravagantly tenuous comparisons between the fight going on in front of you and a fight between Panama Al Brown and Edouard Mascart that you attended in Paris in 1927. First you draw the attention of those around you to a fanciful similarity between one of the present fighters and Brown: "'Reminds me of Panama Al Brown,' you may say as a new fighter enters the ring. 'He was five feet eleven and weighed a hundred and eighteen pounds. This fellow may be about forty pounds heavier and a couple of inches shorter, but he's got the same kind of neck.'" You have thus laid the groundwork for an expert conclusion to be drawn at the end of the fight:

If he wins, you say, "I told you he reminded me of Al Brown," and if he loses, "Well, well, I guess he's no Al Brown. They don't make fighters like Al any more." This identifies you as a man who (a) has been in Paris, (b) has been going to fights for a long time, and (c) therefore enjoys what the fellows who write for quarterlies call a frame of reference.<sup>36</sup>

Some of this makes a familiar self-portrait of Liebling. Obviously, American fight fans would not care if you had been to Paris, but people who read the *New Yorker*, not to mention the quarterlies, might—especially in the 1950s, when American expatriates and French existentialists were important literary figures. Liebling had, of course, been to Paris and written about its food, fights, horse racing, and other assorted attractions; during World War II he had chronicled his own return to Paris from Normandy with the Allied forces. Liebling had also been going to fights, and writing about them, for a long time; and his richly allusive prose offered at least a semblance of familiarity with the quarterlies and the world of culture they represented for him. His list, then, constitutes a resumé detailing his own frame of reference, which significantly overlaps but also significantly exceeds his readers': those who have read Camus are unlikely to know fight

people or other lowlife characters, and vice versa. Liebling's portrait of a ringside aficionado is thus also a self-portrait of an intellectual who makes a public spectacle of his frame of reference. The self-portrait positions Liebling in relation to the ring: in Paris and at the fights, between the critics on the quarterlies and the colorful fight people who serve as critics for the ring, among the well-read but also among those who know the fight world's history, against television but privy to the public imagination as it is displayed by a fight crowd. Liebling also positions himself in time with a thumbnail narrative of boxing's decline: "They don't make fighters like Al anymore." The essays in *The Sweet Science*, especially, argue that boxing has entered "a lean aesthetic period" in the age of television (hence the importance of going to the fights to counteract its effect). Liebling feared that the 1950s had ushered in an age of fewer good, experienced fighters and trainers, and therefore fewer good fights.

It bears noting that Liebling did not employ the decline formula unless he felt he had to, and never without ironic qualification; in his self-portrait, the nostalgic blowhard eulogizing Panama Al Brown at the fights does not inspire blind confidence in his analysis. As a press critic, Liebling could spot a decline narrative (on which urban journalism and sportswriting rely heavily) a mile away, and he was by nature and training suspicious of received wisdom and the formulas that convey it. Liebling further distanced himself from the notion of decline by showing himself to be compensating for the warping effect of nostalgia on his judgment. At the end of "Ahab and Nemesis," for instance, Marciano's defeat of Moore at Yankee Stadium gets Liebling thinking back to the first boxing card ever held there, in 1923, "in a time that is now represented to us as the golden age of American pugilism." He concludes that "old Ahab Moore could have whipped all four principals on that card [Jess Willard, Floyd Johnson, Luis Angel Firpo, and Jack McAuliffe II] within fifteen rounds, and that while Dempsey may have been a great champion, he had less to beat than Marciano."<sup>37</sup> In other words, golden age-and-decline is a dubious formula suffused with autobiographical sentiment.

It also bears noting that Liebling's account differs from the more facile and widely circulated narratives of decline driven by racial and ethnic anxiety that arose in the 1950s to explain changes not only in the ring but in the American social landscape. As the great South-North migration changed American urbanism, Black fighters finally began to eclipse



Irish, Italian, and Jewish fighters. (Hispanic fighters would come to predominate in many of the lower weight classes.) Whatever Liebling's conventional assumptions about race (and they are harder to pin down than readers like Oates and Early allow<sup>38</sup>), his pantheon of first-rank ring poets was all-Black, and he treated racial and ethnic successions as mildly interesting sociological phenomena which mattered only to the extent that they shaped what happened in the ring. The dividing lines he cared most about separated good trainers from bad ones, the tribe of boxers from the tribe of sluggers. Building his account of decline on observation of the ring and an awareness of the historical moment, he did precisely what C. L. R. James advised by starting from inside the boundaries of the sport and then working outward to the world beyond it. Liebling concluded that television, in combination with long-wave social trends of the twentieth century, was eroding both the craft and the institutions of boxing.

In the introduction to *The Sweet Science*, Liebling asserts that boxing is in decline because "there exist certain generalized conditions today, like full employment and a late school-leaving age, that militate against the development of first-rate professional boxers. (They militate as well against the development of first-rate acrobats, fiddlers, and *chefs de cuisine*.)"<sup>39</sup> To "full employment" (an exaggeration even in the 1950s) and nearly universal secondary education (though of significantly lower quality in those parts of the American social landscape that tend to produce boxers), we might add two other "generalized conditions" of leisure and work. First, baseball, football, basketball, and other team sports grew fantastically during the first half of the century, and the amateur and professional institutionalization of these sports helped to shrink the pool of prospective fighters. (Liebling made a point of being horrified by Marciano's new-order fans, uncolorful rah-rah types who seemed to belong at a high school football game.) Second, some observers believed that by midcentury the proliferation of labor-saving devices and the reduction of the heavy manual work required by extractive and manufacturing industries during their more labor-intensive eras had cut into the "production" of boxers in the rough. For example, according to Nat Fleischer, who was Madison Square Garden's house intellectual, "The trades that developed our greatest fighters were those which had to do with swinging a hammer, mining, or hauling heavy loads." Fleischer, certainly not the first American male to long for a more vigorous and accomplished golden age in the receding high-industrial moment, saw

"an amazing decline" in the craft of pugilism since the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century era of Bob Fitzsimmons (a blacksmith), Jack Dempsey the Nonpareil and Jack McAuliffe (both coopers), Jim Jeffries (a boilermaker), Jack Johnson and Harry Wills (both stevedores), and the heavyweight Jack Dempsey (a miner).<sup>40</sup>

These structural changes in leisure and work reduced the number of prospective boxers willing to apprentice themselves in the ring, but the midcentury advent of television accelerated the process of contraction. "The immediate crisis in the United States, forestalling the one high living standards might bring on, has been caused by the popularization of a ridiculous gadget called television," which, Liebling perceptively explains, "is utilized in the sale of beer and razor blades."<sup>41</sup> Regular boxing shows—weekly and sometimes more often—were a mainstay of early television, and TV exposure and TV money were rapidly destroying the network of local clubs and gyms where young men mastered their craft. Why pay to see a club fight when you can watch a stadium fight between nationally ranked contenders on TV for free? That collapse of the club network, and the related thinning in the ranks of experienced old hands who could make a living by teaching young apprentices, attenuated the capacity of pugilism to renew itself. There could not be, then, as many fighters with the training and experience essential to technical virtuosity as there used to be. This complex process played out with particular force in the United States, world capital of boxing since early in the century, where television had its greatest influence over leisure and sports.<sup>42</sup>

The midcentury narrative of scientific pugilism's decline in America offers a parody of postindustrial transformation in which a few promoters and fighters enjoy increased profits (with the aid of technological advances, in the form of television), while many more suffer through the "downsizing" of the boxing business and its reformulation as television spectacle. Like all narratives of decline, this one begs some big questions about its fundamental principles. It is true that after World War II the raw numbers of top-flight boxers decreased sharply: Fleischer claims that early in the century "the difficulty in ranking fighters lay in selecting ten from an outstanding field of possibly fifteen or more. . . . Today's headache comes from trying to find a sufficient number of worthies in any division after the first three or four have been listed."<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to accept, though, that the best fighters of the postwar period have been inferior to those of previous

eras. The lower weight classes have gone through "golden ages" since the 1950s (think of Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Roberto Duran, and Thomas Hearns, to name one circle of ring poets who produced masterworks in the 1980s), and even in the case of heavyweights, the division most sharply affected by television, one might argue that current training practices and nutrition can make contemporary fighters both stronger and faster than their predecessors. If both boxers in the ring are at least competent, the stronger and faster one usually wins, which means that it is possible to imagine even a pretty good postindustrial heavyweight like Riddick Bowe—let alone Ali or a young Holmes or Tyson—presenting a combination of speed and power that would have overwhelmed sainted high-industrial figures from Jeffries to Dempsey.

Whatever its manifest weaknesses, though, the story of boxing's decline demands at least a hearing, especially if extended to the present and especially if applied to the heavies. Looking beyond the television-enhanced drama and cultural import of Muhammad Ali's career during the 1960s and 1970s, a narrator of decline could plausibly argue that the rise of television has bequeathed us a period in which relatively few competent boxers, who are relatively unseasoned because they do not have to fight up through local and regional strata to hit the big time, compete for astounding purses without necessarily knowing much about boxing. Neither Oliver McCall nor Bruce Seldon, both of whom had fewer than thirty professional victories and both of whom, at least temporarily, held pieces of the world heavyweight title after 8 April 1995, is particularly impressive as a boxer, or even as a puncher. They are undoubtedly in superb physical condition—both built like V-shaped Michelin men, true to the pumped-up Arnoldian (Schwarzenegger, not Matthew) ideal of the 1980s and 1990s, yet retaining a boxer's speed and suppleness—but neither defends himself with more than paint-by-numbers expertise, and neither throws crisp combinations of punches. McCall hits harder than Seldon does, but he is not a great puncher; Seldon has the better jab, but it is not in the same class as Holmes's. George Foreman, also recognized in the spring of 1995 as a champion of sorts by some of the many governing bodies and unofficial authorities in boxing, can still punch very hard, but he is too old and slow to defend himself from a precise hitter. Any heavyweight with a jab and a command of basic footwork should be able to cut him to pieces while staying out of his way. Were he alive today, Liebling would probably

be decrying this present "lean aesthetic period" among the heavies and welcoming the return of Mike Tyson, who originally learned the fighter's trade from Cus D'Amato, a trainer with pretelevision credentials for whom Liebling had a great deal of respect.

Liebling esteemed Archie Moore above all other fighters in part because his later career represented the old order's last stand. Moore began fighting in 1936, and he was still going in the 1960s. He fought 228 professional bouts, a depth of experience that made for complete mastery of the sweet science's principles. (Tyson, the premier heavy since Holmes's reign ended, is still well short of fifty professional bouts.) Moore's loss to Marciano in 1955 forms the closing frame of *The Sweet Science*: "Ahab and Nemesis," however self-aware it is about the tendency of decline narratives to achieve explanatory force at the expense of complexity, closes Liebling's account of an old order in decline in the 1950s (although in the early 1960s he began to hope that Cassius Clay might usher in a new golden age).

When Liebling died in 1963, before the Age of Ali, thirteen-year-old Larry Holmes was still years away from the ring, although he was already in the habit of beating up his peers (including Sal Panto, future mayor of Easton). Had Liebling lived to see Holmes fight, he probably would have appreciated the pretelevision resonances in the Easton Assassin's style. It is also likely, though, that Liebling would not have esteemed the workman-like Holmes as he did Moore or Clay; he would probably have decided that Holmes lacked what Liebling's semimythical friend Colonel Stingo called "the divine inflatus," that artistic amplitude found only in true heavyweight poets. Holmes and Liebling would have seen eye-to-eye, though, on the matter of boxing's decline.

"I'm the last of the good heavyweights," Holmes likes to say. By "good" he means at least three things. First, he means that he is the last classical stylist among the heavyweights, skilled in the manly art of self-defense. He means the same thing that Liebling meant when he called Moore "the old classicist" and "the last of the good pre-television heavyweights." George Foreman, a great puncher of Holmes's respectable vintage, is not "good" in this technical sense: "They say Foreman got hit 200 times in his last fight," Holmes points out; "I didn't get hit 200 times in my whole career." Even in his pugilistic dotage, Holmes still has a rigorous left jab: a hard, straight punch thrown with defensive and offensive purpose, not the pro forma tap or inert stiff-arm that many heavies use for a jab. Second, Holmes means



that he is a good draw. With the exception of Riddick Bowe, who "has a sense of humor" and is not a bad boxer, the heavyweight division lacks "personality," he says. Holmes and Foreman are still active in their mid-forties because they command respect, but the rest are either nobodies (Bruce Seldon), "assholes" (Oliver McCall), or unlikely to stay active for long (Mike Tyson, who "hasn't changed" and will end up back in the joint or worse). Third, Holmes means "good" in a moral sense. He wants to distinguish himself—a family man, a businessman, an old-style "race man" working quietly in the wings of Ali's and Sharpton's television-savvy political theater—from loutish younger heavies who "beat up women," train badly, use drugs, buy decisions, and suck up to Don King.

Holmes is dissatisfied, though, with being the last of the good heavyweights in a time when few are equipped to appreciate that distinction. He complains that even the ringside judges lack the subtlety of perception needed to recognize the quality of his work, forcing him to dumb down his style accordingly. Liebling was satisfied with his relation to the history of boxing, presenting himself as an older man, intimately connected to the prewar ring world, whose cultural work it was to witness and narrate, from ringside, boxing's present decline. Holmes, who is still fit enough in his mid-forties to do his work in the ring, wants to improve his place in its history.

He keeps fighting because the money is still good, but also because he wants to add luster to his reputation by regaining the heavyweight championship. He is, of course, already a distinguished figure among champions, having held the title for seven years, and he will be remembered as a tough and canny heavyweight with anachronistically sound boxing skills, a great chin, and terrific self-possession in the ring. But Holmes will not be remembered as one of the greatest heavyweight champions, mostly because his style in the public arena—his conservative fighting style and modest Eastonian persona—did not command a wider following. The transition from Jimmy Carter's America to Donald Trump's may yet come to be widely understood as an appropriately resonant historical backdrop against which Holmes's tenure as champion will gain a larger meaning, but for now his reputation does not enjoy the extra-pugilistic resonance with which Hitler and World War II endowed Joe Louis or Vietnam and the U.S. urban crisis endowed Ali. Moreover, some people feel that Holmes did not fight enough great adversaries, a charge leveled at all heavyweight

champions except Ali, who had the three-man wrecking crew of Liston, Frazier, and Foreman (not to mention his draft board and Howard Cosell) to help make him great. Ali was too spent by 1980 to do Holmes the favor of giving him an epochal struggle.

It may seem unfair, then, but if the fight world's historical memory were a landscape, Holmes's reputation would be a cast-iron footbridge of understated classical elegance over which strollers made their way from a colossal statue of Ali to Tyson's truncated obelisk. Even Marciano, who retired unbeaten in 1956 after knocking out Moore, would rate at least a big chunk of granite set in a nice grove. The reputation of Marciano, who fought out of Brockton, an industrial town of Eastonian scale and type, famously irritates Holmes: Marciano, after having beaten the old classicist Moore, retired, and died relatively young, figuratively got up off the canvas one more time to become Holmes's nemesis. Holmes won his first forty-eight professional fights, leaving him one short of Marciano's perfect lifetime record of 49-0, but then lost to Spinks. After the fight, Holmes testily responded to inquiring reporters, "Marciano couldn't carry my jockstrap." They made more of Holmes's heretical bad sportsmanship than they ever had of his victories. It is easy to see, though, why Marciano's presence in the first rank of champions would irritate Holmes. Even though purists regard Marciano as a loutish and indifferent boxer, he was a world-historical puncher who took a punch to give one, the type that crowds love best. It also rankles that people seem not to hold it against Marciano that he did not have to fight great champions in their prime, or that he only defended his title six times. Furthermore, and crucially, Marciano was the last of the great White heavyweights, insanely popular not only with the boxing press, but also with the so-called White ethnics of Italian, Irish, and Eastern European descent who dominated the industrial social order of places like Brockton and Easton. If Marciano were from Easton and still alive, his shoes would never touch the street: every time he left the house, White-ethnic mobs of young men (with connect-the-dots mustaches, baseball caps, and baggy clothes) and old men (with full mustaches, logos of veterans' organizations on the caps, no baggies) would scoop him up and carry him around on their shoulders.

None of this is lost on Holmes. In the lobby of L&D Holmes Plaza, there is a "Wall of Fame" hung with handsomely mounted photographs of boxers. Some of the pictures are inscribed with a congratulatory note and signature. These inscriptions have in common a guileless tone of summer-

camp friendliness ("To my friend," "Take good care of yourself") and a tendency to assure Larry Holmes of his place in boxing history: "To a great champion" (Tony Zale and Jack "Kid" Berg); "Your the greatest" (Willie Pep); "To Larry with sincere wishes to a great champion" (Billy Soose, who adds his own credentials: "Retired middle weight champion of the world"). Petey Hayes says it most baldly: "You can be classified with the great champions of all times." There are, of course, several photographs of Black and Hispanic fighters on the wall, but none of them bears an inscription assuring Holmes of his greatness. (Alexis Arguello reminds him to "be a good son," though.) The wall, then, exudes a soft chorus of White-ethnic voices, all telling Holmes that he deserves a monument of his own. In a town full of sports-obsessed White ethnics who do not like Holmes as much as he thinks they ought to, these voices offer authoritative counterpoint from the experts.

At least in his relationship to Easton, though, Holmes may be trying to buck historical forces that run deep in the community's fabric. The local resentment he perceives from Eastonians can be seen as an aspect of a more general historical grievance related to Easton's narrative of decline. As in the story of boxing's decline, the 1950s is the beginning of the end in the town's historical memory. Easton's narrative of decline enjoys a semiofficial status, informing as it does the city's comprehensive plan for downtown redevelopment. "Downtown [Easton] has stayed much the same over the past 40 years," says the consultants' report on which the city's plan is based, "but the world around it has changed. The dominance of the automobile, hence suburban shopping centers and malls, is not expected to abate."<sup>44</sup> The same postindustrial transformation—condensed by Liebling in the figure of the television, and by the consultants in that of the automobile—which caught up with the sweet science in the 1950s has been tough on Easton as well. Suburbanization of capital and population, deindustrialization of the older central cities, contraction of the manufacturing sector and expansion of the service sector, a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of the social and political landscape, the succession of ethnic and racial neighborhood orders during an age of interlocking South-to-North and city-to-suburb migrations—all these processes have diminished the town and its way of life as they were during the industrial golden age. However, no clearly defined new order has emerged to replace the old. Easton still conforms in significant ways to the high-industrial template

that evolved in the Midwest and Northeast before World War II: White ethnics dominate the population, 70 percent of the city's housing units were built before 1940, and jobs that involve making and fixing things still command special respect. City planners hope to profit from tourism—to make downtown Easton “a destination again” in a decentralized age—by enhancing and exploiting the “historical” value of the industrial order's surviving elements. The story of Easton's decline, as retold by its planners, points toward a future in which the old neighborhood and the plant will attract tourists to the coal-and-steel belt the way chin beards and horse-drawn buggies attract them to the nearby Amish country.

Seen in the light of this transformation, Holmes personifies aspects of postwar history with which many people in Easton have not made their peace. He is a wealthy man in a town that used to be more prosperous, an agent and proponent of postindustrial redevelopment in an industrial town, and a Black Southerner come North into a White-ethnic preserve during the great postwar migrations of people and capital. That Holmes has come to prominence via a morally and pugilistically virtuous ring style that bespeaks prewar and pretelevision antecedents—a throwback to the boxing culture of the industrial era—only suggests an irony at his expense. Most of the people who follow the fights, or at least the heavyweights, in the Age of Tyson are not ready to appreciate Holmes either. He cannot win either of his two historical battles until the town's culture refits itself to the historical moment or until the transitional era he represents in boxing history acquires new significance.

In August 1995, a rumor circulated in the press that Easton was planning to erect a statue of Holmes in the town's central square, at a cost of \$150,000. Officials in City Hall quickly scotched the rumor, and Holmes himself told an interviewer that, while the statue was “a great idea,” he understands “what is going on in the city of Easton. . . . They don't have time to worry about a statue for Larry Holmes.” When asked if he might put up the money himself, as ex-mayor Sal Panto had suggested, Holmes said, “If I spent \$150,000 on a statue of myself, that means to me, ‘Larry Holmes, you've got a fucking big head.’ . . . I don't want people to think that I think I'm better than them.” He wanted to sound like a man who was satisfied with what he had: “I'm just getting finished with one project. . . . And I have a street named after me. I'm the happiest man in the world.”<sup>45</sup>



Then, since he was in training for his next fight (which he won), he went to the gym and got back to work on his own monument.

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"The ring is a continuum with fixed values and built-in cultural patterns, like Philadelphia or the world of Henry James," observes Liebling the aphorist.<sup>6</sup> In a sense, he is right: Holmes the aging scientist lost to McCall the younger free-swinger—a reduced but recognizable restatement of the principles enacted by Moore and Marciano forty years earlier. Before the fight, Holmes even intoned Moore's classicist mantra: "McCall has a good chin, but if you hit him right. . . ." The processes of art are indeed self-renewing. On the other hand, putting Liebling in conversation with Holmes shows the ring's values and patterns of meaning to be anything but fixed; they alter and shift under pressure from the historical moment and the observer's perspective. What Liebling sees in the ring overlaps with what Holmes takes from it, but most of what each knows lies outside the zone of overlap.

Liebling and Holmes have led me on a long, meandering path, into matters of literary form and postindustrial transformation, in finding my way to the ring from College Hill and tracing the pattern of the meanings that spread out from the ring. Both of them, though, offer good models of purposeful meandering. Liebling made the "labyrinthian digression" an element of his style—wedded to a mixture of registers, breadth of allusion, and juxtaposition of boxing and "culture." The point was always to delineate his path to the ring in order to show what meanings he was prepared to find there. Holmes, for his part, now bangs directly at his opponent for only a few seconds in each round, whiling away the rest of the time in apparent digressions from scoring—clinches, sessions of resting on the ropes, stretches of purely defensive blocking and slipping—in which he wears the other fighter down and lays the groundwork for exploiting another opening. The point is always to win the fight and thereby to acquire in the ring the money and acclaim it takes to place himself advantageously in the world beyond it.

If we pay attention to the significant forms of their work, stylists like Liebling and Holmes lead us by branching paths into those traditions—of fighting, of writing, of urbanism—that join the ring to the social and tex-

tual worlds that contain it, present to past, quarterlies to dailies, College Hill to Easton. "There is still a kick in style," concluded Heywood Broun on the occasion of classicist Benny Leonard's defeat of slugger Rocky Kansas in 1922, "and tradition carries a nasty wallop."<sup>47</sup>

### Notes

Thanks to Larry Holmes, Dick Lovell, and Art Statum, who were generous with their time and opinions in interviews; John O'Keefe, for material on redevelopment in downtown Easton; and John Mosedale, who once loaned my brother *The Sweet Science*.

- 1 In late 1995, the Fox Network began to experiment with occasional prime-time matches on free television, a series built around Mike Tyson's return to the ring and his effort to unify the heavyweight championship.
- 2 A. J. Liebling, *The Sweet Science* (New York, 1982 [1956]); and *A Neutral Corner: Boxing Essays by A. J. Liebling*, ed. Fred Warner and James Barbour (San Francisco, 1990).
- 3 Budd Schulberg, *Sparring with Hemingway and Other Legends of the Fight Game* (Chicago, 1995), 35.
- 4 For reviews of boxing literature, each of which says as much about its author's path to the ring as it does about the literature, see Schulberg, *Sparring with Hemingway*, esp. 187-90; Gerald Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, NJ, 1994), esp. 5-45; Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City, NY, 1987), esp. 26-28, 50-62; Tom Sawyer, *Noble Art: An Artistic and Literary Celebration of the Old English Prize Ring* (London, 1989); and Arthur Krystal, "Ifs, Ands, and Butts: The Literary Sensibility at Ringside," *Harper's* (June 1987): 63-67. An excellent book on boxing that confines itself to what the fight world knows is Thomas Hauser, *The Black Lights* (New York, 1986), an account of the long and tortuous path to the ring taken by Billy Costello as he prepared to defend his super-lightweight title against Saoul Mamby, who has in latter years joined Larry Holmes's crew of seconds.
- 5 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC, 1993 [1963]), 54, 171.
- 6 A. J. Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," in *Sweet Science*, 295.
- 7 For details of Liebling's life and his various autobiographical glosses on it, see Raymond Sokolov's excellent biography *Wayward Reporter: The Life of A. J. Liebling* (New York, 1980).
- 8 Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," 288.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 300-301.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 293.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 301. Moore concluded in retrospect that he had indeed hit Marciano right and that Marciano was dazed and ready to be knocked out, but that an overexcited or perhaps more darkly motivated referee saved Marciano; see Archie Moore and Leonard B. Pearl, *Any Boy Can: The Archie Moore Story* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1971), 85-88.
- 13 Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," 301.
- 14 Oates, *On Boxing*, 26.

- 15 Ibid., 53. Oates admires and quotes from George Garrett's essay "My One-Eyed Coach," probably the sharpest and most concise use of boxing to meditate on writing and reading; see *Reading the Fights*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates and Daniel Halpern (New York, 1990), 253-58.
- 16 A. J. Liebling, "The Men in the Agbadas," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 192; and "Ad Lib," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 148.
- 17 Liebling, "Ad Lib," 148; and "An Artist Seeks Himself," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 85-86.
- 18 Liebling, "Artist Seeks Himself," 84.
- 19 A. J. Liebling, "A Blow for Austerity," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 118.
- 20 A. J. Liebling, "Anti-Poetry Night," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 213.
- 21 Ibid., 222.
- 22 A. J. Liebling, "Poet and Pedagogue," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 164.
- 23 Budd Schulberg's novel *The Harder They Fall* (New York, 1947) is narrated by just such a child of the middle class, who wants to write a great boxing novel but earns his keep writing press releases for fight-fixing mobsters.
- 24 A. J. Liebling, "Introduction," in *Sweet Science*, 8.
- 25 Ibid., 12.
- 26 John Ford passed that judgment on him in his introduction to a collection of pieces from Egan's journal; see *Boxiana*, ed. John Ford (London, 1976), 5.
- 27 Liebling, "Introduction," 10-11.
- 28 Fred Warner, "Afterword," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 244-45.
- 29 Liebling's books include *They All Sang: From Tony Pastor to Rudy Vallée* (by Edward J. Marks, as told to A. J. Liebling [1934]); *Back Where I Came From* (1938); *The Road Back to Paris* (1944); *The Telephone Booth Indian* (1944); *La République du Silence/The Republic of Silence* (edited with Eugene Jay Sheffer [1946, 1947]); *The Wayward Pressman* (1947); *Mink and Red Herring: The Wayward Pressman's Casebook* (1949); *Chicago: The Second City* (1952); *The Honest Rainmaker: The Life and Times of Colonel John R. Stingo* (1953); *Normandy Revisited* (1958); *The Press* (1961); *Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris* (1962); *The Jollity Building* (1962); *The Most of A. J. Liebling* (1963); and *Liebling at The New Yorker: Uncollected Essays* (edited by James Barbour and Fred Warner [1994]).
- 30 Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," 289.
- 31 A. J. Liebling, *Mollie and Other War Pieces* (New York, 1964), 286.
- 32 See Oates, *On Boxing*, 53; and Early, *Culture of Bruising*, 12, 20-21.
- 33 Oates, *On Boxing*, 116.
- 34 Art Statum, interview by author, Easton, PA, 18 April 1995.
- 35 Holmes is quoted from his remarks at a press conference in Easton on 21 March 1995 and from an interview by the author on 26 April 1995.
- 36 A. J. Liebling, "Boxing with the Naked Eye," in *Sweet Science*, 17.
- 37 Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," 306.
- 38 See Oates, *On Boxing*, 53; and Early, *Culture of Bruising*, 12, 20-21. Early can think of no more cutting thing to say of Ishmael Reed's essay "The Fourth Ali" than that Reed, "a black intellectual," writes like Liebling, a "white boxing writer."
- 39 Liebling, "Introduction," 2.

- 40 Nat Fleischer, *50 Years at Ringside* (New York, 1958), 274-75.
- 41 Liebling, "Introduction," 3.
- 42 For another version of this argument, see Randy Roberts, "The Wide World of Muhammad Ali: The Politics and Economics of Televised Boxing," in *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, ed. Elliot J. Gorn (Urbana, 1995), esp. 28-31, 38-39. Roberts draws upon the wisdom of fight manager Jack "Doc" Kearns, who, like Liebling and Fleischer, argued that television was bad for boxing.
- 43 Fleischer, *50 Years*, 274.
- 44 Abeles Phillips Preiss & Shapiro, Inc., and Norman Mintz Associates, "A Strategy to Make Downtown Easton a Destination" (report submitted to the Easton Economic Development Corporation and the City of Easton, October 1993), 12.
- 45 Dave Boyer, "No False Idol for the Champ," *Easton Express-Times*, 1 September 1995, B: 1.
- 46 A. J. Liebling, "The University of Eighth Avenue," in Warner and Barbour, eds., *Neutral Corner*, 19.
- 47 Quoted in Liebling, "Ahab and Nemesis," 288.