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Pugilism and Poetry: Guillaume Apollinaire, Arthur Cravan and the Poète-Boxeur

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**PUGILISM AND POETRY: GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE,
ARTHUR CRAVAN AND THE POÈTE-BOXEUR**

by

AUSTIN HANCOCK

PREVIOUS DEGREES

**BACHELORS IN FRENCH STUDIES, WAGNER COLLEGE
BACHELORS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, WAGNER COLLEGE**

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The black boxers who fled the United States to Paris in the beginning of the 20th century were a true sensation among the city's avant-garde, and of all the artists and litterateurs gathered around the rings of the Parisian boxing scene, two champions of the poetic world stand out: Guillaume Apollinaire and Arthur Cravan. For these two poets who embraced the fraternal bond which has long existed between pugilist and lyricist, the noble art came to have a unique impact both upon their poetic works and how they defined themselves as poets. By putting these two poetic heavyweights head-to-head, this thesis explores the poetry and persona of the *poète-boxeur*.

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Introduction

The subject of this thesis is Guillaume Apollinaire and Arthur Cravan's shared fascination with boxing and pugilism's metaphoric value in relation to each poet's life and work. Literature's fascination with the noble art dates back to antiquity, and, as *la boxe anglaise* was introduced to Paris by several great African-American boxers seeking refuge in France from the racism of the United-States, the city's literary elite was no exception. As the sports magazine *La boxe et les boxeurs* reported in 1911 "Les endroits où l'on boxe continuent de plus en plus à être fréquentés par l'élite de la capitale...les écrivains sont maintenant légion."¹ According to Joyce Carol Oates in her essay *On Boxing*, "Each boxing match is a story without words... this doesn't mean there is no text or language, that it is somehow "brute," "primitive," "inarticulate," only that the text is improvised in action; the language a dialogue between the boxers of the most refined sort."² It therefore comes as no surprise that literary greats like Colette and Cocteau gravitated towards the ring where they could witness the work of their muscular counterparts: Johnson, Langford and McVey.

Of the dozens of litterateurs turned boxing enthusiasts who could be found in the crowds gathered around the ring, two of the era's champions stand apart: Guillaume Apollinaire and Arthur Cravan. As Claude Meunier examines in his essay *Ring Noir : Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (1992), these poets considered the boxer to be a kindred spirit and wanted to "partager le même sort que les boxeurs et comparer à bon

¹ *La boxe et les boxeurs*, December 19th 1911 cited in Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir: Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars Et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 46.

² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial 1994), 11.

compte leur destin tragique à celui des cogneurs.”³ Although the poet and the boxer may seem like an unlikely pair, Meunier explains the roots of their kinship in the following terms ;

Poètes et boxeurs partagent depuis toujours le même sort éphémère, quand un seul coup sépare le travail quotidien sombre et épuisant, dans la salle de boxe ou dans l’atelier, de la gloire et de la lumière, de la reconnaissance par les pairs. Un coup, un vers et tout peut basculer : l’obéissance bornée de l’artiste ou du champion à sa destinée rêvée et vacillante.⁴

This long-standing connection between boxer and poet took on a unique metaphoric value for Apollinaire and Cravan who embraced their bond to the boxer as few poets ever have. Not content to simply watch the exploits of their semblables in the ring, these poets metaphorically (and in Cravan’s case literally) laced up the gloves themselves as the noble art guided their pursuit of a new poetics of the 20th century. This thesis therefore examines the metaphoric value of the boxer to Apollinaire’s conception of poetry and the poetic métier and then further explores how these same pugilistic aspects are present in the work and identity of a man who truly was a poète-boxeur, Arthur Cravan. Apollinaire’s fascination with boxing manifests itself in the pugilistic innovations of *L’esprit nouveau* which united the spirit and physical form of his poetry as never before, as well as within his conception of the pugilist as a masculine prototype for the poet of the modern era. Arthur Cravan then takes this union between poet and boxer even further by using a visceral poetic style to achieve his own union of the lyrical and the physical form, and by forming his own identity as a *poète-boxeur* which extends beyond masculinity to machismo.

³ Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir : Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris : Plon, 1992), 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

Historical Background: Poetry on the Ropes and Renaissance in the Ring

Before moving on to a deeper analysis of the relationship between boxing and the poetry and the poetic crafts of Apollinaire and Cravan, we must first briefly examine the historical nexus between boxing and poetry at the beginning of the 20th century. Only thirteen years after the passing of Victor Hugo, the death of Stéphane Mallarmé struck yet another blow to the world of French poetry. Mallarmé, who in 1895 had warned of a “crise de vers,” had passed just three years later at the age of fifty-six and without his leadership some wondered how the crisis could ever be resolved. As the *Revue des Beaux-Arts et des Lettres* lamented :

Oh ! que les morts vont vite ! en quelques années, tous ceux que nous aimions, les voici emportés! Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Théodore de Banville, Leconte de Lisle, Edmond de Goncourt, et César Franck, et Gounod, et puis Verlaine, et puis Rops ! et, dans ceux de notre génération, Jean Lombard, Hennequin, Ephraïm Mikhaël ! et puis maintenant, lui le dernier resté, voilà qu'il s'en va aussi ! Et ceux sur lesquels on avait tant compté pour recevoir le flambeau des mains des ancêtres et le porter devant nous, l'adorable Laforgue et le divin Rimbaud, comme trop aimés des dieux, ils sont les premiers partis !⁵

Worse still, poetry found its leadership struck down in a world that was constantly changing. As science and technology continued to advance at an ever quickening pace, poetry seemed on the verge of becoming a relic of the past rendered useless by the march of progress. Guillaume Apollinaire's *Le poète assassiné* dramatizes the threat posed by modernity to poetry through the character of “le chimiste-agronome,” Horace Tograth, who literally declares war on poetry. Using telegraphs and telephones to spread his message across the world, Tograth declares:

⁵ Fagus, “Stéphane Mallarmé,” *Revue des Beaux-Arts et des Lettres*, October 1, 1898, <http://www.cynthia3000.info/fagus/2010/11/la-mort-de-mallarme/> (Accessed September 24, 2013).

Monde, choisis entre ta vie et la poésie; si l'on ne prend pas de mesures sérieuses contre elle, c'est fait de la civilisation. Tu n'hésiteras point. Dès demain commencera l'ère nouvelle. La poésie n'existera plus, on brisera des lyres trop lourdes pour les vieilles inspirations. On massacrera les poètes.⁶

Meanwhile, since the mid-nineteenth century, boxing, which Jennifer Groltz describes as “that other always-purportedly-about-to-die past-time”⁷ had faced in reality the same persecution by modernity that Apollinaire had imagined striking poetry. As Kasia Boddy observes, in England the appropriately named New Police were cracking down on the prize-fighting rings that had been frequented by the royal family only thirty years earlier. As England and France entered peaceful relations, the sport which once symbolized English military power began to be seen as archaic and unnecessary in an increasingly civil world. The United States served briefly as a refuge for bare-knuckle brawlers who had been run out of England, but this fistic sanctuary was not to last. Beginning with Massachusetts in 1849 and New York in 1859, the prizefighting ring would be illegal in nearly every major American city by the end of the century.⁸ Boddy further notes that “the era of the great boxers also seemed to be over.”⁹ As the great fighters of the era began dying: “Gentleman John” Jackson in 1845; Tom Cribb in 1848; Pierce Egan in 1849, and Tom Spring in 1851 the tone of boxing journalism became, like the *Revue des Beaux-Arts et Lettres*, “resolutely elegiac.”¹⁰

By the time of Jack Johnson's arrival in Paris in July of 1913 however, boxing had made a comeback for the ages. Once again we turn to Boddy who observes:

⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le poète assassiné* (Paris : Bibliothèque des curieux, 1916), 114.

⁷ Jennifer Groltz, “On (Poetry and) Boxing,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2012), <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/we-can-be-heroes-poetry-at-the-olympics-part-2/> (Accessed September 17, 2013).

⁸ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

If “American” translated into “the urban”, and “the modern”, “boxing” increasingly featured as a synecdoche for all of these. This would have seemed absurd in, for example, the mid-nineteenth century, when prize-fighting was viewed as a lingering anachronism. But in the early twentieth century, boxers are frequently found in lists, assemblages, collages and films that claimed to represent cities, Americanism or modernity.¹¹

Pugilism’s return to relevance can first of all be attributed to a change in the form of the sport itself. To this end, the first chapter of this thesis analyzes the changing pugilistic style of the early 20th century in comparison to the innovations in poetic style and form made by Apollinaire and Cravan. We begin with Apollinaire, whose *esprit nouveau* contains astonishing parallels with boxing as it demands that the poet hone his craft “dans la surprise”¹² just as the boxers described by Oates “will bring to the fight everything that is themselves, and everything will be exposed – including secrets about themselves they cannot fully realize.”¹³ A pugilistic spirit pervades Apollinaire’s poetry, and he himself acknowledges the boxer’s role as both muse and semblable in *Le poète assassiné*.¹⁴ It is hence fitting, that through a close reading of Apollinaire’s calligramme “Terrible Boxeur” this chapter probes the depths of the connection between *l’esprit nouveau* and the noble art. After examining how Apollinaire’s poetic methods take their inspiration for boxing, we turn our examination towards former amateur champion of France and “le poète aux cheveux les plus courts du monde,”¹⁵ Arthur Cravan. Through a blend of poetry, boxing, brutal criticism and the occasional gun-shot, Cravan’s writing and performances of “*The Very Boxe*” brought many elements of *l’esprit nouveau* to life, and furthermore allowed the poète-boxeur to practice his own uniquely fistic poetic style.

¹¹ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 225.

¹² Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 949.

¹³ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 9.

¹⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le poète assassiné* (Paris, Bibliothèque des curieux, 1916).

¹⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 87.

In addition to the changing nature of the sport itself, boxing's renaissance was also due to the rise of a new, seemingly invincible group of Black champions whose presence in the ring transformed the perception of the boxer as a cultural icon. A second chapter therefore turns towards the cultural significance of these boxers and its influence on their conception of the poetic *métier* and the identity of the modern poet. As Christopher E. Forth examines in *Masculinity in the Modern West*, in response to a crisis in masculinity caused by the increasingly civilized modern world, there rose a belief in the power of a "dose of primitivity needed to inoculate men against modern softness."¹⁶ The boxing ring, which according to Petrine Archer-Shaw creates a space where "it was possible for savage and civilized to meet,"¹⁷ provides a sure source of this remedy and the Black boxer's primitive machismo seemed to not only weather the civilizing effect of modernity, but to master it as well. Jack Johnson, the greatest of the era's Black champions, was equally at home in the ring, on the dance floor or behind the wheel of a fast automobile, and his exploits inside and outside of the ring both enraged the establishment and endeared him to the avant-garde. By imitating icons like Johnson, Apollinaire and Cravan hoped to gain a similar cultural status. The negrophilia of these two poets is hence rooted in their desire that the modern poet resemble the black boxer: an outsider who, as Apollinaire describes in *L'esprit nouveau*, "dominera le monde entier"¹⁸ through his ability to blend the primitive and the modern.

Acutely aware of the effeminizing effects of modernity, Apollinaire hence exalts a connection to physicality and primitive masculinity, for which the indefatigable masculinity of the black boxer provides an example, as being essential to the poet of the 20th century. For

¹⁶ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 141.

¹⁷ Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 46.

¹⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 943.

Cravan this masculinity is elevated to a type of machismo as he turns the literary world into a boxing ring and uses his fistic criticism to prove his dominance over his rivals. As Cravan seeks to prove himself the undisputed champion of the avant-garde, the poet cultivates his poetic legend much in the same way Oates describes the boxer's cultivation of a "self in the ring,"¹⁹ but an undercurrent of masochism exists in Cravan's poetry which reveals that the life of the poet, like that of the boxer described by Oates "is primarily about being, and not giving, hurt."²⁰

Apollinaire and Cravan did in fact quarrel with each other as they vied for supremacy of the Parisian literary scene. Cravan first provoked Apollinaire in the fourth issue of his review *Maintenant* by calling him a "juif"²¹ as well as by taking a shot at Apollinaire's former fiancée, Marie Laurencin, and Bertrand Lacerelle observes that Apollinaire shot back a low blow by refusing to qualify Cravan as a poet in his response to Cravan's instigations.²² It is perhaps therefore inevitable that over the course of our analysis we shall return to this confrontation and ask ourselves which poet emerges victorious. Boxing is after all, based on the rule that there can only be one man left standing. However, as Oates observes; "Most fights, however fought, end with an embrace between the boxers after the final bell – a gesture of mutual respect and apparent affection,"²³ and this fraternal spirit is also evident between these two poets as well. For Apollinaire, the noble art and its champions served as models for his poetry and poetic identity, and Arthur Cravan not only shared Apollinaire's admiration for these pugilists, but furthermore became a real-life poète-boxeur himself.

¹⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²¹ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 73.

²² Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan Précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 24.

²³ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 32.

Chapter I: The Poetry of the Noble Art

“Styles make fights”

This boxing adage was most famously made by Muhammad Ali’s trainer Angelo Dundee in regards to the dazzling ringmanship of his young fighter. Dundee added “perhaps the most important part of training is the development of a fighter’s style, one perfected by long hours in the gym.”²⁴ Styles make poetry as well, and the cultivation of a poet’s style is undoubtedly the most important aspect of his craft. The ultimate goal of both boxer and poet is the expression of themselves, of their style, within and in spite of the limitations and rules inherent to their art which are in fact necessary to style’s creation. Style is not a question of what but of how, and restricted to the use of either fists or language, the boxer and the poet must focus on the way with which they utilize their limited arsenal. As we shall examine, boxing’s return to prominence in the early 20th century was largely due to changes in the form and style of the sport. As poets determined to rise to the top of the literary world, Apollinaire and Arthur Cravan followed suit through stylistic innovations of a uniquely pugilistic nature.

A Transformation of Form: The Queensbury Rules and Poetic Structure

The roots of boxing’s return to relevance lie first and foremost in the creation of the Queensbury Rules, which transformed the unruly brawling of the prize-fighting ring into the more strategic and aesthetically pleasing noble art that we know today. Written by light-weight champion Arthur Chambers in 1866 and endorsed by the Marquess of Queensbury, John Sholto Douglas, the following year, the Queensbury Rules were designed to promote fair play within the

²⁴ Angelo Dundee, *My View from the Corner: A Life in Boxing* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 64.

ring. There would be no more wrestling, kicking or striking when an opponent was down. But the rules did nothing to lessen the violence of the ring; in fact the opposite is true. The deaths and serious brain trauma that afflict modern boxers were far less common in the days of bare-knuckle fighting. A fist breaks much more readily than a skull. It is therefore clear that the brutality and primitive force of the fight were not lost through the adoption of the Queensbury regulations; they were simply stylized within this framework and hence rendered more poetic. As Oates observes, without the presence of the referee, another introduction of the Queensbury rules, who enforces these restrictions “the spectacle of two men fighting each other unsupervised in an elevated ring would seem hellish, if not obscene – life rather than art.”²⁵

In a manner which would surely be familiar to any poet, the boxer now had to work against the restrictions of his noble art in order to find his glory. Perhaps the most important of these new restrictions was the introduction of a specific spatial and temporal structure upon the fight. As opposed to the ill defined dimensions of the prize fighting ring, all matches were now to be conducted within a twenty-four by twenty-four square foot ring and fighters were to be matched up according to their weight classes to insure a certain level of fair-play. Whereas the prizefight was one continuous contest “to the finish,”²⁶ under the Queensbury rules there would be a set number of 3 minute rounds that were each divided by a 1 minute rest period. The boxer’s art was now inseparable from the ring of the bell, which, combined with the percussive “smack” of the gloved punches that were now the only permitted form of attack, imbued boxing with a rhythmic aspect comparable to the falling of a poem’s syllables. Indeed, a boxing round is often

²⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 47.

²⁶ As Boddy observes, it should be noted that the “finish” of a prizefight was usually due to exhaustion rather than the K.O of a fighter. Like that of the boxing glove, the introduction of rounds actually augmented the violence of the ring by forcing the boxer to take his opponent out by force rather than fatigue. Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 92.

referred to as a *stanza*.²⁷ These rhythms are not at all however those of the Alexandrine which Mallarmé describes as “ce mécanisme rigide et puéril.”²⁸ As Angelo Dundee put it to Sugar Ray Leonard during his fight with Marvin Hagler “You gotta be smooth baby!”²⁹ or in rather poetic words of my former trainer Gary Stark Sr.; “You gotta play. If you just throw one-two, one-two you’re done. Mix it up! Bap. Bap. Bap. BOOM! BOOM!” Although a boxer may practice a certain combination a thousand times in the gym, his punches will be useless if his opponent can see them coming. He must therefore, as Oates describes, “be able to improvise mid-fight”³⁰ to surprise his opponent via what Jean Cocteau deems a “poésie active dans les syntaxes mystérieuses.”³¹ This unpredictable and active poetry was also practiced by Guillaume Apollinaire who, through the removal of all punctuation from his verses Guillaume found a unique way to escape the rigidity of poetic forms and render his syllabic combinations as unpredictable as the punches of a great boxer. Similarly pugilistic characteristics continue to present themselves as one examines his method of poetic creation.

L’esprit nouveau and the noble art

Apollinaire’s title ambitions are present from the very beginning of *L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes*, as he proclaims that, like the champions of the ring, *L’esprit nouveau* “dominera le monde entier.”³² Not only does the goal of *L’esprit nouveau* have a pugilistic ring to it however, but its methods do as well. Apollinaire first stresses that the poetry of *L’esprit nouveau*, does not intend to break completely away from that which came before it. Apollinaire writes:

²⁷ Boxrec Boxing Encyclopedia s.v. “stanza,” <http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Stanza> (accessed September 17, 2013).

²⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crise de vers” 1897, http://www.unidue.de/lyriktheorie/texte/1897_mallarme2.html (Accessed September 23, 2013).

²⁹ *The Superfight: Marvin Hagler vs. Sugar Ray Leonard, April 6th 1987* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz07y6FODRg> (Accessed September 24, 2013).

³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 77.

³¹ Jean Cocteau, “Un poème à l’encre noir” (1937) Cited in Elise Dürr, *Écrit dans les cordes*. (Paris : L’Eloquent, 2006), 57.

³² Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 943.

L'esprit nouveau qui s'annonce prétend avant tout hériter des classiques un solide bon sens, un esprit critique assuré, des vues d'ensemble sur l'univers et dans l'âme humaine, et le sens du devoir qui dépouille les sentiments et en limite ou plutôt en contient les manifestations.³³

Like boxing, which Roland Barthes deemed the most “janséniste”³⁴ of sports and which Pierce Egan first deemed the “Sweet Science of Bruising,”³⁵ the poetry of *L'esprit nouveau* therefore respects the rules of the craft and maintains a strong amount of discipline and rigor inherited from this sense of “devoir” of classical poetry. The poet of *L'esprit nouveau* will continue to hone his classical techniques: “L'assonance, l'allitération, aussi bien que la rime” whose importance Apollinaire deems “légitime,”³⁶ rather than swinging wildly with “paroles en liberté” like his less disciplined futurist contemporaries.

But like the boxer who must combine practiced skill with instantaneous improvisation in the ring, *l'esprit nouveau* also searches to find “de nouvelles expressions parfaitement légitimes”³⁷ within his poetry. Apollinaire echoes French heavyweight George Carpentier who deemed his “French style of boxing” a combination of “science” and unrestrained “ruggedness”³⁸ as he proclaims:

C'est pourquoi l'esprit nouveau se réclame avant tout de l'ordre et du devoir qui sont les grandes qualités classiques par quoi se manifeste le plus hautement l'esprit français, et il leur adjoint la liberté. Cette liberté et cet ordre qui se confondent dans l'esprit nouveau sont sa caractéristique et sa force.³⁹

³³ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 943.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1957), 4.

³⁵ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 944.

³⁶ Ibid., 944.

³⁷ Ibid., 945.

³⁸ George Carpentier, *My Methods* translated by F. Hurdman-Lucas (London: Athletic Publications 1947), 34.

³⁹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 946.

This force, like that of the boxer, stems from the ability to do the unexpected and to find new ways to work within the restrictions of one's art. The boxer and the poet will always be limited: one can only use his fists and the other can only use language, but both must improvise to use these limited tools in new ways. As Nietzsche said "All talent must unfold itself in fighting,"⁴⁰ be it against an opponent or the restrictions and limitations of one's art.

It should also be noted that the black boxers who fled to Paris in the early 20th century and inspired Apollinaire, were often ducked by their white counterparts because they could do things in the ring that whites could not. In fact, as Meunier notes, the color line was often drawn specifically around these boxers to keep their genius force away from white fighters.⁴¹ As Joyce Carol Oates describes, Jack Johnson defied the normally lumbering style of the heavyweight class because he was "as agile on his feet and as rapid with his hands as any lightweight."⁴² Furthermore, although Petrine Archer-Shaw observes that Blacks were often viewed as "Primitive,"⁴³ boxers like Johnson and Joe Jeannette were renowned for their scientific styles. This blend of (perceived) primitivism and science is at the heart of *L'esprit nouveau* which respects both the merits of regimented poetic order but also the savage value of "danses guerrières."⁴⁴

Not only do the poet of *L'esprit nouveau* and the boxer share a similar method of innovating within restriction, but they are also working towards a common goal: the revelation of an unknown truth. As Oates describes, boxers "are there to establish an absolute experience, a

⁴⁰ Cited in Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 9.

⁴¹ Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir : Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris : Plon, 1992), 32.

⁴² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 231.

⁴³ Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 11.

⁴⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 947.

public accounting of the outermost limits of their beings”⁴⁵ through the brutality of their sport. The same is true for the poet who works in a domain “plein de dangers”⁴⁶ in order to uncover the truth: “Il est tout étude de la nature extérieure et intérieure, il est tout ardeur pour la vérité.”⁴⁷ Boxer and poet are therefore both “hommes du vrai” who search to reveal a new truth which will be beautiful simply because it had previously been unknown: “Qui oserait dire que, pour ceux qui sont dignes de la joie, ce qui est nouveau ne soit pas beau?”⁴⁸

Poetry and boxing are beautiful simply because they reveal what had not been known before. Neither seeks to interpret reality, but rather to reveal a superior truth that lies beyond it, Oates’ observation that “Boxing’s claim is that it is superior to life in that it is ideally, superior to all accident” underlines an astonishing parallel between pugilism and the Surrealist movement to which *L’esprit nouveau* gave birth. Just as the poet of the *L’esprit nouveau* looks for inspiration in the real and the present, and “se contente souvent de recherches, d’investigations, sans se préoccuper de leur donner de signification lyrique,” what makes a fight compelling is not its outcome, but instead the unfolding of the fight itself and the truths this process reveals about the combatants. As Oates observes, “the Greatest” Muhammad Ali’s most important fight may have been his first loss to Joe Frazier during the course of which Ali, his skills diminished by the march of time, was revealed to have true “heart.”⁴⁹ Although matches are often invested with racial, economic and nationalistic symbolism, boxing, unlike war, is a never ending series of conflicts between two individual men and each combat reveals its own truth. As Oates writes:

⁴⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 8.

⁴⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 947.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 949.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 951.

⁴⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 223.

Boxing is only like boxing. For if you have seen five hundred boxing matches you have seen five hundred boxing matches and their common denominator, which certainly exists, is not of primary interest to you.⁵⁰

Apollinaire expresses a similar sentiment in *L'esprit nouveau* as he emphasizes that surprise, which is “le plus grand ressort nouveau,” contains a value unto itself:

Les savants scrutent sans cesse de nouveaux univers qui se découvrent à chaque carrefour de la matière, et il n’y aurait rien de nouveau sous le soleil. Pour le soleil peut-être. Mais pour les hommes !

Il y a mille et mille combinaisons naturelles qui n’ont jamais été composées... Même s’il est vrai qu’il n’ya rien de nouveau sous le soleil, *il ne se consent point à ne pas approfondir tout ce qui n’est pas nouveau sous le soleil*. Le bon sens est son guide et ce guide le conduit en des coins sinon nouveaux, du moins inconnus.⁵¹

Our analysis now turns to a close reading of one of Apollinaire’s calligrammes where the pugilistic nature of *L'esprit nouveau* finds itself incarnated in a short poem about a “Terrible Boxeur”⁵² as Apollinaire innovates within the restrictions of his craft in order to reveal an unknown truth about his subject, the boxer. But it is a truth that we have already begun to discover; that boxing and poetry are at their base the same art.

⁵⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 4.

⁵¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 949.

⁵² Guillaume Apollinaire. *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris : La Pléiade, 1956), 737.

L'esprit nouveau and Apollinaire's **Terrible Boxeur**



« Il lutte pour le rétablissement de l'esprit de l'initiative, pour la claire compréhension de son temps et pour ouvrir des vues nouvelles sur l'univers extérieur et intérieur qui ne soient point inférieures à celles que les savants de toutes catégories découvrent chaque jour et dont ils tirent des merveilles »

Guillaume Apollinaire, *L'esprit nouveau* 1912

The innovation of Apollinaire's "Terrible Boxeur"⁵³ is present before one has even begun to read; not only is it a poem, it is also a drawing. But this innovation is far from superficial; this new visual aspect works in concert with the poem's sonority to create a poem which strikes the reader in unexpected ways. The verse itself "Terrible Boxeur Boxant avec ses souvenirs et ses milles desirs" contains a directness and unity unto itself which reminds us of another writer who fancied himself a boxer: Ernest Hemingway. However, the straightforward nature of this short verse about an unknown boxer belies a surprising depth, which, as we will examine, incarnates *L'esprit nouveau* in its entirety.

We begin our examination with the boxer's face where the capital T of the word Terrible forms the thick brow of this boxer whose face, like many fighters who have taken too much

⁵³ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris : La Pléiade, 1956), 737.

punishment in the ring, is now literally of a terrible composition. Moving on through verse, the *unité sonore* of “Terrible Boxeur Boxant” strikes us in a way that is unexpected, but perfectly logical; Apollinaire uses the words “Boxeur” and “Boxant” to form the powerful and symmetrical arms of the boxer which makes the classic alliterative one-two punch of the verse all the more powerful. With the B as the mitted fingers and thumb, the o the hand and the x their laces, the boxer’s gloves themselves are actually made by the English word Box which, according to Jean-Paul Besse, itself struck the French poets like a punch: “Son nom étrange mais combien suggestif, si bref et percutant...rien n’exprime mieux ce jeu viril et dur que ces sons magnétiques à la sauvage et claire rudesse.”⁵⁴ Apollinaire’s poetic technique hence parallels the boxer’s technique perfectly. Beginning with his practiced classical techniques, which create an aurally effective verse, Apollinaire then freely improvises to use his words in a new and unexpected way on a visual level. These aural and visual effects merge and amplify each other in order to strike the reader with a combination he has never seen before and Apollinaire’s “Terrible Boxeur Boxant” gives the reader both a boxed ear and a black eye.

But to say that a “Terrible Boxeur” is “Boxant” is almost a pleonasm which would risk reducing the boxer to the level of a machine or an animal, were it not balanced out by the second hémistiche of the poem where the antithetical rhyme between “souvenirs” and “désirs” forms the boxers legs and creates both a visual and aural symmetry to match that of the boxer’s torso. These two contradictory words give the “Boxeur Boxant,” whose existence in the present is stressed by Apollinaire’s use of the *participe présent*, both a past and a present and explore the interior nature of the poem’s subject in response to the first half of the verse which studies the exterior and forms the boxer’s nude torso. Apollinaire cleverly ties these two 9 syllable

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Besse, *Les Boxeurs et les Dieux : L’esprit du ring dans l’art et la littérature* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1998), 19.

hemistiches of his eighteen syllable verse through a second use of alliteration. The two x sounds found in the first hémistiche: “Terrible Boxeur Boxant avec” set up a third formed by the last sound of the first verse, k, and the s first sound of the second hemistich; “ses souvenirs et ses mille désirs.” The first half of the verse which describes the present physical characteristics of the boxer is therefore linked to the second verse about the inner workings of the boxer that lie beneath his appearance by this final alliterative syllable which bridges the césure of the verse at a point of both poetic and literal *enjambement*.

Jean-Paul Besse writes “Mais dira-t-on quel intérêt y a-t-il à boxer? Le plus vieux du monde, et qui va de pair avec la conception de la vie de la plupart de nous : l’harmonie entre le corps et l’esprit qui engendre la beauté authentique.”⁵⁵ Apollinaire clearly writes for the same reasons as his calligramme finds the truthful harmony between the outer and inner natures of his subject. Furthermore, by using the words of his verse to create a physical form from his poem which is in perfect harmony with its spirit he has successfully achieved Besse pugilistic maxim that “Le corps doit dire l’âme.”⁵⁶ For Jean Prévost, this same union of muscle, heart, energy and spirit is why “La boxe est le sport qui laisse une place au génie,”⁵⁷ and this same unity is what constitutes the genius of this poem.

The “Terrible Boxeur” of the poem is therefore Apollinaire himself who strikes the reader with his own one-two punch by using language in both traditional and new ways, visually and aurally to reveal these inner and outer truths. *L’esprit nouveau* which he writes is, like the boxer’s leg, founded upon memories of other poetic traditions. In his essay *Journée du pugiliste*, Jean Prévost writes of how for Pierre, the boxer of his story, “le souvenir de tout ce qu’il pouvait

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Besse, *Les Boxeurs et les Dieux : L’esprit du ring dans l’art et la littérature* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1998), 44.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁷ Jean Prévost, *Les plaisirs des sports : essais sur le corps humain*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1925), 68.

combiner d'attaques rappelle dans tout son corps l'aisance et la verve,"⁵⁸ and for Apollinaire these "souvenirs" serve the same purpose as they remind him of poetry's past achievements and the merits of the traditional techniques that are on display in this poem. Apollinaire also desires to find what is new, and to do so he must innovate and improvise within his poetry, all while using the same words which are the poet's only tools. Pierre is able to find a new force when he believes he has pushed his tool, his body, to the limit: "Le corps humain est plein de surprises et quand nous savons toutes nos forces épuisées, il nous en fournit que nous ne connaissons pas,"⁵⁹ and Apollinaire finds the same surprising force as, having already used conventional poetic techniques to their maximum effect, he finds a new force within language which had before been unknown.

Sam McVey and Croniamantal's poetry lesson

That the boxer of Apollinaire's calligramme should be an image of the poet himself makes perfect sense given the pugilistic nature of *L'esprit nouveau*, but it may come as a surprise to find out just how important the figure of the boxer is to Apollinaire's poetry. In fact, Apollinaire himself points to the pugilist as the inspiration behind his most celebrated poetic style. According to Michel Décaudin, Apollinaire's *Le poète assassiné* is a work of both "Autobiographie et mythe"⁶⁰ in which Apollinaire weaves details from his own life into the tale of his hero, Croniamantal; a poet scorned during his time but who becomes posthumously known the world over and who "Cent vingt-trois villes dans sept pays sur quatre continents se disputent l'honneur d'avoir vu naître."⁶¹ Croniamantal hence accomplishes the world domination prophesized by *L'esprit nouveau*, and, looking towards how this poet came to develop his poetic

⁵⁸ Jean Prévost, *Les plaisirs des sports : essais sur le corps humain*. (Paris : Gallimard, 1925), 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁰ Michel Décaudin, Preface of *Le poète assassiné* (Paris : Gallimard, 1979), 7.

⁶¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le poète assassiné* (Paris : Gallimard, 1912), 21.

style, we find that he learns a crucial lesson in lyricism through a boxer. As the poet is still looking to develop his poetic technique which already combines both vers libre and traditional forms, he happens upon a living statue of the poet Francis Coppée with whom he hopes to learn about the nature of rhyme:

« Cher maître comme vous voilà sombre »

Il répondit courtoisement :

« C'est que ma statue est de bronze. Elle m'expose constamment à des méprises. Ainsi, l'autre jour,

Passant auprès de moi le nègre Sam Mac Vea

Voyant que j'ai plus noir que lui affligea »

« Voyez comme ses vers sont adroits. Je suis en train de perfectionner la rime. Avez-vous remarqué comme le distique que je vous ai déclamé rime bien pour l'œil.

- En effet de Croniamantal, car on prononce *Sam Mac Vi*, comme on dit *Shakespeare*.

- Voici quelque chose qui fera mieux votre affaire, continua la statue :

Passant auprès de moi le nègre Sam Mac Vea

Sur le socle aussitôt ces trois noms écrivit

« Il y a là un raffinement qui doit vous séduire, c'est la rime riche pour l'oreille

- Vous m'éclairez sur la rime, dit Croniamantal. Et je suis bien heureux, cher maître, de vous avoir rencontré en passant.⁶²

A correlation is made between boxer and poet as McVey is put into comparison with Shakespeare: another champion of an Anglo-Saxon tradition with something to teach to French poets. The author of *Passant* is further likened to McVey, because they are both afflicted by the same blackness.

With a record of 62-14-11 with 46 KOs, McVey was popularly known as “Le Napoléon Noir sur le ring”⁶³ because, much like Mike Tyson, the heavyweight's relatively small stature belied enormous punching power. It therefore makes perfect sense that the passing of McVey

⁶² Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le poète assassiné* (Paris : Gallimard, 1912), 95.

⁶³ Monte Cox, “Sam McVey the Mike Tyson of his Time” <http://coxscorner.tripod.com/mcvey.html> (Accessed September 21, 2013).

serves as the inspiration for Coppées verses in which he demonstrates to Croniamantal that a rhyme can please either the eye; “Sam Mac Ve/a/affligea” or the ear; “Sam Mac Ve/a écrit.” In calligrammes like the “Terrible Boxeur,” Apollinaire combines these visual and auditory pleasures to create poems that, though they may be seem rather small, unite spirit and physical form to a surprising and powerful effect.

Arthur Cravan and *La Very Boxe*, the Terrible Boxeur incarnate?

Writing to André Breton in his *Lettres de Guerre*, Jacques Vaché proclaimed Arthur Cravan to be the living incarnation of *l'esprit nouveau* only wished for by Apollinaire, and, given the importance of pugilism to Apollinaire's poetic methods, Cravan's experience in the ring supports Vaché's conclusion.⁶⁴ Cravan is far less renowned for his verses than he is for the sensational events of his life; he scandalized the avant-garde of both Paris and New York with his uniquely provocative literary conferences and is the only poet in history to have ever gone toe-to-toe with a truly great boxer like Jack Johnson, but as Apollinaire acknowledges in *L'esprit nouveau* that “On peut être poète dans tous les domaines: il suffit que l'on soit aventureux et que l'on aille à la découverte.”⁶⁵ Cravan, as a man whose travels ranged from Australia to Nova Scotia, certainly meets these requirements. Moreover, Cravan's performances of *La very boxe* at these literary and pugilistic exhibitions fully embrace Apollinaire's declaration that the poet will have “le monde entier, ses rumeurs et ses apparences, la pensée et le langage humain, le chant, la danse, tous les arts et tous les artifices”⁶⁶ at his disposition. Through these new poetic methods,

⁶⁴ Referenced from Bertrand Lacerelle's. *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 35. Lacerelle is himself in agreement with Vaché.

⁶⁵ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 950.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 945.

Cravan, who declared himself to have “mille âmes,”⁶⁷ gives poetry a new physical form just as Apollinaire has done through his “Terrible Boxeur” of “mille désirs.”

The prospectus distributed for Cravan’s fourth “conference-spectacle” in Paris on July 5th, reads as follows:

VENEZ VOIR –Salle des Sociétés savantes – 8, rue Danton – Le Poète – ARTHUR CRAVAN –
(neveu d’Oscar Wilde) – champion de boxe, poids 125 kg. Taille 2 m – LE CRITIQUE BRUTAL
– PARLERA – BOXERA – DANSERA – la nouvelle « Boxing-Dance » - LA VERY BOXE –
avec le concours du sculpteur MAC ADAMS – autres numéros excentriques – NEGRE.

BOXEUR. DANSEUR. – dimanche 5 juillet 9 h. du soir prix des places : 5fr., 3fr. ou 2fr.⁶⁸

It seems odd that, although Cravan is announced first and foremost as a poet whose status as litterateur is legitimized by that of his uncle, there is no mention of poetry among the scheduled topics of this gathering that appears to be more spectacle than conference. The poet will instead treat the audience to an exhibition of boxing, dancing and a mysterious mix of the two known only as “La Very Boxe” which is rendered all the more intriguing by its apparent foreignness. However, as Apollinaire states in *L’esprit nouveau* these other two rhythmic arts are themselves poetic manifestations of what Apollinaire calls “cet art suprême qui est la vie,”⁶⁹ and the poet should not confine his creation purely to the page. As Apollinaire writes:

Au contraire, s’il veut par exemple amplifier l’art de la danse et tenter une chorégraphie dont les baladins ne se borneraient point aux entrechats...c’est là une recherche qui n’a rien d’absurde, dont les sources populaires se retrouvent chez tous les peuples où les danses guerrières, par exemple, sont presque toujours agrémentées de cris sauvages.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot. (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 52.

⁶⁸ Cited in Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 102.

⁶⁹ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 949.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 947.

From Robert DeNiro's Jake LaMotta shadow-boxing to the Intermezzo of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in the opening credits of *Raging Bull*⁷¹, to Muhammad Ali's spectacular "Ali Shuffle," such "dances guerrières" abound in boxing, and, when practiced at its highest levels, the sport itself resembles a masterpiece of choreography that can elicit cries from the audience of uncommon savagery. One can be sure that Cravan's own performance of the *Very Boxe* advertised above must have drawn several cries from the audience and Cravan himself threw in his own vocal outbursts as well. As Paris-Midi reported the morning following the conference:

Cet Arthur Cravan... a parlé, dansé, boxé. Avant de parler il a tiré quelques coups de pistolet puis a débité, tantôt riant, tantôt sérieux les plus énormes insanités contre l'art et la vie. Il a fait l'éloge des gens de sport, supérieurs aux artistes... Il lisait debout en se dandinant, et de temps à autre lançait à la salle d'énergiques injures. Dans la salle on paraissait goûter cette façon saugrenue de conférer. Les choses, cependant, ont failli se gâter quand cet Arthur Cravan a éprouvé le besoin d'envoyer à toute volée sur le premier rang des spectateurs, un carton à dessin qui par hasard, n'atteignit personne. Quelques amis du danseur, boxeur et conférencier, ont achevé de donner à cette soirée son caractère particulier de grosse plaisanterie anglo-américaine en dansant, boxant et conférenciant à leur tour.⁷²

As the above account of Cravan's evening of *La Very Boxe* makes abundantly clear, Cravan was no stranger to the power of surprise extolled by Apollinaire. The difference being, that while Apollinaire's "Terrible Boxeur" surprises the reader by taking a physical form on the page, Cravan's poetry manifests itself in three dimensions directly before the audience as he lashes out towards his spectators with his own colossal body. This is not to say however, that only the audience faced danger in Cravan's artistic style; as Bertrand Lacerelle notes, one can

⁷¹ *Raging Bull*, DVD, directed by Martin Scorsese (1980; Beverly Hills: MGM Home Entertainment, 2006).

⁷² *Paris-Midi* July 6, 1914 cited in Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 102.

qualify Cravan's 1916 fight in Barcelona against Jack Johnson as being yet another performances of *La Very Boxe*. Although the Spanish Newspaper *El Mundo Deportivo* reported that their "combat tant attendu fut un vrai désastre,"⁷³ by going six lopsided rounds with one of history's all-time greatest boxers, Cravan put his body on the line in one of "les expériences littéraires...hasardeuses et...parfois peu lyriques"⁷⁴ of Apollinaire's *L'esprit nouveau*. Despite being knocked –out easily by Johnson, Cravan emerged victorious as a poet by pushing his poetic practice into a realm where it had never been before. As Lacerelle writes; "S'il ne marque pas dans les annales de la boxe, Arthur Cravan s'incrit définitivement dans celles de l'art moderne."⁷⁵

Although Cravan and Apollinaire both achieve a new physical form of poetry through their pugilistically inspired art, there exists however, an evident difference between *L'esprit nouveau* and Cravan's own style of fistic art. Whereas Apollinaire's "Terrible Boxeur" gives a new corporeal manifestation to his verse, it is Cravan's body which gives birth to his poetry. Furthermore, while *L'esprit nouveau* attributes a quasi-mystical poetic power to the poet, Cravan instead claims the poet is inferior to the athlete and certainly finds himself at odds with Apollinaire's claim that "le poète seul nourrit la vie."⁷⁶ In fact for Cravan, quite the opposite is true. As he claims in his critique of *L'exposition des Indépendants*, "pour être artiste il faut commencer par boire et manger" because "l'art à l'état mystérieux...a plutôt son siège dans le ventre que dans le cerveau."⁷⁷ Cravan's poetic style hence emphasizes the actual being of the poet himself as Cravan shows pure contempt for the studied technique usually associated with

⁷³ *El Mundo Deportivo*, April 24th 1916. Cited in Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale*. (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 156.

⁷⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 948.

⁷⁵ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 130.

⁷⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 951.

⁷⁷ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 71, 79.

the poetic métier. But while he ignores the refined technique upon which Apollinaire builds his sweet science, Cravan's poetry remains nonetheless pugilistic. The difference is simply that while Apollinaire can be likened to the skilled boxer, Cravan resembles that of the more openly aggressive slugger, a brute who disregards the studied techniques of the boxing match and comes to fight. Distrustful of the judges' decision, Cravan is instead always searching to deliver an inspired knock-out punch.

Arthur Cravan : Le plus grand poète du monde

Returning to Cravan's declaration "pour être artiste il faut commencer par boire et manger," it may seem bizarre that, according to Cravan, the path towards becoming an artist begins neither with study nor with creation, but instead ingestion. However, as Boddy details, "an obsession with the boxer's diet"⁷⁸ has been part of the noble art since the early 18th century,⁷⁹ and Cravan applies the pugilistic concept observed by Oates that "a boxer "is" his body and is totally identified with it,"⁸⁰ to these other art forms. As Bertrand Lacerelle concludes, for Cravan "le physique est inséparable de la création,"⁸¹ or, in Cravan's words "La peinture c'est marcher, courir, boire, marcher, dormir et faire ses besoins."⁸² Hence, in his self-published review *Maintenant*, Cravan promotes the restaurant Chez Jourdan by advertising the opportunity witness Kees Van Dongen – an artist who Cravan declares to have "la peinture dans sa peau"⁸³ – "mettre la nourriture dans sa bouche, la mâcher, digérer et fumer."⁸⁴ Similarly, in his critique of *L'exposition des indépendants* Cravan writes that Robert Delaunay has "une gueule de porc

⁷⁸ Kasia Boddy *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 124.

⁷⁹ Red meat in particular has long been considered a particularly vital component of a boxer's diet and its importance is perhaps best described by Jack London's "A Piece of Steak" (1909) <http://www.classicshorts.com/stories/steak.html> (Accessed online September 25, 2013).

⁸⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 5.

⁸¹ Bertrand Lacerelle, "Arthur Cravan (enfin) chez André Gide," *La nouvelle revue française* 83 (2008): 245.

⁸² Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot. (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 78.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

enflammé ou de cocher de grande maison” and therefore “pouvait ambitionner avec une pareille hure de faire une peinture de brute.” However, Cravan finds that, largely due to the influence of his wife, “une cé-ré-brââle,” M. Delaunay’s body does not hold the same promise as his head. “J’exagère probablement en disant que l’apparence phénoménale était quelque chose d’admirable. Au physique c’est un fromage mou: il court avec peine et *Robert* a quelque peine à lancer un caillou à trente mètres.”⁸⁵

Diet is not enough. For Cravan, unlike the intellectuals of the exhibition, a true artist must embrace all aspects of his physical being. Cravan therefore advises that one leave l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where he believes all sorts of people, including, most tragically “des jeunes Américains d’un mètre quatre-vingt-dix, heureux dans leurs épaules et qui savent boxer et qui viennent des pays arrosés par le Mississippi,”⁸⁶ waste their time trying to learn artistic technique, in order to consume and celebrate life’s other physical experiences. Boxing is the sport that celebrates a man’s physicality like no other, and, as Boddy observes,⁸⁷ in the early 20th century was seen as the ideal way for men to retain what Teddy Roosevelt called “their fiber of vigorous hardness and masculinity.”⁸⁸ Hence, Cravan writes in his critique of Henri Hayden’s work at the exposition:

Un bon conseil: prenez quelques pilules et purgez votre esprit; baisez beaucoup ou encore entraînez-vous à l’outrance : lorsque vous aurez cinquante centimètres de tour de bras peut-être serez vous enfin une brute, si vous êtes doué.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot. (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 77-78.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁷ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 95.

⁸⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous life” 1900, quoted in Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 95.

⁸⁹ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot. (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 71.

Similarly, he advises Tobeen;

Allez courir dans les champs, traverser les plaines à fond de train comme un cheval ; sautez à la corde et quand vous aurez six ans, vous ne saurez plus rien et vous verrez des choses insensées.⁹⁰

The question begs to be asked however, over why the poet's physique should be granted such importance. At a certain level, the size of an artist's biceps serve as proof that he has undergone – to borrow the term from another poet by the name of Arthur – a type of physical *encrapulement* in which by embracing the physical aspects of his being, his artistic capacities are developed at the same time as his muscles. Thanks to his enormous stature, Cravan, whose conference prospectus announces his size at 2 meters tall and 125 kilograms, is therefore uniquely gifted with the physical tools necessary to become *le plus grand poète du monde*. Cravan further amplifies his physical vitality by declaring himself “NEGRE” like the supremely powerful boxers he admired, and Cravan's own performances of *La Very Boxe* allow him to display his corporeal credentials. The poète-boxeur will later scandalize and delight the avant-garde of Greenwich Village by attempting to undress himself during another conference he held in Grand Central Station, but given the importance of the artist's physique to Cravan's creative philosophy, perhaps he was simply trying to fully present his poetic qualifications to the New York audience. In any case the intervention of several security guards granted the poète-boxeur an opportunity to put his body into action as his conference on “Les Artistes indépendants de France et d'Amérique” quickly turned into a real display of his fistic art as he engaged in a very real fight with the guards.⁹¹

Similarly, Cravan leveraged the genius to which his body testified into his brutal critiques that base their attacks as much on artistic shortcomings as upon his rivals' small physical statures

⁹⁰ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot. (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 72.

⁹¹ Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale*. (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 187.

which betrayed their artistic shortcomings. Using what his wife Mina Loy deemed “the critical instinct of Knock-Out,”⁹² Cravan aggressively insults the artists of *L'exposition des Indépendants* in order to, in the words of Lacerelle “met[tre] K.O. 54 artistes du salon.”⁹³ The poète-boxeur’s attack on Gide in the third edition of *Maintenant*, translated a fistic spirit into criticism in a similar fashion as Cravan contrasts his own vivacity - “Je préfère de beaucoup, par exemple, la boxe à la littérature” - to Gide’s intellectual lifestyle. As Lacerelle observes, Cravan delivers the Knocks-Out blow by ripping a shot to Gide’s body “M. Gide doit peser dans les 55 kilos et mesurer 1,65 environ. Sa marche trahit un prosateur qui ne pourra jamais faire un vers.”⁹⁴ In Cravan’s view, Gide would be better served consuming than writing *Les nourritures terrestres* because as it stands they aren’t even in the same weight class.

Besse’s pugilistic maxim that “Le corps doit dire l’âme” is hence applicable to Cravan’s poetry just as it was to Apollinaire’s, but in a more literal sense. Cravan disregards the order and technique employed by Apollinaire in favor of a purer and less cerebral expression which springs directly from the physical being. Foregoing technique, Cravan resembles Jack Dempsey who once said: “All the time he’s boxing he’s thinking. And all the time he’s thinking I’m hitting him,” as he assaults Gide’s overwrought literary method which is all practice and no inspiration “M. Gide châtie terriblement sa prose...qu’il ne doit guère livrer aux typographes que le quatrième jet.”⁹⁵ As Lacerelle writes:

La poésie de Cravan, qui dit que la littérature « c’est ta ta tata », est un chant, une vibration, un rythme, l’expression vitale du sens, de l’inspiration et non un concept, une théorie, une invention. Inspiration contre imagination. L’imagination est littéraire, l’inspiration est poétique.⁹⁶

⁹² Mina Loy cited in Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 250.

⁹³ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 118.

⁹⁴ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 37.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁶ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 109.

But while Cravan offers the embrace of one's physicality in the ring and elsewhere as offering a path towards becoming an artist, this is not so much a journey of discovery as it is one of a return to the state of man untainted by the civilizing force of society which impedes him from true poetic inspiration. As Cravan describes "un homme fin ou subtil n'est presque toujours qu'un idiot...quand on a la chance d'être une brute, il faut savoir le rester."⁹⁷ For Cravan, the greatest of artists, like the greatest of boxers are "naturals". As Oates describes:

It might be theorized that fighting activates in certain people not only an adrenaline rush of exquisite pleasure but an atavistic self that, coupled with an instinctive sort of tissue-intelligence, a neurological swiftness unknown to "average" men and women, makes for the born fighter, the potentially great champion, the *unmistakably* gifted boxer.⁹⁸

To access the artistic gifts of this "atavistic self", Hayden must therefore purge his spirit, and Tobeen must return to the age of six through boxing which, according to Oates, provides a unique chance to "not merely mimic but, magically to *be* brute, primitive, instinctive and therefore innocent."⁹⁹ However, as Lacerelle observes:

En refusant de se civiliser, le poète ne pense pas au mythe du bon sauvage ou à quelque rousseauisme. L'homme de Cravan, s'il est celui qui à la fois précède et dépasse toute civilisation, principe et pérennité, se régénère à la source des humanités, s'étoffe du savoir, se vêt de sciences et saute de locomotive en paquebot. Il y a du vampire dans tout cela : l'homme éternel qui s'incarne dans toutes les époques et boit le sang de la connaissance.¹⁰⁰

Consumption therefore rests first and foremost in Cravan's artistic philosophy, not just in relation to the physical experience, but in the consumption of knowledge as well. Cravan, who proclaims "si j'écris c'est pour faire enrager mes confrères ; pour faire parler de moi et tenter de

⁹⁷ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 66, 77.

⁹⁸ Joyce Carol Oates. *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) 81

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰⁰ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 112.

me faire un nom,”¹⁰¹ is hence what one would call a “hungry” fighter who looks to climb to the top of literary food chain by preying upon his rivals. As he launches his fistic critiques towards an older, more established writer like Gide, Cravan bears a striking resemblance to the boxer found in the following anecdote from Oates’ *On boxing*:

After junior-welterweight champion Aaron Pryor won a lackluster fight last year, a younger boxer in his weight division, interviewed at ringside, said with a smile: “My mouth is watering.”¹⁰²

Le vers incorrigible

This same consumptive creative philosophy is evident in Cravan’s text *Oscar Wilde est vivant*. Cravan begins by setting himself apart from the presumably intellectual reader of his text as he underlines how his exceptional stature allows him to feel and express deeper emotions than the average man, writing; “Sans doute ne sommes-nous pas physiquement semblables...notre tour de poitrine diffère aussi, ce qui, probablement, vous empêchera de pleurer et rire avec moi.”¹⁰³ Having resolved to become a poet in order to find his glory, Cravan sits in his room *trying* to compose some verses, but he is disgusted by their lack of originality. The aspiring poet struggles to comprehend “comment Victor Hugo a pu, quarante ans durant, faire son métier”¹⁰⁴, and is particularly troubled by the thought that by the time he has become a great poet he will no longer have his physical beauty. After trying once more to *think* of a new poem he comes to the following conclusion:

... le vers est un enfant incorrigible ! Naturellement, je n’eus pas de succès : tout restait aussi médiocre. Enfin, dernière extravagance, j’imaginai le *proso-poème*, chose future, et dont je renvoyai, du reste, l’exécution aux jours heureux – et combien lamentables – de l’inspiration. Il

¹⁰¹ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot(Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 77.

¹⁰² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 16.

¹⁰³ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot(Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 50.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

s'agissait d'une pièce commencée en prose et qui insensiblement, par des rappels – la rime – d'abord lointain et de plus en plus rapprochés, naissait la poésie pure.¹⁰⁵

This proso-poème to which Cravan alludes will later take form in his *poète-boxeur* where, in stark contrast to the lassitude and futile contemplation he displays in *Oscar Wilde est vivant*, Cravan is brimming with vitality as he has put down the pen and put on his gloves to forge his glory in the ring rather than in verse:

Houiaiaia! Je partais dans 32 heures pour l'Amérique. De retour de Bucarest, depuis 2 jours seulement j'étais à Londres et j'avais trouvé l'homme qu'il me fallait... Il y avait de quoi mourir de rire : houiaiaia ! sans compter que ça pouvait être de l'or en barre puisque j'avais calculé que si l'entreprise marchait bien elle pouvait me rapporter dans les 50 000 francs, ce qui n'est pas à dédaigner. En tout cas, ça valait toujours mieux que le truc de spiritisme que j'avais commencé à montrer.¹⁰⁶

This “truc de spiritisme” which has fallen to the wayside is none other than Cravan's attempt to partake in the cult of poetry, but as Cravan the boxer makes his way to the ring by train, Cravan the lyricist reveals himself as, in a manner that seems almost involuntary, his prose slowly becomes more lyrical and eventually transforms into *la poésie pure*. Cravan is inspired first by the “intense corporalité”¹⁰⁷ of his neighbor's mustache and then once again by a young American girl sitting across from him. Each of these moments of inspiration spurred by the bodies of his traveling companions lead him to immediate poetic reveries which themselves never stray far from the corporeal:

Et tandis qu'allophe/A l'amour de ton chauffage... Nos merdes rallument leurs moirés... dans la finale/Abdominale!... Aux plexus rougissants, /Boucheront jusqu'aux bords nos organes dorés... Nous reposerons nos pectoraux trop lourds... Pareilles aux pates, les pensées

¹⁰⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

banales/Nous bourreront comme des oies/Pendant que nos estomacs liés,/Plus fort que deux
souliers,/Tout en répandant la chaleur du foie, Se baigneront dans leurs aurores intestinales.¹⁰⁸

Cravan declares the word “allophage,” from the greek *allos* and *fagos*, to be a “Néologisme servant à designer celui que déguste ou mange idéalement autrui,”¹⁰⁹ and this concept provides a perfect resume of Cravan’s poetic process; his inspiration springs from his consumption of all that surrounds him.

A gluttonous consumption is at the heart of Cravan’s second flight of inspiration in which his prose turns to poetry as he dreams of a bourgeois life in San Francisco with the rich mother of his young American neighbor. Yet Cravan is not perturbed when this reverie is ended by his manager announcing that they have arrived at the destination of the fight and responds to this return to the real, physical world and responds with a hearty “Allllright”; for even if he is tempted to rest his “pectoraux trop lourds”¹¹⁰ the poète-boxeur cannot stand to be at rest. An “allophage” like Cravan must always consume what is “other”; that which is new and unknown, the next country or the next opponent. Hence, rather than following Hugo’s example and languishing in his room, slowly losing his corporeal grace and beauty, Cravan has chosen boxing which according to Oates “more than any human activity...consumes the very excellence it displays – its drama is this very consumption”¹¹¹. *Oscar Wilde est vivant* concludes with Wilde underlining this reckless vitality as he tells his nephew “You are a terrible boy.” Cravan, who himself knows the poetry to be an “enfant incorrigible,”¹¹² is hence at his most poetic as he lives out his life on a physical level.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot(Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 87-91.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 16.

¹¹² Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot(Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 51.

L'éléphant et le rhinocéros

Bertrand Lacerelle observes that Cravan's brutal critiques launched at virtually every artist of *L'exposition des Indépendants* really are all aimed at one target: his poetic rival Guillaume Apollinaire who was not known only as a poet, but also as an influential art critic.¹¹³ Before making a total mockery of art criticism itself in his critique, Cravan writes "Celui qui écrit sérieusement une ligne sur la peinture est ce que je pense,"¹¹⁴ and Cravan further provokes Apollinaire by calling him a "juif." Although Cravan claims "je n'ai aucun préjugé contre les juifs,"¹¹⁵ one imagines that the Catholic Apollinaire probably still did not appreciate the misidentification. Cravan also takes particular issue with Apollinaire's former fiancée, Marie Laurencin, writing:

Marie Laurencin (je n'ai pas vu son envoi). En voilà une qui aurait besoin qu'on lui relève les jupes et qu'on lui mette une grosse...quelque part pour lui apprendre que l'art n'est pas une petite pose devant le miroir.¹¹⁶

Cravan succeeds in enraging Apollinaire who demands reparation. Cravan responds with the following letter of clarification:

Paris, le 6 mars 1914

Monsieur,

N'ayant que très peu d'amour propre, je viens déclarer que, contrairement à ce que j'aurai pu laisser entendre dans mon article sur *L'exposition des Indépendants* paru dans ma revue « Maintenant », Monsieur Guillaume Apollinaire n'est point juif, mais catholique romain. Afin d'éviter toutes les méprises possibles je tiens à ajouter que M. Guillaume Apollinaire n'est pas

¹¹³ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 23-37.

¹¹⁴ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 77.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

maigre, qu'il a, au contraire un gros ventre et qu'il ressemble plutôt à un rhinocéros qu'à une giraffe. (sic)¹¹⁷

Par la même occasion je tiens à rectifier une phrase que j'ai écrite sur Mlle Laurencin : puisque j'ai dit : « En voilà une qui aurait besoin qu'on lui mette une grosse...quelque part » je tiens essentiellement qu'on comprenne à la lettre : « En voilà une qui aurait besoin qu'on lui relève les jupes et qu'on lui mette une grosse paléontologie au Théâtre des Variétés. »

Monsieur, veuillez me croire à plat ventre,

Arthur Cravan

Upon receiving this letter, Apollinaire's friend Jérôme Tharaud responds to Cravan saying that Apollinaire has found Cravan's apology "suffisante,"¹¹⁸ but Cravan is not willing to let the fight end so quickly. After receiving Tharaud's reply, Cravan rushed to have a modified version of the letter published as a supplement to his already infamous 4th edition of *Maintenant*, and hence was able to take a few more shots at Apollinaire.

Yet, in spite of the letter's provocative and mocking tone, given to what degree Cravan values the brutishness and the vivacity of an artist; we understand that having a "gros ventre" is actually high praise. Furthermore, Cravan, who often compares himself to an elephant, finds Apollinaire to be a pachyderm as well. The rhinoceros, as the smaller animal, is still not quite Cravan's equal but a certain respect between these two heavyweights is nevertheless revealed even as Cravan challenges Apollinaire's championship status. For his part, although he was initially outraged by Cravan's provocative critique, Apollinaire's respect for Cravan is evidenced by the fact that he chose to keep Cravan's letter among his personal papers for *Le poète assassiné*¹¹⁹. This makes sense given that Cravan, as a poète-boxeur himself, could have served a

¹¹⁷ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 83.

¹¹⁸ Cited in Bertrand Lacerelle. *Arthur Cravan Précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010) 32

¹¹⁹ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan Précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 33.

role similar to McVey and Coppée in Croniamantal's poetic education. It is not at all surprising that these two poets of pugilistic style should clash, but what comes through in the end is not whether the slick technical genius of Apollinaire triumphed over Cravan's raw poetic force, but rather that these two poets each found their paths to glory by imitating the creative power of the noble art.

Chapter 2: The Pugilist and the Modern Poet

“To be a champion, one must only be a consistently better performer than his or her competitors; to be a great champion like Muhammad Ali, one must transcend the perimeters of sport itself to become a model (in some cases a sacrificial model) for the general populace, image bearer for an era.”¹²⁰

Bare-chested and alone with his opponent under the glaring lights of the ring, his face fully visible in moments of both pain and triumph, the boxer shares an intimate relationship with his audience that is unrivaled by any other sport. It is perhaps due to this intimacy that the boxer so often assumes an importance as a public and cultural figure which reaches well outside the limits of the squared circle. As sportswriter Gary Wills remarked “For some reason people don’t want fighters just to be fighters,”¹²¹ and Muhammad Ali was far from the first boxer to become an “image-bearer” of his era. In the early 20th century, the figure of the boxer loomed larger over Paris than ever before, as the numerous black champions who found refuge in the city became larger than life figures for both the general Parisian public and especially for the avant-garde. Having examined in our first chapter how the noble art is reflected within the poetic styles of Guillaume Apollinaire and Arthur Cravan, our second chapter now turns to examine the poets themselves. Beyond the pugilistic styles of their verses, the fraternity between these poets and their pugilistic counterparts extends to both how Apollinaire and Cravan practiced the poetic

¹²⁰ Joyce Carol Oates. *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) 205

¹²¹ Gary Wills. *I’m a Little Special: A Muhammad Ali Reader*, (London: Gerald Early, 1999) 166

métier and how they conceived their identities as poets, as they prepared to go toe-to-toe with the challenges of the modern era.

Jack Johnson and Le Ring Noir

In December of 1908, Jack Johnson taunted and out-boxed the over matched Tommy Burns over the course of fourteen rounds to become the first black heavyweight champion of the world, and, long before Muhammad Ali proclaimed himself the “one nigger that the white man didn’t get,”¹²² also became the first black boxer whose willful defiance of the establishment would transform him into a true cultural icon. Johnson’s victory issued what Archer-Shaw deems “the first challenge to white supremacy,”¹²³ and, as Kasia Boddy observes, Johnson’s status as both a hero to Black America and villain to White America was equaled only by Civil War heroes “General Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln.”¹²⁴ The racial dimension added to the sport by black boxers like Johnson cannot be overlooked as a factor in boxing’s return to relevance in the early 20th century, and Johnson’s polarizing figure captured so much public attention that when he fought “The Great White Hope,” Jim Jeffries, in Reno, Nevada on July 4th 1910, a 20,000 seat arena had to be constructed specifically for the event.¹²⁵ Johnson’s victory over Jeffries was such a monumental event in the struggle for racial equality that the violence of the fight’s aftermath was much more serious than anything that took place inside the ring as race riots and lynching of black men broke out across the United States.

¹²² Muhammad Ali 1970, quoted from Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 213.

¹²³ Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 44.

¹²⁴ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 181.

¹²⁵ *Jack Johnson vs. James Jeffries July 4th 1910 Reno, Nevada*, National Film Registry Footage <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1y76L2P-IQ> (Accessed October 3, 2013).

The Galveston Giant's pugilistic triumphs were not however the only reason Johnson infuriated the establishment. If anything, his exploits outside of the ring were even more outrageous. As Kasia Boddy writes:

In and out of the ring he flamboyantly broke taboos...By his own admission, Johnson was 'a dandy'; shaving his head and sporting everything Booker T. Washington had promised whites that accommodating blacks would refrain from wearing...He also liked fast cars and famously hired a white chauffeur to drive him around. Worse of all, Johnson spent his money on white prostitutes and had three wives, all white.¹²⁶

Having skipped bail and fled the United States, Johnson received a warm welcome to Paris when he arrived on July 15th, 1913 with his wife Lucille and "22 grandes malles, d'un poids total de deux mille et quelques kilos" in tow.¹²⁷

Johnson had been preceded by a number of other black boxers who found the city to be a sanctuary where the color line separating black and white boxers did not exist. As early as 1905 Sam McVey had established his own boxing school in Paris, and the Parisian public had already been treated to several great matches fought by McVey and his fellow black boxers Joe Jeanette and Sam Langford. Examining the nature of these fights, Petrine Archer-Shaw observes that:

The boxing matches imported to Paris from America carried with them a showmanship and a menacing low life of pimps that contrasted sharply with the gentleman's sport that had crossed the Channel from England a century before. Black fights created even more interest because they provided an arena in which the myth of black savagery could be confirmed and even supported. It

¹²⁶ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 186.

¹²⁷ *La Boxe et les boxeurs*, July 16, 1913 cited in Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir : Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris : Plon, 1992), 16.

was boxing's dichotomies that provoked the interest of Paris's extremists, such as the Dada and surrealist groups, who were quick to pick up on the sport's cultural and class contradictions.¹²⁸ Indeed, "le mariage de la vérité primitive - le combat, la race, l'amour - et de la vie contemporaine – l'avant-garde, l'argent, le scandale, la vitesse des automobiles"¹²⁹ that Claude Meunier defines as the "ring noir" epitomizes the paradoxical nature of the avant-garde's negrophilia in which, although black culture was often primitivized, for the avant-garde "blackness" was as sign of their modernity, reflected in the African sculptures that scattered their rooms.¹³⁰

The description of Sam McVey recovering from a bout as "un grand objet d'art fragile"¹³¹ found in *La boxe et les boxeurs* suggests that these black boxers were themselves merely considered ornamental by the avant-garde, but Meunier also makes the observation that, rather than simply being pieces of art, these boxers also replaced the 19th century's "autoportraits de l'artiste en danseur de fil, en pierrot lunaire, en saltambique" upon which they "ennoblirent encore le motif tant ils paraissaient riches et exubérants"¹³² to become the avant-garde's new preferred simulacrum of the artist. Meunier agrees with Oates's observation that this bond between boxer and artists has long existed in their similar "fanatic subordination of the self in terms of a wished-for destiny"¹³³. Both pugilists and artists toil in painful obscurity as preparation for a relatively brief, and hopefully glorious, moment before the public. However,

¹²⁸ Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 46.

¹²⁹ Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir: Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars Et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 73.

¹³⁰ Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 19.

¹³¹ *La boxe et les boxeurs*, April 7, 1911 cited in Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir: Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars Et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 38.

¹³² Claude Meunier. *Ring Noir: Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars Et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 61-62.

¹³³ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 26.

this eternal bond is but one reason why the boxer became an exemplar to the avant-garde of early 20th century Paris. To fully understand why the black boxer became a hero to poets like Apollinaire and Cravan, we must also examine the crisis in masculinity in the face of modernity which afflicted the era's intellectual elite and how Johnson's rise to the heavyweight championship presented itself not only as a symptom of this crisis, but also as a possible solution.

Masculinity in crisis and Apollinaire en athlète

In his article "Les jeunes ne veulent plus prendre de coups: l'agonie de la boxe," Jean Cau bemoans that "à travers calme et suicide, la douceur démocrate de la vie,"¹³⁴ the youth of modern France have been turned away from the "trop noble" art of pugilism. As he writes:

Ça faisait trop rêver les mômes dans les rues et les terrains vagues...rêver d'être des punchers, des stylistes, des encaisseurs, des combattants, des champions d'une banlieue, d'une France et du monde bien sûr. Et rêver d'être des hommes, ô bonheur, oh oui des hommes !

Although Cau's article dates from 1978, his lamentations about modernity's effeminizing effect upon men who no longer face the baptismal force of an opponent's blows would have been very familiar to European society in the early 20th century. According to Christopher Forth, this "belief in the hygienic and therapeutic value of pain, violence and hardship has functioned in the West as a method of preserving men from the conditions of civilized existence"¹³⁵ since the 19th century and boxing, as what Oates describes as a "distillation of the masculine world,"¹³⁶ has long served as a gauge for the health of modern manhood. In 1884, Francis Galton conducted an experiment at the International Health Exhibition in which a padded rod was used as a

¹³⁴ Jean Cau, "Les Jeunes ne veulent plus prendre de coups : l'agonie de la boxe." *Paris-Match* n°1503, March 17, 1978 <http://cultureboxe.com/2012/11/18/les-jeunes-ne-veulent-plus-prendre-de-coups-lagonie-de-la-boxe/> (Accessed October 15th 2013).

¹³⁵ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 141.

¹³⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 74.

mechanism to record the strength of a man's punch and was rather unimpressed by the new crop of men:

It was a matter of surprise to me, who was born in the days of pugilism, to find that the art of delivering a clean hit, straight from the shoulder, as required by this instrument, is nearly lost to the rising generation. Notwithstanding the simplicity of the test, a large proportion of persons bungled absurdly over it.¹³⁷

Galton, the founder of eugenics, was quick to warn about the deleterious effects of modern life upon the race, and Johnson's rise to the heavyweight championship seemed to confirm these fears. Forth notes that Darwinist ideas had served to "promote patriarchal and racist agendas"¹³⁸ in which the white man's evolutionary superiority over blacks was evidenced by what was perceived as a greater level of sexual dimorphism amongst whites than amongst blacks. Masculinity was therefore proof of one's evolutionary advancement, but Johnson's victory overturned this entire system of beliefs. According to Oates, within the ring, "a man's masculinity is the use of his body. But it is also his triumph over another's use of his body... Masculinity in these terms is strictly hierarchal – two men cannot occupy the same space at the same time,"¹³⁹ and boxing hence represented a Darwinian theater where evolutionary superiority could be proven. As Boddy describes, "Seeing Johnson humble successive white hopes, many whites lost hope about the best that they could breed,"¹⁴⁰ and Johnson's habit of taking white women as his love interests only furthered this fear about the impotency of the white race.

¹³⁷ Cited in Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 106.

¹³⁸ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 142.

¹³⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 75.

¹⁴⁰ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 184.

However, rather than fret about the challenge posed to the establishment by Jack Johnson's unrivaled masculinity, the Parisian avant-garde embraced Johnson and other black boxers as fellow outsiders whose defiant masculinity could be emulated. Intellectuals were considered to be particularly susceptible to this degenerating force of modernity upon their masculinity. As Forth explains, although a modern Parisian might have boasted of having a larger brain than a "savage," there were also fears "of intellectual advancement at the expense of physical development" and that this same intellectual advancement rendered a man "more fragile."¹⁴¹ France's loss in the Franco-Prussian War and declining birth rate also brought further attention on the country's perceived inability to produce "strong male bodies."¹⁴²

These concerns about the fragility of French masculinity in the face of modernity pervade Apollinaire's article "Guy de Maupassant athlète" which he wrote for *La Culture physique* in 1907. Apollinaire begins by first underlining a distinction between the Frenchman and other Europeans:

Maupassant par certains côtés de son talent, se rattache à la tradition la plus française sinon la plus classique, et qui, à cause de sa fidélité à suivre la discipline réaliste est donné aujourd'hui encore pour un parangon de santé spirituelle, termina ses jours en accès de frénésie et en divagations dont il décrit les affres dans une nouvelle : *Le Horla*, qu'en état de santé mentale un Français n'aurait pas écrite mais qui, due à un Américain, à un Anglais, ou même à un Allemand n'accuserait qu'un peu de misère morale peut-être, mais certes aucune folie.¹⁴³

Ravaged by syphilis, Maupassant had gone mad by the time he wrote *Le Horla* in 1887, six years before his death. Yet, Apollinaire asserts that the "frénésie" and "affres" which inspired the work would not necessarily be accompanied by madness were Maupassant to have not been a

¹⁴¹ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 147-148.

¹⁴² Ibid., 146.

¹⁴³ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1195.

Frenchman. In fact, Maupassant, as Apollinaire frequently reminds us, was a Normand who falls between these two heritages, and, as a young man who “consacra une importante partie de son existence à son développement physique,”¹⁴⁴ Maupassant once shared a great deal with another figure of anglo-saxon tradition: the boxer. Apollinaire writes that “toutes ces manifestations d’une vie intense lui donnèrent la santé, la vigueur, cette carrure solide et ce cou puissant dont il était fier”¹⁴⁵ which put the young Maupassant in strong contrast to “the slightness of their arms and chests”¹⁴⁶ which, according to Forth, characterized the physical degeneration of overly refined French youth at the turn of the century. Unfortunately, after gaining fame and fortune, “le jeune homme épris d’exercices athlétiques, soucieux de sa force et de sa santé, est devenu un malade, un misanthrope,”¹⁴⁷ as he gave up the physical exercises of his youth that had insured his sound mind and body in favor of the decadent comforts of cocaine and opium. As Apollinaire writes : “conséquence de cette hygiène déplorable, son cerveau s’épuise, la folie le guette.”¹⁴⁸

Apollinaire traces the trajectory of Maupassant’s descent into madness and physical decrepitude by comparing two works of Maupassant’s which each give a very different opinion of the value of physical exercise. In an excerpt from Maupassant’s “Sur l’eau” that Apollinaire proclaims “un raisonnable appel en faveur de la beauté corporelle,”¹⁴⁹ we find the young author praising the virtues of physical exertion and “l’élégance de forme qui donne seule l’agitation physique”¹⁵⁰ and deploring the physical degeneration of France’s youth: “Les enfants, ventrus dès le berceau, déformés par l’étude précoce...arrivent à l’adolescence avec les membres mal

¹⁴⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1195.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1196.

¹⁴⁶ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 147.

¹⁴⁷ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1196.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1198.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1199.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1196.

poussés.”¹⁵¹ As Apollinaire exclaims, “Personne aujourd’hui même où l’on comprend le rôle social des sports, l’importance de la culture physique, personne ne saurait mieux parler de la beauté humaine.”¹⁵²

Just five years later however, Apollinaire finds that Maupassant has turned against these virtuous physical pursuits. In his preface written for le baron de Vaux’s *Tireurs au pistolet*, Maupassant mocks the Parisian public who “est en général infiniment plus fier des supériorités physiques que des supériorités morales...on ne peut causer dix minutes avec eux sans qu’ils célèbrent leur force et leur adresse.”¹⁵³ Practitioners of the noble art are targeted with particular spite:

Soyons prudents et circonspects; ne parlons jamais de la boxe si nous ne voulons point recevoir dans le nez quelque horion formidable qui nous démontre un coup imparable en même temps que la puissance musculaire de notre nouvelle connaissance.¹⁵⁴

Instead, Maupassant now only admires the decadence of pistol shooting which “n’exige [pas de] mouvements désordonnés, enfin, comme il n’est point classé parmi ces exercices hygiéniques,”¹⁵⁵ but Maupassant’s scorn of what Apollinaire describes as these “Pauvres exercices hygiéniques, vous voilà ridiculisés de façon aristocratique”¹⁵⁶ will be his downfall. Without the “dose of primitivity needed to “inoculate” men against modern softness”¹⁵⁷ described by Forth to protect him from insanity, Maupassant becomes a victim to the decadence of modernity well before his time. As Apollinaire laments: “Il eût dû devenir centenaire et meurt

¹⁵¹ Guy de Maupassant “Sur l’eau” (Marpon et Flammarion : Paris, 1888) cited in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1196.

¹⁵² Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1200.

¹⁵³ Guy de Maupassant, *Préface des Tireurs au pistolet du baron de Vaux* (Paris : Morpon & Flammarion, 1883) cited in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1200.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1200.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1202.

¹⁵⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1202.

¹⁵⁷ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 141.

fou dans la force de l'âge. Il eût dû louer les sports et ne vante que ceux pratiqués dans l'Antiquité."¹⁵⁸ These sentiments will later be echoed by Muhammad Ali: "All the great poets should have been fighters. Take Keats and Shelley, for an example. They were pretty good poets, but they died young. You know why? Because they didn't train."¹⁵⁹



Apollinaire's elegy to Maupassant is hence both a cautionary tale of what can become of the man who allows his body to degenerate in the face of modern life as well as a paean to the virtues of physical exercise which Maupassant so regrettably forgot. In further praise of corporeal beauty, a caricature of "Apollinaire en athlète" by Picasso was included with the article,¹⁶⁰ which according to Gertrude Stein, "montre Guillaume comme un exemple de ce que peut arriver à faire la culture physique."¹⁶¹ Not only does Apollinaire possess an Olympian physique in Picasso's

caricature, but, with pen in hand and pipe in mouth, Apollinaire has presumably just finished the article for *La Culture physique* which he holds in his left hand. As Forth notes, these academic

¹⁵⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1200.

¹⁵⁹ Cassius Clay, "Do You Have to Ask", in *I am the Greatest!* Vinyl Album (Rev-Ola, 1964).

¹⁶⁰ Pablo Picasso, *Apollinaire en athlète* 1907 Pen and ink on paper. Published in *La Culture physique* March 1907.

¹⁶¹ Gertrude Stein, *Autobiographie d'Alice B. Toklas* (Gallimard : Paris, 1933) cited in Bertrand Lacerelle. *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 24.

pursuits that “we might call ‘muscular intellectualness’ offered an important...way of affirming manhood”¹⁶² as well.

Far from being conflicting interests, Apollinaire’s physical and intellectual prowess work in concert with each other to affirm the poet’s masculinity. We hence observe that Besse’s pugilistic maxim “Le corps doit dire l’âme,”¹⁶³ which we uncovered earlier in Apollinaire’s “Terrible boxeur”, applies equally to Apollinaire’s ideal of the poet himself. This resemblance between poet and boxer is further evidenced by the figure of Coppée’s statue in *Le poète assassiné* which seems to be directly inspired by a declaration from a young Maupassant which Apollinaire chooses to include in his elegy in *La culture physique*: “Et rappelons-nous combien les nègres sont beaux de forme, sinon de face, ces hommes de bronze.”¹⁶⁴ Having become a statue of bronze, the poet has himself taken on the physical characteristics of the black boxer, Sam McVey, who inspires his verse. He now possesses the same hard physique as Sam McVey who, according to Meunier was “une grande figure du ring noir, sur son crâne se cassaient les doigts et les poignets de tous les autres,”¹⁶⁵ and this resemblance is then furthered as Coppée compares himself to McVey, stating, “j’ai plus noir que lui s’affligea.”¹⁶⁶ While this “noir” is indeed an affliction which makes both poet and black boxer pariahs of the establishment, this blackness also signals that the poet possesses “the superior masculinity of African-Americans”¹⁶⁷ to which the victories of black boxers testified. This “primitive” and physical masculinity which

¹⁶² Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 144.

¹⁶³ Jean-Paul Besse. *Les Boxeurs et les Dieux : L’esprit du ring dans l’art et la littérature* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1998), 44.

¹⁶⁴ Guy de Maupassant *Sur l’eau* (Marpon et Flammarion : Paris, 1888) cited in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 1200.

¹⁶⁵ Claude Meunier, *Ring Noir: Quand Apollinaire, Cendrars Et Picabia découvraient les boxeurs nègres* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 32.

¹⁶⁶ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le poète assassiné* (Paris : Gallimard, 1912), 95.

¹⁶⁷ Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, 2008), 164.

boxers like McVey embody is crucial to Apollinaire's conception of the poet of the 20th century. By embracing this primitive nature, the poet would escape the degenerative effects of modernity that led to Maupassant's demise, and, instead, as he proclaims in *L'esprit nouveau*, "dominera le monde entier"¹⁶⁸ just like his counterparts in the ring.

Arthur Cravan's Machismo and the Poetic Championship of the World

At a height of 2 meters and weighing in at a muscular 125 kilos, Arthur Cravan's actual physique bears a striking resemblance to Picasso's caricature of *Apollinaire en Athlète*, and given the importance of physical exertion to Cravan's creative process that we uncovered in chapter 1, Cravan was obviously well aware of the importance of muscular effort to a successful artist. Like Apollinaire, Cravan found his model for this muscular poet in the black boxers whose unabashed masculinity was scandalizing the establishment, and if anything, Cravan's revolt against his overly intellectual contemporaries gives priority to the poet's visceral nature above all else. For Cravan, this masculinity is hence exaggerated to such an extent that it would be more correctly labeled machismo: "a strong or exaggerated sense of manliness; an assumptive attitude that virility, courage, strength, and entitlement to dominate are attributes or concomitants of masculinity."¹⁶⁹ Cravan's macho valorization of the physical is perhaps what pushed the poète-boxeur into the ring where he risked serious brain trauma to prove his manhood,¹⁷⁰ but it also had profound effects upon his identity as a poet as Cravan struck out against his literary rivals in order to prove his dominance. Furthermore, as we examine the pugilistic nature of this persona, it

¹⁶⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes : II* (Gallimard : Paris, 1991), 943.

¹⁶⁹ Merriam-Webster online dictionary <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/machismo> accessed October 6th 2013.

¹⁷⁰ As Neil Carter observes, although usually overshadowed by the public's moral objections to the sport, an awareness of boxing damaging effects upon the brain dates back to 1893 and the presence of ringside doctors was established in 1906. Cited in Neil Carter *Medicine, Sport and the Body: a Historical Perspective* (New York Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). Accessed October 22nd 2013. <http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/Medicine-Sport-and-the-Body/chapter-ba-9781849662062-chapter-009.xml?print>

becomes clear that, beyond the “exercices hygiéniques” championed by Apollinaire, Cravan understood that the assertion of one’s machismo has a darker side which not only necessitates that one attacks but that one is prepared to take a punch as well.

As we analyze Cravan’s poetic identity we are first struck by how deliberately he crafted this persona as he entered the literary arena. As Maria Lluïsa Borràs describes:

Son arrivée à Paris met fin aux errances du Fabian vagabond et transforme vite en Arthur Cravan le poète qui tentera désespérément de se faire connaître. Il fréquentera bien quelques soirées littéraires mais de façon marginale, et il usera mille arguteries – sans renoncer à la provocation, ou au scandale – pour se faire un nom, non pas le sien, Fabian Avenarius Lloyd, mais le pseudonyme qu’il inventera à l’automne 1910 : Arthur Cravan¹⁷¹

Examining this chosen pseudonym, Bertrand Lacerelle points to King Arthur, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde’s Arthur Saville and Edgar Allen Poe’s Arthur Gordon Pym as the “quatre origines possibles pour le choix du prénom de Cravan.”¹⁷² However, we must add a fifth possible inspiration to this list: Jack Johnson, born John Arthur Johnson, ring name “Lil’ Arthur.” It was likely out of the question that Cravan would accept the qualifier “Lil’” no matter how ironic it may have been, but Cravan’s admiration for Johnson was no secret. Cravan famously pleads: “Ah! laisse-moi rire, rire, mais rire comme Jack Johnson”¹⁷³ in *Oscar Wilde est vivant*.

Furthermore, although the poète-boxeur refused to fight for either Raymond Poincaré or Woodrow Wilson in the First World War, reflecting on his match with Johnson, Cravan declared to *The Soil*: “After Poe, Whitman, Emerson, he is the most glorious American. If there is a revolution here I shall fight to have him enthroned King of the United States.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 73.

¹⁷² Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 173.

¹⁷³ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 52.

¹⁷⁴ Arthur Cravan, “Arthur Cravan vs. Jack Johnson” *The Soil* N°4, April 17, 1917 <https://archive.org/details/jstor-20542322> (Accessed October 20, 2013).

The reasons for Cravan's fondness for Johnson are apparent. For Cravan, brutishness is the state to which all artists must aspire. As Cravan advises the artists of *L'Exposition des indépendants*:

Quand on a la chance d'être une brute, il faut savoir le rester. Tout le monde comprendra que je préfère un gros Saint-bernard obtus à Mademoiselle Fanfreluche qui peut exécuter les pas de la gavotte et, de toute façon, un jaune à un blanc, un nègre à un jaune et un nègre boxeur à un nègre étudiant.¹⁷⁵

As a black heavyweight champion, Johnson had won an undisputed claim to the pinnacle of this hierarchy of brutishness and masculinity by laying his challengers out on the canvas, and Cravan hence imitates Johnson's example through his uniquely pugilistic "Critical Instinct of Knock-Out."¹⁷⁶

The first chapter of this thesis explored the fistic nature of Cravan's brutal criticism which repeatedly takes aim at his artistic opponent's bodies in order to knock them out of the artistic arena, but by directly attacking his artistic rivals, Cravan predates Hemingway's use of a literary "championship" as a "metaphor for literary succession,"¹⁷⁷ and Cravan's attack on André Gide bears a striking similarity to Johnson's own title fight with Tommy Burns. Both Cravan and Johnson come into their matches as outsiders facing established champions, and Cravan furthers this similarity by aligning himself with Johnson along racial lines as he contrasts "les mains...d'un fainéant, très blanches, ma foi!"¹⁷⁸ of Gide to his own skin "vite dorée, car j'ai toujours eu un peu honte d'être blanc."¹⁷⁹ According to Lacerelle, it is ultimately evident that

¹⁷⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 78.

¹⁷⁶ Mina Loy cited in Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 250.

¹⁷⁷ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 235.

¹⁷⁸ Arthur Cravan *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 37.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

Gide, like Burns, does not stand a chance against a true brute,¹⁸⁰ and Cravan even adopts Johnson's scandalous mocking of his opponent's inferior masculinity. Johnson recounts in his memoirs *Mes Combats*, which Cravan almost certainly read as they were published in installments in the magazine *La vie au Grand Air* in 1911, that he humiliated his opponent with taunts like "What are you scared of little boy?...Don't forget we're playing a man's game and men are supposed to enjoy it."¹⁸¹ and Cravan similarly touts his superior physicality over Gide who at 55 kilos does not understand the macho universe of the boxing ring either. When Cravan mentions boxing, Gide naively responds "« La littérature est pourtant le seul point sur lequel nous puissions nous rencontrer. »"¹⁸²

However, it is not necessary that Gide appreciate the noble art because Cravan's brutal critical technique transforms the literary arena itself into a boxing ring, and Cravan finds a way to provoke his rivals into a fight whether they want to face the poet boxer or not. As Lacerelle notes, the 54 artists who Cravan targets in his critique of *L'exposition des indépendants* were really just stepping-stones towards Cravan's title bout with Apollinaire as the poète-boxeur specifically targeted artists whom Apollinaire had praised in his own criticism.¹⁸³ Each of these artists hence functions as what is known in boxing as a "tomato can," an "opponent" whose sole value is to build up Cravan's record so that he may challenge Apollinaire for the title. As Oates writes, the name of the opponent "is always unknown,"¹⁸⁴ and the poète-boxeur therefore often

¹⁸⁰ Bertrand Lacerelle, "Arthur Cravan (enfin) chez André Gide," *La nouvelle revue française* 83 (2008).

¹⁸¹ Jack Johnson, *My Life and Battles* edited and translated by Christopher Rivers (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 71.

¹⁸² Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 35.

¹⁸³ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 24.

¹⁸⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 34.

does not worry himself with details as he dispatches his opponents: “*Kipling*, je n’ai pas vu son envoi et j’ignore jusqu’à l’orthographe correcte de son nom.”¹⁸⁵

In case the first fifty-three victories Cravan piles up were not sufficient to gain Apollinaire’s attention, Cravan directs his final blow at Apollinaire’s former fiancée, Marie Laurencin. Cravan’s insult, “*Marie Laurencin*. En voilà une autre qui aurait besoin qu’on lui relève les jupes et qu’on lui mette une grosse... quelque part pour lui apprendre que l’art n’est pas une petite pose devant le miroir.”¹⁸⁶ both disrespects Apollinaire’s former fiancée and insults Apollinaire’s manhood in an act of macho provocation that will be echoed perfectly in the iconic Rocky series when Clubber Lang goads Rocky Balboa in to the ring by telling his wife, “Bring your pretty little self over to my apartment tonight, and I’ll show you a real man.”¹⁸⁷ Cravan succeeds in drawing Apollinaire into a battle of words, and, although we have observed a certain respect between the two “pachydermes” in this confrontation, as Lacerelle points out, Cravan’s desire to “rivaliser poétiquement avec le champion de l’avant-garde, et physiquement”¹⁸⁸ is none the less clear. Cravan’s machismo demands that he prove himself superior to all his competitors in a way that parallels, albeit less modestly, his hero Johnson’s own reasons for fighting for the heavyweight championship – “I considered myself to be the equal of the best men out there and I’m not sure that, down deep, I didn’t even consider myself a little better.”¹⁸⁹

The poète-boxeur hence established himself as the elephant in comparison to Apollinaire the rhinoceros, the biggest brute of them all and *le plus grand poète du monde*. In the process Cravan found infamy as well as glory in scandalizing the avant-garde and even served jail time

¹⁸⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 76.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁸⁷ *Rocky III*, DVD, directed by Sylvester Stallone, 1982 (Beverly Hills: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003).

¹⁸⁸ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 24.

¹⁸⁹ Jack Johnson, *My Life and Battles* edited and translated by Christopher Rivers (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 49.

for the indecent remarks about Laurencin in his critique of *L'exposition des indépendants*.¹⁹⁰ However, this scandal only further likened the poet to Johnson who, himself persecuted by the law, was in Cravan's words "... a man of scandal – I like him for that... anything that has to do with Johnson has to do with a crowd of policemen."¹⁹¹ As Oates writes: "Those whose aggression is masked, or oblique or unsuccessful, will always condemn it in others,"¹⁹² and Cravan and Johnson's unabashed machismo therefore could not go unpunished by the establishment. However, Oates also observes that in the boxing ring "anger is accommodated, ennobled... rage is transposed without equivocation into art."¹⁹³ By transforming literature into a pugilistic contest, Cravan, who was later championed by both the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, was able to imitate Johnson and endear himself to an avant-garde that was appreciative of his poetic aggression.

"To be or not to be...American": The Duplicity and Masochism of the Poète-Boxeur

As our examination of the parallels between Johnson's rise to the heavyweight title and Cravan's own assault on his literary rivals shows, although the concept of machismo originates from Spain, it was among the American boxers like Johnson that Cravan found his macho role models. In fact, turning towards the article "To be or not to be American," which Cravan published in 1909 when he was still going by his given name Fabian Lloyd, we find a sort of formula to the machismo of the poète-boxeur. Of the numerous "tuyaux pour devenir le plus poli des gentlemen américains"¹⁹⁴ which Cravan provides the reader "Soyez glabres... Crachez dans

¹⁹⁰ Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 119.

¹⁹¹ Arthur Cravan, "Arthur Cravan vs. Jack Johnson" *The Soil* N°4, April 17, 1917 <https://archive.org/details/jstor-20542322> (Accessed October 20, 2013).

¹⁹² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 69.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹⁴ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 121.

les salons,”¹⁹⁵ several strike us as particularly important. First, we find Cravan already praising the virtue of one’s physique as he, somewhat unrealistically, advises his readers “Soyez d’une taille un tantinet au-dessus de la moyenne,” and the misogyny that would one day put Cravan behind bars is already present as well: “Ayez la femme en mépris.”¹⁹⁶ The roots of Cravan’s attack on all of his poetic competition and the diminutive status of “rhinocéros” which he grants Apollinaire are also resumed in this short article: “Souvenez-vous bien de cette admirable maxime: je suis n° 1, mon proche est n° 2.”¹⁹⁷

But in addition to these easy to follow instructions for becoming American, Cravan also underlines how easy this transformation is made because to “be” American one need only change at a superficial level. Cravan writes “Il faut être américain, ou tout au moins le paraître, ce qui est exactement la même chose,”¹⁹⁸ and moreover, Cravan twice repeats this equivalence between being and appearance in relation to American boxers: “l’Américain est craint, il sait boxer ; ou du moins on le croit... La casquette visière est seulement tolérable pour les boxeurs ou ceux qui veulent passer pour tels, ce qui est encore exactement la même chose.”¹⁹⁹ It is well documented that Cravan lied several times about his pugilistic credentials over the course of his career as a boxer: in his match with Greek Olympic champion George Calafatis he qualified himself as the champion of Canada²⁰⁰ and he was falsely reported to be “el campeón europeo” by the Barcelonan press coverage of his fight with Johnson.²⁰¹ Moreover, Cravan’s claims that one need only look and act the part in order to become an American, or better yet an American boxer, beg questions about the sincerity and authenticity of the poète-boxeur’s own macho persona.

¹⁹⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 121.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-124.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁰¹ Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 151.

In many respects the poète-boxeur's duplicity is to be expected. According to Geoffrey Ward, Jack Johnson's own autobiography is "filled with exaggerations, embellishments and outright inventions,"²⁰² and Cravan is once again following his icon's lead in creating his own legend. Furthermore, Oates observes that such falsifications are inherent to the noble art itself:

One of the primary things boxing is about is lying. It's about systematically cultivating a double personality: the self in society, the self in the ring...and in the ring, if he is a good boxer and not just a journeyman, he will cultivate yet another split personality, to thwart the Opponent's game plan vis-à-vis *him*.²⁰³

For the poet of "mille âmes" who declares "Je suis toutes les choses, tous les hommes et tous les animaux!"²⁰⁴ there is no doubt that Cravan had mastered this technique. However, for the poète-boxeur, the self in society and the self in the ring must often be one and the same, and as we turn towards a further analysis of Cravan's life and poetry, a conflict reveals itself between the ultra-macho persona with which Cravan presented himself and other forces within Cravan's "mille âmes."

As Cravan begins his critique of *L'exposition des indépendants* in which he will brutally attack the artistic community and rail against the futility of artistic study, the critic's imagined reader asks him a very logical question about why he even bothers with art at all - "...pourquoi, méprisant la peinture, vous vous donnez la peine d'en faire la critique?"²⁰⁵ - to which Cravan responds with characteristic machismo: "C'est bien simple: si j'écris c'est pour faire enrager mes confrères ; pour faire parler de moi et tenter de me faire un nom. Avec un nom on réussit avec les

²⁰² Geoffrey C. Ward Foreword to Jack Johnson, *My Life and Battles* edited and translated by Christopher Rivers (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009), 4.

²⁰³ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 77.

²⁰⁴ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 45.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

femmes et dans les affaires.”²⁰⁶ In making this assertion, the poet shows he certainly does not believe in Théophile Gautier’s slogan “L’art pour l’art.” Instead, Cravan resembles many great boxers who have professed similarly superficial motives. Highly successful champions from Dempsey to Holmes have insisted that they only fought for money, and even “The Greatest”, Muhammad Ali has claimed “Boxing was nothing. It wasn’t important at all. Boxing was just a means to introduce me to the world.”²⁰⁷

Yet, as Joyce Carol Oates observes, these boxer’s claims are surely cover-ups for much deeper motivations because “To acknowledge other motives would suggest *machismo*’s vulnerability,”²⁰⁸ and looking to Cravan’s unpublished works we find that his own assertions that “j’ai toujours essayé de considérer l’art comme un moyen et non comme un but”²⁰⁹ are equally misleading. In his private poetic *Notes* which were published in 1942, we are struck by the line “Mon art est le plus difficile parce que je l’adore et je lui chie dessus”²¹⁰ as Cravan clearly professes a deeper appreciation for his poetry than he lets on in his publications of *Maintenant* while also lamenting that he must degrade the value of his own art in order to maintain his scandalous macho image. In further contrast to the macho public persona that is constantly throwing punches at his fellow litterateurs, these private notes find Cravan committing a sort of sacrilege against the ideals of machismo as he writes “si j’avais connu Balzac j’aurais essayé de lui voler un baiser.”²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 68.

²⁰⁷ Muhammad Ali, 1983 cited in Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 205.

²⁰⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 63.

²⁰⁹ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 33.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

However, as Borràs outlines, Cravan was conscious from the very beginning of his poetic career that “la provocation pour la provocation”²¹² would be how the name Arthur Cravan would make the headlines. With his enormous physical size, Cravan was well suited to play the part of the primitive and was happy to do so if it helped him make a name for himself. Mike Tyson would later express a similar sentiment about his own scandalous public image saying:

I know at times I come across like a Neanderthal or a babbling idiot, but I like that person. I like to show you that person because that’s who you all come to see. I’m Tyson. I’m a tyrannical titan. And sometimes I say, ‘God, it would be good to be a fake somebody rather than a real nobody.’²¹³

Like Tyson, Cravan continues to portray his macho persona in order to gain the favor of the crowd even though he privately confesses in the poem “Arthur” from his *Exercice Poétique* that he is “triste d’être boxeur” and suffers from his “funeste pluralité.”²¹⁴

Paradoxically, however, in doing so Cravan embodies what for Oates is the quality which unifies poet and boxer:

This fanatic subordination of the self in terms of a wished for destiny...the sport’s systematic cultivation of pain in the interests of a project, a life goal: the willed transposing of the sensation we know as pain (physical, psychological, emotional) into its polar opposite.²¹⁵

Masochism is essential to the crafts of both the boxer and the writer, and Oates’ observation that “Boxing is about being hit rather more than it is about hitting”²¹⁶ is equally applicable to Cravan’s identity as a poet. As Lacerelle writes in his definition of the “Syndrome de Cravan,” “Cravan vacille entre les deux pôles de son existence, souffrance et satisfaction. Son cri de

²¹² Maria Lluïsa Borràs, *Arthur Cravan: Une stratégie du scandale* (Paris : Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1996), 97.

²¹³ *Tyson*, documentary motion picture, directed by James Toback, (UK: Sony Pictures Classics, 2008).

²¹⁴ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 98.

²¹⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 26.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

guerre : « Hélas et Hourra ! »²¹⁷ We now add to Lacerelle's diagnosis another binary – masochism and machismo.

As the almost anagrammatic nature of these two words suggests, these two facets of the poète-boxeur's identity are inextricably linked. In fact, these opposing ideals are so essential to the poet's identity that they are found within his very name – “Arthur,” the king, the poetic hero and the champion of the world, meets “Cravan,” in English “craven” from the ancient French “cravanté,” the beaten, the contemptible and the crushed.²¹⁸ By putting himself into the ring with a poetic great like Gide and Apollinaire or with a legendary boxer like Johnson, Cravan invites pain upon himself be it from the psychological anguish of positioning himself as the eternal outsider or from an actual physical blow, but by continuing forward in spite of this pain Cravan also proves that he possesses the machismo which forms the base of his claims to greatness. A Greek inscription dating from the 1st century BCE reads: “A boxer's victory is gained in blood,”²¹⁹ and for Cravan the path to poetic greatness is equally demanding.

Boxing therefore serves a role in the machismo of Cravan's poète-boxeur persona that is both similar and different from the “exercices hygiéniques” championed by Apollinaire. For both Apollinaire and Cravan, the primitive masculinity of the black boxer, “ce beau nègre en acier,”²²⁰ serves as a model for how the poet can retain his own masculine power in face of the modernity's effeminizing effects. This unrestrained masculinity sets the poet apart from a society where manhood is in decay, and hence renders him, like the black boxer, an outsider who can combat the establishment and *épater les bourgeois*. Cravan however, having actually entered the ring himself, knows the true price of proving one's machismo. By turning the literary arena into a

²¹⁷ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 217.

²¹⁸ *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, s.v. “craven,” <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/craven> (accessed October 13 2013).

²¹⁹ Cited in Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 185.

²²⁰ Guillaume Apollinaire. *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris : La Pléiade, 1956), 179.

boxing match he aims to prove himself a true champion, an alpha poet whose masculinity is beyond compare, but this tactic also requires he endure certain amount of pain as he enters the ring with his rivals and even attacks the very art which he adores. Yet while this masochism takes on a uniquely pugilistic form within Cravan's macho poète-boxeur persona, it should not be at all unfamiliar to Apollinaire. As Oates writes, "To move through pain to triumph – or the semblance of triumph – is the writer's, as it is the boxer's hope,"²²¹ and it was by embracing this connection between pugilist and poet that Apollinaire and Cravan were able to triumph as poets of the modern era.

²²¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 60.

Legacies and Legends

*“The boxing past exists in an uncannily real and vital relationship with the present. The dead are not dead, or not merely dead ...a boxer can – sometimes – transcend the merely physical; he can, if he is lucky, be absolved of his mortality.”*²²²

Only months after Apollinaire and Cravan faced off over the affair of *L'Exposition des Indépendants*, a very different kind of combat would force both poetic heavyweights to leave the Parisian literary scene on two diverging paths: while Apollinaire would adopt French citizenship and head to the trenches, Cravan would adopt several false nationalities in order to flee the war to Spain and later the Americas. In his desertion, Cravan calls to mind Ali's famous declaration “I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong,”²²³ and once again resembles his icon Johnson who, when asked if he would join the ranks of the American army replied: “Fight for America? Well I should say not. What has America ever done for me or my race?”²²⁴ Leon Trotsky, who fled Europe on the same New York bound ship as the poète-boxer, recalls that Cravan “avouait franchement qu'il aimait mieux démolir la mâchoire à des messieurs yankees, dans un noble sport, que de se faire casser les cotes par un Allemand,”²²⁵ and the boxer's aversion to the battlefield is easily understood. Both Cravan's pugilistic and poetic styles center upon using his superior physicality and machismo to prove his superiority over his rivals and further his name. He hence would have no place in the anonymity of the battlefield where bullets and bombs

²²² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 110-111.

²²³ Muhammad Ali, 1969, cited in Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 212.

²²⁴ Jack Johnson cited in Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 245.

²²⁵ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 210.

would negate his physical advantages. As Cravan describes to Trotsky, war is a “massacre insensé,”²²⁶ violence without restriction that bears little resemblance to the noble art. There are no weight classes or referees and one rarely faces one’s adversary face to face, man to man. If Apollinaire had any illusions about finding the same unification of body and spirit offered by the boxing ring in the chaotic violence of the trenches, his death from the Spanish flu after being injured by shrapnel surely shows us just how different war is from the “exercices hygiéniques” the poet championed. Alas, neither poet would survive past 1918, as Cravan, after gaining money for his passage by fighting Mexican champion Jim Smith, would prove no match for the sea and drown en route from Mexico to Brazil under mysterious circumstances. Nevertheless, just as the walls of a boxing gym are invariably covered with images of past champions, so too did Cravan and Apollinaire’s legacy remain visible after their passing. As Bertrand Lacerelle writes “André Breton et les futures surréalistes sont très affectés par la mort de Guillaume. Quant à Arthur, ce sont plutôt les dadaïstes qui le déplorent.”²²⁷ The pugilistic fascination shared by these two poets would not be lost upon their Surrealist and Dadaists followers either.

André Breton’s *poème-objet* from December of 1941²²⁸ would, like Apollinaire’s calligrammes, give new physical form to poetry, and, perhaps not coincidentally, feature a pair of boxing gloves within its composition. Echoing what Oates describes as, “Boxing’s claim is that it is superior to life in that it is, ideally, superior to all accident. It contains nothing that is not fully willed,” Breton gives the following definition to surrealism:

Surréalisme n. m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée.

²²⁶ Arthur Cravan, *Œuvres : Poèmes, articles, lettres*, Ed. Jean Pierre Begot (Paris : Editions Ivrea, 2009), 210.

²²⁷ Bertrand Lacerelle, *Arthur Cravan précipité* (Paris : Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2010), 37.

²²⁸ André Breton, *Poème-Objet*, Carved wood bust of man, oil lantern, framed photograph, toy boxing gloves, and paper mounted on drawing board, December 1941. (Museum of Modern Art, New York City) http://www.moma.org/collection/provenance/provenance_object.php?object_id=81121

Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.²²⁹

The surrealists, like boxers, therefore access “the outermost limits of their beings,”²³⁰ through their art. This desire to reach beyond expectations and access the power of that which is unexpected can be traced back to the originator of the term, Guillaume Apollinaire whose poetry, like a boxing match, combines spirit and form to powerful and surprising ends.

Meanwhile, Cravan's own brutally provocative style is easily found within Tzara's Dadaist manifestos as he knocks-out his reader with the line “Foutez-vous vous-même un coup de poing dans la figure et tombez morts.”²³¹ As Kasia Boddy notes, “fists are continually evoked as essential Dadaist tools against establishment culture,”²³² and the Dada movement, like Cravan, hoped to knock-out an artistic establishment that had become poisoned by intellectualism and reason. Cravan's *Very Boxe* would have been right at home amongst Dada's soirées which often combined boxing, music and dance²³³ in an affirmation of what Tzara called “la vitalité de chaque instant.”²³⁴ Arthur Cravan was named one of Dada's presidents in absentia by Tzara, and it seems some members of the movement fancied themselves poète-boxeurs in their own right as Francis Picabia used a portrait of French champion George Carpentier in place of Marcel Duchamp on the cover of the Dada Journal 391.²³⁵

The Parisian literary elite's obsession with black boxers would also continue long after Cravan and Apollinaire's deaths. One could point to April 15th 1931 as the culmination of this relationship when Al Brown, who was actually managed by John Cocteau, faced off against

²²⁹ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (Editions du Sagittaire, 1924) <http://aragon-triolet.populus.org/rub/12> (Accessed October 24, 2013).

²³⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 8.

²³¹ Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes : tome I* (Paris : Flammarion, 1975), 376.

²³² Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 248.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 248.

²³⁴ Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes : tome I* (Paris : Flammarion, 1975), 374.

²³⁵ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 246.

Roger Simendé at the Cirque d’Hiver in order to raise money for the Dakar-Djibouti mission to collect African art. Although, the anthropologist Jean Jamin argues “that the black man that fought that night prefigured the ‘objets nègres’ that, two years later, the expedition would bring back from the land of their ancestors,”²³⁶ Brown’s own prefight statement that “I am boxing to contribute to the success of the expedition and to increase the knowledge and understanding of Africa”²³⁷ suggests that the boxer did not consider himself to be simply another piece on display.

Yet we must also look elsewhere to find the successors to Apollinaire and Cravan’s pugilistic and poetic titles. Beyond the negrophilia of these white poets, Ari Gounongbe and Lilyan Kesteloot’s analysis of the most important figures of the negritude movement finds that “Il y a un côté boxeur chez Césaire, une énorme agressivité.”²³⁸ However, Césaire’s own description of the black “boxeur affamé”²³⁹ found in his “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” as “COMIQUE ET LAID”²⁴⁰ calls into question whether Césaire himself would appreciate such a comparison. For Césaire, the boxer “dédigné”²⁴¹ appears ridiculous outside of the ring where his grace and triumphs are forgotten in face of the racism of everyday life.

Two decades later, however, a poète-boxeur would emerge whose physical grace coupled within an equally astounding verbal assault allowed him to effect real change to the establishment. Muhammad Ali, the most celebrated of all poète-boxeurs, would, as Oates observes, “make his mark as a radical political presence.”²⁴² Ali would not follow in the

²³⁶ Jean Jamin cited in Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris* (Chicago: University of Illinois University Press, 1998), 29.

²³⁷ Alfonso Teofilo Brown cited in Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris* (Chicago: University of Illinois University Press, 1998), 28.

²³⁸ Ari Gounongbe and Lilyan Kesteloot. *Les Grandes figures de la négritude* (Paris : Editions L’Harmattan, 2007), 150.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=g8fQYE3kNAC&pg=PA150&dq=negritude+boxe&hl=fr&sa=X&ei=1mVhUtXdKcemygHO44H4Ag&ved=OCDsQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=negritude%20boxe&f=false> (Accessed October 25, 2013).

²³⁹ Aimé Césaire, *La Poésie* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1994), 36.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁴² Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 206.

footsteps of previous champions like Joe Louis or Floyd Patterson who acquiesced to white society's norms. Instead, Ali's defiance, which was often uncannily reminiscent of his "predecessor Jack Johnson,"²⁴³ would come to symbolize the radical changes which took place during his reign as champion. One could even say that the American Revolution predicted by Cravan came to pass, only with Ali rather than Johnson being crowned King of the United States. Yet Johnson is not the only figure of our study whose traces can be found within the image of "the Greatest."

In the ring, Muhammad Ali's style was, like Apollinaire's *Esprit nouveau*, built around the unexpected. From the phantom right hand that sent Sonny Liston to the canvas in the first round of their rematch to his impossible 8th round KO of George Foreman during the Rumble in the Jungle, Ali's pugilism revolved around the theory that the most dangerous punch is the one your opponent never sees coming.²⁴⁴ Outside of the ring Ali's always provocative persona - "Frazier is so ugly that he should donate his face to the US Bureau of Wildlife" - calls Cravan to mind, and seeing Ali's provocative and entertaining mixture of dancing and boxing, the "Ali shuffle,"²⁴⁵ one is quickly reminded of Cravan's *Very Boxe* as well. As for Ali's poetry, Norman Mailer notes that his prefight verses rarely strayed from a very straightforward playfulness,²⁴⁶ but, these boastful poems nonetheless captured the public's attention and allowed Ali to achieve a goal he shared with both Cravan and Apollinaire. As Ali himself remarked after winning the Championship for the first time in 1964: "I shook up the world!"²⁴⁷ Just as Ali would revolutionize the sport, Guillaume Apollinaire, inspired by Ali's predecessors, would shatter the

²⁴³ Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing: Updated and Expanded Edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 207.

²⁴⁴ Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (Boston : Little, Brown and Company, 1975), 5.

²⁴⁵ The "Ali Shuffle" was a bit of showboating in which Ali would quickly shuffle his feet in the ring. Although it may have distracted opponents at times, its main purpose was entertainment.

²⁴⁶ Norman Mailer. *The Fight* (Boston : Little, Brown and Company, 1975) 13

²⁴⁷ Muhammad Ali, February 25th 1964. Cited from Alex Trickett "When Clay Shook up the World" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/boxing/3516241.stm> (Accessed October 20, 2013).

establishment's perceptions with a poetic style that redefined the possibilities of language.

Cravan, for his part, would practice a poetic style educated by his own experience as a boxer and shake up the literary world by turning it into a boxing match where his brutal poetic aggression could flourish. The black boxer served as an exemplar for both of these lyrical heavyweights and by embracing their craft's connection to the noble art, ultimately both Apollinaire and Cravan were able to become champions of the poetic world.

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