American Novel: the undertones of Horatio Alger, the inter-racial comradery of nineteenth-century fiction, the sage advisor and his youthful apprentice, and the rugged and righteous individual confronting the angry mob. It is a tale of courage, heroics, and triumph. Epic in its proportions, the Robinson legend has persevered—and will continue to do so—because the myth, which rarely deviates from reality, fits our national perceptions of fair play and social progress. The emotional impact of Robinson's challenge requires no elaboration or enhancement. Few works of fiction could impart its power.

Indeed, so total was Robinson's triumph, so dominant his personality, that few people have questioned the strategies and values that underpinned Branch Rickey's "noble experiment." Rickey based his blueprint for integration both on his assessment of the racial realities of postwar America and his flair for the dramatic. He believed that the United States was ready for integrated baseball, but the balance remained so precarious that the breakthrough had to be carefully planned and cautiously advanced. Americans—both black and white, players and fans—needed time to accommodate themselves to the idea of blacks in baseball. The slightest false step, Rickey concluded, would delay the entry of nonwhites into the national pastime indefinitely. Rickey felt that the primary burden of this undertaking had to rest on the shoulders of a lone standard-bearer, upon whose success or failure the fate of the entire venture would be determined. The fact that this gradual process accrued publicity and added to the drama was never central to Rickey's thinking, but rather a natural component of his personality, Rickey conceived of schemes on the grand scale and enacted them accordingly. . . .

The Rickey blueprint placed tremendous pressure upon Robinson, his standard-bearer. Robinson's response to this challenge inspired a legend. His playing skills, intelligence, and competitive flair made Robinson the perfect path breaker. Still, did others exist who could have duplicated his feat? Unquestionably, many black athletes possessed major league talent, but could they have performed adequately under the intense pressure and retained their composure amidst insults? . . .

. . . In Robinson, Rickey had uncovered not only an outstanding baseball player, but a figure of charisma and leadership. For blacks, Robinson became a symbol of pride and dignity; to whites, he represented a type of black man far removed from prevailing stereotypes, whom they could not help but respect. He would not fade into obscurity after retirement as most athletes do. Robinson remained an active advocate of civil rights causes and Afro-American interests. . . .

Muhammad Ali: The Hero in the Age of Mass Media

MICHAEL ORIARD

. . . I'm not concerned here with Muhammad Ali the man, but with Ali as cultural representation. To find the "real" Ali is a quest for biographers; as a student of had in the 1960s and 1970s. Those of us who came of age during the Ali era share certain memories of Ali, however we might have differed, or differ now, in our responses to him. We can all hear Ali's voice, declaiming, "I am the greatest!" We can still hear him predicting the round in which an opponent would fall; we can hear him chant, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"; if we don't remember the precise words, we nonetheless retain impressions of his poetry and his taunts at weigh-ins and even in the ring, and his seemingly hysterical tirades before and after fights. For all their familiarity, however, we should not forget how we first encountered these outpourings from the Louisville Lip, as he was called early on (a less charming later nickname termed him The Mouth). We need to remember that in his first dawning on public awareness, Ali radically changed the self-presentation of the American athlete.

The hero's boast has a long ancestry: from Achilles before the walls of Troy through the latter-day "flyting" of ring-tailed roarers on the American frontier, nearly into the age of modern sport with John L. Sullivan and his fellow bare-knuckle brawlers. But the lineage of our sporting etiquette looks more to the tradition of Castiglione's courtier and his spiritual offspring on pubic-school playing fields in Britain. America's sportsmen through the first half of the twentieth century were not uniformly "sportsmen" in this honorific sense, but officially they subscribed to the aw-shucks code of Frank Merriwell.

Those born after 1960 or so might accept as commonplace something that perhaps thrilled, perhaps offended, but in all cases startled us when we first heard a maniacally exuberant young Cassius Clay declare, "I am the greatest!"—shattering a century-old image of the sportsman. The Merriwell code still hovered over American sport before Ali's emergence. During televised games, players studiously looked away when they sensed a television camera pointed in their direction. They kept their game faces on and their mouths shut; they left the voting on #1 to pollsters and waited until after the game to say "Hi" to their mothers.

After Ali, we heard Joe Namath outrageously predict that his Jets would beat the Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl. Not quite two years later, the Kansas City Chiefs' Elmo Wright, a rookie wide receiver, introduced the first end-zone dance to the NFL—a simple two-step considerably less artful than the Ali Shuffle. . . .

These details of sporting manners reflect a major cultural transformation in post-1950s America. Surely Muhammad Ali is one of the emblems of self-assertion and self-regard in an era whose cultural mainstream has become preoccupied—obsessed—with the self. This is not to say that Muhammad Ali represented the values now associated with "me decade" narcissism and Reagan-era greed, with Yuppie self-indulgence and Donald Trump. When Cassius Clay first declared, "I am the greatest!" this was an original and radical act. It defied the spirit of gray flannel suits and social accommodation; it shattered the mask of humble silence and nonassertion demanded of blacks in America, particularly of blacks in the South. It was also full of risk: proclaiming himself the greatest, Clay/Ali challenged opponents to beat him into a liar. Moreover, at least initially, he risked the outrage of the audience on which his livelihood depended. Anachronistic or not, Merriwellian modesty was the guise that athletes were expected to adopt if they were to be accepted as popular heroes. In this matter of self-presentation Clay/Ali represented something genuinely radical. . . .

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..., associated with strength and violence, Muhammad Ali made us think about beauty. Ali's sculpted body and "pretty" face, together with his gentleness with children, undoubtedly accounted for much of his appeal to women of all ages, who were not typically drawn to prizefighters. This was most conspicuously the "feminine" aspect of Ali, the physical incarnation of those elements of his boxing style (his dancing, his speed and quickness—as opposed to his power) and of his poetry that American culture defines as feminine. I can think of no one in our time who so successfully embodied cross-gender wholeness. As a professor of American literature, I am more accustomed to looking at this matter from the other direction: at the dilemma of the American male artist who feels driven to assert his masculinity because art and literature have been culturally defined as feminine. Probably only the heavyweight champion of the world could declare "I am the prettiest" and not diminish his aura of physical prowess. Certainly it hasn't worked the other way: writers such as Hemingway or Mailer, for instance, insisting they are the toughest sonsabitches around, have been considerably less convincing.

Ali was the prettiest and the greatest; he was fighter and dancer, loudmouth and poet, exuberant child and heavyweight champion of the world. In describing Ali as a sum of many parts, I have been circling around one of the principal claims I want to make in this essay. *Our* Muhammad Ali is the one we know through television, radio, newspapers, magazines such as *Sports Illustrated,* and closed-circuit screenings of his fights—the collection of images transmitted through those media. The crucial fact about those images is their extraordinary range. Various images of Muhammad Ali might be assigned to different stages in his career. One might reasonably identify an early brash, youthful, and exuberant Cassius Clay, who changed with the changing of his name after winning the title from Sonny Liston in 1964. This new Muhammad Ali grew increasingly militant as a spokesman for black separatism; then another new Ali, the political martyr, emerged with his defiance of the draft board and his three-and-a-half-year exile from boxing; then yet another Ali appeared with his return to boxing in 1970, an older, more mature figure of physical and mental courage in the Norton, Frazier, and Foreman fights. Finally, Ali became the aging champion who fought too long, who not only lost bouts to Leon Spinks, Larry Holmes, and Trevor Berbick, but who also lost his physical health and verbal agility to the sport he had transformed.

Certainly there is much truth in this account of the changes over the course of Ali's career, but it is also essential to recognize that at every stage of his career there was not a single Ali but many Alis in the public consciousness. The brash Cassius Clay could seem either braggart or free spirit; the dancing Ali could seem an artist or a coward; the Muslim Ali could seem a religious or a political man; the conscientious objector could seem a con man, a pacifist, a traitor, or a martyr. To the late-1960s white counterculture, Ali surely was identified more with the antiwar movement than with black separatism; to blacks during this same period he surely represented chiefly racial pride.

All of us—young and old, black and white, poor and privileged—knew these various Alis through the media. The media did not construct a single Ali but the multiple Alis we have been considering. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has the larger culture that produces them. In reading the texts of a complex modern culture such as ours, it is essential to acknowledge that no single interpretation is likely to be possible. Students of American culture who attempt to interpret the texts of our past confront an overwhelming challenge to discover how ordinary people interpreted them. Students of sport have this advantage: the sports journalism that has always accompanied organized sport virtually from the beginning offers, not direct access to the minds and hearts of its readers, but at least closer access to them than is usually possible. Sportswriters are themselves individual interpreters of the events they describe; at the same time, they mediate between these events and those who read their accounts. What one finds in the reporting on Ali over the years is, first, an awareness among sportswriters that Ali was a "text" that could be read in competing ways and, second, a record of the ways he was read.

To approach Ali as a "cultural text" I read through the coverage of his career in *Sports Illustrated,* and I discovered, among other things, that journalists understood Muhammad Ali in just this way, without recourse to Clifford Geertz or any other theorist. Ali fascinated some of our most respected journalists—Norman Mailer, George Plimpton, and Wilfred Sheed come most quickly to mind—but I was particularly struck by the writing of *SI*'s Mark Kram, a much less famous sportswriter. Ali's own artistry in and out of the ring clearly challenged sportswriters to create a commensurate art of their own. Kram chiefly covered Ali's second career, beginning with his return from exile to fight Jerry Quarry in 1970. In welcoming Ali back to boxing, Kram described him as a "clever dramatist" who "was creating a new theme for his fight with Quarry." Kram identified Ali's scripts for his earlier bouts: "brashness versus malevolence" for Sonny Liston; "holy wars" with Ernie Terrell and Floyd Patterson; and "the black prince on the lam" for his European fights with Karl Mildenberger, Henry Cooper, and Brian London. Now, with Quarry, Ali had cast himself as "Rimbrindt back from exile."

The specific scripts are less important here than Kram's explicit recognition that boxing matches can function as cultural dramas or texts. The following spring Kram returned to this idea before Ali's first fight with Joe Frazier. In describing the roles that Ali and Frazier would be playing in the ring, Kram stood back to look at the history of boxing from this perspective:

> Americans are the most curious in their reaction to a heavyweight title bout, especially one of this scope. To some, the styles and personalities of the fighters seem to provide the paraphernalia of a forum; the issue becomes a sieve through which they feel compelled to pour all of their fears and prejudices. Still others find it a convenient opportunity to dispense instant good and evil, right and wrong. The process is as old as boxing: the repelling bluff and bluster of John L. against the suavity and decorum of Gentleman Jim; the insidious malevolence of Johnson vs. the solidity of Jeffries; the evil incarnate Liston against the vulnerable Patterson. It is a fluid script, crossing over religion, war, politics, race and much of what is so terribly human in all of us.

Heavyweight championship fights have always been culturally scripted; equally important, as Kram noted, is the fact that these scripts are read differently by

different observers. Kram went on to describe some of the most prominent "readings" of the upcoming fight:

> The disputation of the New Left comes at Frazier with its spongy thinking and push-button passion and seeks to color him white, to denounce him as a capitalist dupe and a Fifth Columnist to the black cause. Those on the other fringe, just as blindly rancorous, see in Ali all that is unhealthy in this country, which in essence means all they will not accept from a black man. For still others, numbed by the shock of a sharply evolving society, he means confusion; he was one of the first to start pouring their lemonade world down the drain.
>
> Among the blacks there is only a whisper of feeling for Frazier, who is deeply cut by their reaction. He is pinned under the most powerful influence on black thought in the country. The militants view Ali as the Mahdi, the one man who has circumvented what they believe to be an international white conspiracy. To the young he is identity, an incomparable hero of almost mythological dimension.

And so on. Black and white, conservative and liberal, young and old read the cultural text of Muhammad Ali in different ways. . . . It's important to keep in mind both Ali's uniqueness *and* his typicality. Among the champions of our time Ali was uniquely enigmatic—a puzzle, a mass of paradoxes; this is how sportswriters repeatedly described him, as they obsessively attempted to unravel his mystery. Their own varied, conflicting interpretations were thus to some degree a consequence of Ali's resistance to simple explanation. In this range of interpretations, of course, Ali can also be considered typical: because of our diversity we Americans do not read *any* of our important cultural texts in identical ways. This may seem an obvious point, but its implications are important: no simple "dominant" ideology is imposed upon an unresisting public by the mass media. Sport in general, and perhaps Muhammad Ali in particular, can teach us how the media reach their diverse audience through multiple narratives.

The coverage of Ali's career in *Sports Illustrated* reveals an Ali who never fit a single role. Through the earliest years he was repeatedly termed a child: bragging, careless or casual about training, absurdly confident; a *willful* child with a short attention span, as unpredictable to his own managers as he was to the public. But against this sense of Clay as child stood the "remarkably calm and composed Clay" who entered the ring with the monster Sonny Liston in 1964, whose strategy had been "carefully rehearsed and meticulously perfected," who was driven by a deep sense of purpose, whose performance was remarkable for "the completeness of his ring wisdom." Tex Maule, the *SI* reporter whose words I've just quoted, commented that "the boasting and *calculated* gibes . . . had *seemed* the overweening confidence of a child" (my emphasis). Was Cassius Clay some kind of wondrous child of the gods or a canny ring technician whose childlike antics were meant to build interest in his fights and doubts in opponents' minds? Boxing fans answered that question in different ways and at stake were beliefs about race, about what it takes to succeed in America, even about the relative importance of biology and self-determination in human lives.

By the morning after the Liston fight, Cassius Clay was Muhammad Ali, a Black Muslim, forever altering the terms by which he would be considered, but not altering the conflicts among terms. Ali as vain self-promoter now competed with Ali as spokesman for black America; Ali as "that marvelous, whimsical, overweening and ... as the "black racist." Ali's Muslim connection was initially interpreted in terms of race, not religion; one writer dismissed his religious rantings as "the Allah routine." But the fighter—whether "a genius in his chosen craft" or simply a natural who did things in the ring that "no longer have any roots in intellection"—began to talk about dreams, about his sense of having been chosen for a purpose, about "divine things." The physical and the metaphysical, the natural and the supernatural, contended for reporters' and the public's attention. Following Ali's fight with Floyd Patterson in November 1965—in which the playful child had seemed cruelly contemptuous of his opponent, and of the audience as well—*SI*'s Gilbert Rogin mused: "What strange times we live in. What a strange, uncommon man is Clay. Who can fathom him? We can only watch in wonder as he performs and ponder whether, despite his truly affecting ways, he doesn't scorn us and the world he is champion of." Playful or merely cruel, pug or prophet, an already puzzling Ali was becoming a more profound riddle.

In a five-part series in spring 1966, following Ali's challenge to his draft board, *Sports Illustrated* and Jack Olsen confronted the "enigma" of Muhammad Ali head-on: the incongruous mix of "bombast and doggerel," "hardheaded bigot[ry]," and "the conscience of a genuine objector." The most accessible champion in memory, to whom children flocked constantly, was also "the most hated figure in sport." His buffoonery too often crossed the boundary into nastiness. "His life is a symphony of paradoxes," Olsen wrote in the first installment of the series. In the third, an inquiry into the seeming hysteria of Ali's prefight and postfight rantings—temporary lunacy? an act? a psychological ploy? simple fear?—Olsen compiled a long list of the images that had become attached to Ali:

> Figuring out who or what is the *real* Cassius Clay is a parlor game that has not proved rewarding even for experts. Clay's personality is like a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were cut by a drunken carpenter, a jumbled collection of moods and attitudes that do not seem to interlock. Sometimes he sounds like a religious lunatic, his voice singsong and chanting, and all at once he will turn into a calm, reasoning, if sometimes confused, student of the Scriptures. He is a loudmouthed windbag and at the same time a remarkably sincere and dedicated athlete. He can be a kindly benefactor of the neighborhood children and a vicious bully in the ring, a prissy Puritan, totally intolerant of drinkers and smokers, and a foul-mouthed teller of dirty jokes.

Notice here—in 1966, two years after Ali changed his name—that Olsen *still* called him "Clay." The two names, Cassius Clay or Muhammad Ali, themselves conjured up conflicting interpretations of the heavyweight champion. Following his list, Olsen quoted Ali's physician, Dr. Ferdie Pacheco, who had heard it said that "there's 15 sides to Clay" but had decided that the fighter was "just a thoroughly confused person." Pacheco did not solve the riddle, of course, but only added a sixteenth possibility.

The hero and villain of the late sixties became more thoroughly heroic in the seventies, yet without being reduced to a single dominant image. Following his world travels and campus lectures in the United States during his exile from boxing, Ali returned to the ring in 1970 as a spokesman "for 22 million black people," as "a symbol of black nationalism and antiwar sentiment," as a man fighting "not

just . . . one man" but "a lot of men." Ali, who was once an "indefatigable consumer," now seemed to have turned ascetic. He had become a "patriarch," a "Prophet," a tool to be used however Allah wills—a serious man, driven by a sense of "divine destiny." But he was also a ring artist, "the ultimate action poet," and, in certain writers' more skeptical moods, still a fame junkie, con man, and nonstop showman.

A sense of transcendent destiny runs through much of the writing on Ali from 1970 to 1975, the nature of the drama shifting from Broadway and Tin Pan Alley to Greek tragedy: Ali, the hero returned from banishment, fighting not just mortal opponents but mortality itself; Ali, once the golden child of the early sixties, after his defeat by Joe Frazier in 1971 now a man of suffering, of pain, of vulnerability; Ali the hero in the Underworld, in Sisyphean struggle against the Jimmy Ellises, the Buster Mathises, the Bob Fosters, the Floyd Pattersons (yet again—Ali doomed to clear obstacles once thought forever cleared), in his uphill quest to reclaim the championship that had once been his. In these fights Ali shows his old skills but seems too compassionate, seems to have lost his "will to kill." He is then shockingly defeated by Ken Norton, after which comes a further testing (by fate? by Allah?): Norton in a rematch; Frazier in a rematch but now not for the championship because Frazier has lost to a seemingly invincible George Foreman, the highest mountain yet up which Ali must roll his boulder. Ali seems blessed by the gods, by Allah, with his astonishing victory over Foreman in Africa, followed by the awesome *Götterdämmerung* of the third Frazier fight, the one in the Philippines. The fighter who danced and jabbed, and about whom cynics wondered whether he could truly punch and take a punch, became a fighter of stunning power and an almost frightening courage to withstand the most brutal blows ever thrown in the heavyweight ring.

The question uppermost in writers' minds during this epic struggle to reclaim his stolen championship was What drove Ali? Clearly he was driven, but was it by a simple lust for fame or by a truly transcendent destiny? Writers on the boxing beat, unaccustomed to metaphysical speculations, now became serious philosophical inquirers. And while Ali's popularity grew more general, the responses he evoked continued to vary. The opposing possibilities of mortality and transcendence defined the extreme limits of Ali's images in this period, culminating in a paradoxical kind of transcendent mortality in Mark Kram's lyrical account of the third Frazier fight: "Once, so long ago, he had been a splendidly plumed bird who wrote on the wind a singular kind of poetry of the body, but now he was down to earth, brought down by the changing shape of his body, by a sense of his vulnerability, and by the years of excess. Dancing was for a ballroom; the ugly hunt was on." If Ali no longer danced and soared, in the ugly hunt he was a dauntless hunter. . . . More prosaically, when *Sports Illustrated* named Ali sportsman of the year in 1974, George Plimpton proposed yet more ways to read the fighter, attempting to explain how the triumph of so controversial a figure could be so popular "I think it was the sort of joyous reaction that comes with seeing something that suggests all things are possible: the triumph of the underdog, the comeback from hard times and exile, the victory of an outspoken nature over a sullen disposition, the prevailing of intelligence over raw power, the success of physical grace, the ascendance of age over youth, and especially the confounding of the experts. Moreover, the victory assuaged the guilt feelings of those who remembered the theft of Ali's career." Th final phase of Ali's career—the precipitous decline from triumph over Joe Frazier in Manila in 1975 to defeat by Leon Spinks, Larry Holmes, and Trevor Berbick in 1978, 1980, and 1981—was played out at times as farce (the bizarre match with a sumo wrestler in Tokyo in 1976) or embarrassment, toward the end more often as tragedy: Ali, a man who "suffers wonderfully from *hubris,*" as Plimpton put it in 1974, now paying heavily for his pride and courage. . . .

. . . If [Michael] Jordan is like Ali in this status as cultural text, Ali differed—and was perhaps unique—in two important ways. First, against the crush of media attention, Ali managed to maintain an amazing degree of control over the ways he was interpreted. *He* remained the principal author of his own cultural text. When *Sports Illustrated*'s Mark Kram reviewed Ali's "one-act play of infinite variations" (the occasion was his second fight with Floyd Patterson, in 1972), he described Ali as the producer of his own show; in the ring Ali seemed like a "drama coach" feeding Patterson his lines. And it wasn't just the general public for whom Ali wrote his own scripts and enacted the dramas of his own creation. He also dictated to reporters, a group considerably less susceptible to illusions and delusions. He played for reporters the various roles that *he* wanted them to consider; he presented himself as an enigma that reporters became obsessed with figuring out, while never allowing them access to his essential mystery. Collectively, the reporters came to understand, as George Plimpton put it, that "so much of what Ali does is a game, a put-on," but both collectively and individually they never were exactly sure which part was put-on, which part serious. In one of Howard Cosell's many interviews with Ali—one act in the vaudeville show they staged over most of Ali's career—Cosell and Ali bantered over who had created whom. The answer seems obvious: Ali was not a media creation but a self-creation who used the media brilliantly. In our world of sound bites and handlers, sports itself is resistant to mere manipulation. At the heart of sport, unlike most kinds of entertainment, lies something *real:* what the athletes themselves bring to the field or the ring. As Mark Kram wrote, in anticipation of Ali's third fight with Joe Frazier, "There is nothing contrived here. This is not an electronic toy conceived in network boardrooms and then sent out and made to look like a dramatic sporting conflict." Within the world of sport, Muhammad Ali more successfully than anyone within memory resisted manipulation by others. . . . Ali was the author of his own narratives, and, moreover, he transcended all attempts to explain him.

The second way I think Ali is different from other sports heroes lies in the kind of hero he was, and is. Having circled around it, I've arrived at the issue announced in the title of this essay: the question of Ali as a "hero" in an age in which the electronic media are capable of reaching billions of people everywhere in the world, but whose images are so overwhelmingly numerous and so dependent on novelty that the lifespan of even the most powerful images seems that of the firefly. I think that David Halberstam is correct in recognizing a new kind of fame: fame potentially of unprecedented reach, due to the transmission of images via satellite into every corner of the globe, but also fame of unprecedented brevity. That this fame will emanate from the United States, chiefly through commercials and images on consumer goods, also seems clear. . . .

. . . The progression from oral to print to electronic cultures has meant the progressive shortening of the hero's endurance in popular consciousness. Muhammad Ali . . . had enormous fame, although he did not (could not?) market himself through product endorsements (if Michael Jordan is the first "new age athlete," perhaps Muhammad Ali is the last sport hero of the preceding era in which marketing was an adjunct of fame, not its principal form). It is worth noting that Ali remains a major hero in the developing countries of Asia and Africa, where Michael Jordan is virtually unknown. Where oral tradition remains strong, fame endures; heroes are passed on from generation to generation. Whether Ali's fame will transcend generations in the United States is uncertain, but for his own generation at least, Ali's fame has lasted, as has no other athlete's.

Where Ali chiefly differs from other sports heroes, however, is in something more fundamental: the very kind of heroism, he represents. Halberstam's equation of heroism with fame runs counter to a definition of the hero that we associate with fame runs counter to a definition of the hero that we associate with ages before the advent of the mass media—heroism as something more than celebrity, the hero as someone who embodies qualities we admire and wish to emulate, who ultimately represents his people in their highest aspiration. On these terms we might say that Jordan, too, is not just famous but also heroic; he embodies the dazzling grace, beauty, creativity, and competitiveness that feed the fantasies of children and inspire awe in adults. But Ali embodied that and more: the astonishing drama/melodrama/tragedy of his career gave his popular representations a kind of depth and resonance that the visual images of the electronic media cannot capture. Halberstam claims that Ali's religion and politics limited his fame. Certainly they made him a villain for many in the late sixties and early seventies, as they made him a hero to others; but they also gave moral substance to the image that emerged from the desperate fights of his comeback—the ones with Frazier and Foreman—during a politically more quiescent time, when history seemed to have proven him right in refusing induction into the army. The apparent moral courage of the draft resister and his identification with the underprivileged throughout the world deepened and enlarged the physical and psychological courage of the man who slugged it out with Joe Frazier for fourteen brutal rounds in Manila. If Ali's principles angered many in the 1960s, by the 1970s he could be admired for at least having principles. To think of Muhammad Ali in this way makes him seem an anachronism, a kind of hero perhaps no longer possible in the age of the spectacle.

Or—another possibility. Perhaps Muhammad Ali, as "cultural text," can represent a model for American culture as a whole for which we are desperately searching today. Through the 1960s, Ali was a hero to the young more than the old, to intellectuals more than blue-collar workers, to blacks more than whites, to militant blacks more than moderate and Christian blacks. By the mid-seventies, after the Foreman and Frazier fights, when Ali became almost universally admired, he continued to mean different things to different people. Mark Kram pondered the diversity of Ali's audience in the months following the third Frazier fight: "His followers cut across all class lines. There are the masses of poor, who see him as a symbol of escape from their own miseries, as an enemy of tyrannous governments. There are the moneyed, who must always be near success. There is the white middle class, that huge engine of society that once so rejected him but now jockeys for position with miniature cameras and ballpoint pens.". . .

. . . Muhammad Ali came to be a true "multicultural text," in which for over a decade we Americans, in all our diversity, were able to find important values. For most of Ali's boxing career his public images were inextricably tied to his race, and for part of that time they were bound to his racialist rhetoric. But at some point in the mid-seventies, this changed. Ali remained utterly racial yet simultaneously beyond race.

The world of sport regularly raises up a handful of heroes, who for a short time represent the fastest, the strongest, the most graceful, the most courageous, but who then yield their pedestals to the next set of heroes. The culture as a whole benefits, while the discarded heroes often become victims of their own fame, players in our modern version of an ancient tragedy. But in addition, on rare occasions, from the world of sport arises a Muhammad Ali, who not only is the prettiest, the loudest, and the greatest, but who reminds us of the deeper and broader possibilities of commitment and achievement, while still entertaining us and letting us dream.

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