

The Makerere generation

Cold War diplomacy and African literature

PETER KALLINEY

In June 1962, an important gathering of anglophone African writers took place at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Ezekiel Mphahlele (later Es'kia Mphahlele), the expatriate South African fresh from the success of *Down Second Avenue* (1959), organized the event. The idea was simple and unprecedented: to bring together established and promising writers, magazine editors, critics and publishers for discussion about the future development of African literature. Among the attendees were the Nigerians Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. A young J. T. Ngugi (now Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o), a Makerere student from Kenya, buttonholed Achebe at the conference and asked him to read the manuscript of *Weep Not, Child*. Achebe read it with great interest, and the novel would become title number seven in Heinemann's African Writers Series, which was getting started with Achebe's editorial guidance. The Nigerian poets J. P. Clark, Gabriel Okara and Christopher Okigbo were also in attendance, as were George Awoonor-Williams (later Kofi Awoonor), Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Grace Okot, and Okot p'Bitek. Langston Hughes, Barry Reckord, the Jamaican playwright, and Robie Macauley, then Editor of *Kenyon Review*, also attended. Rajat Neogy, who had begun publishing *Transition* magazine in 1961, served as an unofficial local host.

The event – the Conference of African Writers of English Expression, to give it its clumsy official title – is now best remembered as the start of the debate on the status of English in postcolonial African literature. Many readers do not realize that the conference was part of a remarkably vibrant network of African literary institutions formed in the late 1950s and early 60s. *Black Orpheus*, the Nigerian little magazine, was founded in 1957 by the German expatriate Ulli Beier (who did not attend the conference, although the script of his undelivered address is among the conference archives). Beier, Clark, Okigbo, and Soyinka would all be involved in the creation of MBARI, a combination of bar, restaurant, performance and gallery space, library, and publishing venture in Ibadan. Neogy's *Transition*, which would achieve an international circulation of 12,000, began life as an avant-garde review with editorial offices on the verandah of Neogy's home. These were the days of the Transcription Centre, a London-based radio producer headed by Dennis Duerden (also a Makerere attendee). Duerden had done tours as a teacher in Nigeria and as a BBC broadcaster. With the Transcription Centre, he recorded interviews with African writers for global distribution. The year 1964 witnessed the inaugural Commonwealth Literature conference at Leeds, at which Achebe gave a pivotal address. It was the first academic conference on what would become known as postcolonial literature.

It was an exciting time to be a young African writer working in the English language.

Decolonization was either imminent or a reality in many areas, although the struggle in the southern part of the continent would continue for several decades. Intellectuals, however, were equally excited about the creation of new literary institutions. For this generation of ambitious but largely untested writers, the growth of conferences, periodicals, publishers and radio producers, all with an African orientation but also with connections to international audiences, was as meaningful as any political development.

The Makerere conference, *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, MBARI, the Transcription Centre and the Leeds conference were all activities sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). As Frances Stonor Saunders discusses in *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War* (1999), we now know that the CCF was established and funded by the CIA. This scandalized many onlookers and participants as the story unfolded in front-page news reports in 1966–7, but the aims of the CCF were never clandestine. Its founding manifesto (1950) declared it to be an anti-communist, anti-totalitarian organization. English-speaking readers are familiar enough with the CCF's support for *Encounter* (1953–91), but that transatlantic publication was only one item in a long inventory of cultural activities around the world. The CCF underwrote magazines in a range of languages and formats, book publication and distribution schemes, scholarly conferences, radio broadcasts and musical events. Europe was the centre of diplomatic efforts in the early 1950s, but the hierarchy soon set their sights on other parts of the world, especially areas where Soviet influence might be neutralized. The CCF established insecure footholds in the southern and eastern parts of Asia and tried their luck in Latin America and in the Middle East, but it was in sub-Saharan Africa that the organization had the largest impact outside Europe.

For some, the involvement of the CCF might seem to cast an unfavourable light on the Makerere conference, *Black Orpheus*, *Transition* and their legacy – as has been the fate of *Encounter* and one of its founding editors, Stephen Spender, who cried foul when the news of the funding scheme broke. (There has been much discussion, in this paper and elsewhere, of how much or little the magazine's editors knew about the sources of their support at the time.) But it would be misleading to describe CCF activities in Africa as comparable to the European situation. In sub-Saharan Africa, and in decolonizing areas of the world more generally, we should not dismiss such events as peripheral episodes in the Cold War. In the CCF's African programmes especially, a conspiratorial picture that posited CIA infiltration and control of credulous organizations would not be quite accurate. Instead, the CCF pursued a policy of political

non-interference, exerting very little control over the organizations to which it offered subventions, infrastructural investment and professional contacts.

This may seem highly implausible: since when did the CIA disburse money to writers and intellectuals and expect little or nothing in return? The archival record – available for inspection at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library Special Collections – tells a very unusual story, one in which the CCF sponsored African literary institutions without demanding very much from their collaborators, least of all a public defence of

In fact, all the written evidence suggests that the CCF supported the relative non-alignment of African literature, promoting political, ideological, creative, and even economic independence where it could. There are complicated reasons why this might have been so, none of them attributable to CIA beneficence. First, from the perspective of the CCF hierarchy who knew about the funding scheme, the secrecy of the operation took precedence over all other considerations. The CCF believed that its message would be more effective than Soviet efforts at cultural diplomacy if the CCF appeared to be free of state control. Unlike the Soviet model, in which intellectuals could be accused of acting as paid propaganda agents, the CCF were anxious that the organization seem financially independent of Cold War interests. CCF operatives were very careful to avoid making transparent political demands of African intellectuals because this would increase the likelihood of suspicion and exposure.

In decolonizing regions of the world, the CCF combined this financial secrecy with a strong anticolonial message. It routinely promoted itself as a patron unassociated with European imperialism and metropolitan domination. With the US and Soviet Union lining up allies and client states, the Cold War threatened to be a repeat of the nineteenth-century scramble for Africa, and most African intellectuals were not eager to become residents of Cold War colonies just as Western European imperialism was in decline. In the transcripts and press releases from the Makerere conference, for example, Mphahlele and his fellow participants praised the CCF because it seemed to support the growth of indigenous cultural institutions. *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* were both started without any CCF support, and when modest subventions began, there is no evidence of any editorial interference (while there is ample evidence to the contrary). The only major requirement was that these journals should collaborate with other elements of the CCF network, especially *Encounter*, a condition their editors were only too happy to accept. Playing up the anticolonial message – and insisting that this new patron did not have Cold War designs on African writers – gave the CCF an advantage over other programmes of cultural diplomacy in the region.

Finally, the records we have indicate that the African intellectuals who benefited most from CCF programmes – Mphahlele, Neogy, Okigbo and Soyinka were among those with the greatest levels of involvement – never acted as Cold War partisans. They were unfraid to criticize the US and its allies when they felt inclined to do so. In the few instances when the CCF put pressure on Dennis Duerden to make Transcriptions Centre broadcasts more political in nature, he refused, saying the organization would lose all credibility on the continent if it appeared to be following a Cold War line. Similar to many of



Chinua Achebe, 1966

United States foreign policy. At most, it is possible that the CCF was careful to screen out African intellectuals who were too sympathetic to the Soviet cause, though there is no clear evidence that this was the case. Most of the CCF's African programmes avoided political matters altogether – touchy issues on which African intellectuals and their CCF counterparts might have very different perspectives – and concentrated instead on literary and professional questions: how could African writers reach wider domestic, continental, and international audiences; how could African intellectuals build lasting cultural institutions; what if any are the artist's responsibilities to nationalist, anticolonial movements; what aesthetic techniques were most promising for writers facing a history of colonial domination and bracing themselves for a Cold War in which they had no real stake?

their generation, the African intellectuals associated with the CCF tended to be Cold War neutrals, with no great affinity for either side in the conflict. The CCF was willing to settle for this state of affairs. For a brief but crucial period, the aims of the CCF and their African collaborators coincided, leading to the establishment of ideologically independent literary institutions that would advance the decolonization of African literary culture.

Although the Makerere conference is well known among students of anglophone African writing, very few know what was actually discussed there. The use of English was not much of a sticking point at the conference itself, if the incomplete and elusive transcripts of the presentations are a reliable record. Instead, panellists debated aesthetic models: did the African American or West Indian tradition offer a better model, or perhaps Anglo-American modernism was something for African writers to emulate? If Cold War debates occurred at the conference, they were voiced primarily in aesthetic terms: should the artist in a decolonizing situation be a politically committed practitioner of social realism, or should the writer opt for detachment and objectivity, insisting on absolute political disinterestedness? Should political objectives, such as decolonization, determine aesthetic production, or should aesthetic freedoms trump all political attachments?

Most of the papers at the conference expressed the belief that African writers should not tie themselves to racial themes or to specific ideological platforms. Saunders Redding, an established African American literary critic, argued that the best writers, white and black, rely on a “synthesizing eye, the detached mind, the impersonal but absorbed heart”. Only a handful of contemporary African American writers, he suggested, had been able to transcend feelings of racial subordination to arrive at a complete, fully detached perspective on the problem of prejudice. Arthur Drayton, a leading critic of West Indian literature, insisted that a version of social realism was the best way forward for writers in decolonizing areas, provided that the writer could use this technique to “universalize” the African experience. Gerald Moore, a British expatriate teaching at Makerere and the on-site conference organizer, commended J. P. Clark’s poem, “Night Rain”, for its refusal of racial consciousness: “Here is no gesture of political or historical protest, no advice, no statement even of the poet’s colour or its significance; but a faithful and beautifully-controlled account of individual experience”. There were plenty of barbs thrown at francophone conceptions of *négritude*, which in the opinion of many attendees lacked both political conviction and aesthetic relevance. Although the 1956 Congrès des Artistes et Écrivains Noirs, organized by the *Présence Africaine* group, was the working model for Makerere, Mphahlele dubbed *négritude* “sterile” in his own press report about the meeting in Kampala.

As all this suggests, several of the delegates recommended detachment, objectivity and universality as the values to which African literature ought to aspire. Wallowing in racial anger and complaining about imperialism would not take African literature far enough. The delegates also pursued Cold War aesthetic debates, pitting a committed, ideologically partisan social realism against an



Wole Soyinka, 1962

ideologically impartial (and therefore politically disengaged) experimental literature. Rather than taking a clear stance, however, the Makerere delegates suggested that African writers should maintain aesthetic neutrality and flexibility. Achebe’s and Ngũgĩ’s predominantly realist techniques did not need to confront Okigbo’s and Soyinka’s more experimental approaches: for a time, they could coexist without being forced into the camps created by Cold War antagonisms. It was only much later that critics of African literature began to separate writers along these lines.

It was on this question of social realism versus aesthetic detachment that the language of the Makerere participants and their CCF sponsors almost aligned but ultimately diverged. For the hierarchy at the CCF, as the pages of *Encounter* make plain, celebrating and commemorating artistic experimentation was a component of the struggle against totalitarianism. *Cold War Modernists: Art, literature, and American cultural diplomacy*, a recent study by Greg Barnhisel (2015), makes a convincing case that the intellectuals affiliated with US Cold War cultural diplomacy saw themselves as curators of the modernist movement in the arts, saving it from an enfee-

bled Western Europe and shielding it from a hostile Eastern bloc. Whereas Soviet art required official approval, any genuine art ought to pledge fidelity to objectivity, detachment and freedom from state coercion; these traits were abundantly expressed in modernism, at least in theory. The CCF consistently promoted avant-garde art as a repository of anti-totalitarian values.

For the Makerere participants, however, aesthetic autonomy meant something a little different. Detachment and impartiality did not necessarily equate with experimentation. Among African intellectuals, the language of aesthetic independence had more subtle shades of meaning than their CCF patrons realized, and could mean freedom from the colonial tradition, and the rejection of Cold War oppositions. The kind of detachment favoured by the Makerere delegates afforded African writers room to manoeuvre by rejecting European imperialism without endorsing either of the aesthetic choices officially sanctioned by the Cold War antagonists. Writerly detachment also meant freedom from state interference and nationalist pressures. Such assertions became crucial as nationalist movements were hijacked by authoritarian regimes across the continent.

The other main topics of conversation at Makerere were the status of African literary institutions, the role of international publishers, editors and patrons, and the feasibility of satisfying the demands of culturally diverse audiences. Several metropolitan publishers, such as André Deutsch, Heinemann, Longman and Oxford University Press, sent representatives to the conference, some of whom were forced to answer pointed questions from the writers, who voiced their concerns about the inherent difficulties of placating foreign editors and audiences while writing in what was, for many, a second language. The development of African writing as a whole could be stunted by the situation, as Mphahlele observed in his press report: “Since wholly African themes may not go down well with overseas audiences, it may be that the current theme that has become predominant in West African prose writing – that of the encounter between an indigenous and a European culture – has been imposed by this need to put oneself across to an external audience”.

Here again, the CCF emphasized its support for the decolonization of culture. It congratulated itself not only on its endorsement of the conference, but also on its support of *Black Orpheus*, *Transition*, MBARI and the Transcription Centre. *Black Orpheus*, whose founding editor Ulli Beier was also

inspired by the 1956 *Présence Africaine* meeting, had started with a grant from the Ministry of Education; the CCF would come on board a few years later. Beier had exceptionally catholic tastes. He would publish art and writing from anywhere in Africa or the black diaspora; he would translate from any language into English; he published avant-garde, social realist and folksy work; he published material from any school or camp, including both the leading *négritude* writers and their outspoken anglophone detractors. The journal was legendarily neutral on political questions (unless by publishing African and black Atlantic writers it could be said to have a political agenda). As Soyinka described it years later, “*Black Orpheus* was literally non-political. It published poetry and plays, it reproduced artworks, the plastic arts, reported on performance arts. Its mission was to link the diaspora culturally with Africa without getting involved in politics”. Beier’s apolitical editorship reflected a pragmatic decision not to alienate potential readers, contributors or sponsors. The journal’s political neutrality and aesthetic heterogeneity represented an affirmation of independence from colonial tutelage, and a refusal to take a position on the Cold War’s aesthetic controversies.

Neogy’s *Transition*, started in 1961, also without CCF support, featured avant-garde writing and entertained political debate, in contrast with *Black Orpheus*. Early issues offered a fascinating blend of experimental poetry (by Neogy, Okigbo and others) and political commentary. In Peter Benson’s apt phrase, Neogy steered an editorial course of “aggressive non-prejudice”. In debates about constitutional reform in Uganda or the one-party system in Tanzania, Neogy gave Milton Obote’s government and Julius Nyerere, alongside their most ardent critics, the opportunity to state their case directly to *Transition*’s readers. *Transition* staged arguments about the merits of capitalism, socialism and communism, about economic development in Africa, and about the involvement of the superpowers in African affairs with this same emphasis on critical non-partisanship. As Bessie Head, a subscriber, put it in a letter to the editor: “To me, at least, *Transition* is a kind of home. It seems to be fighting neither for communism [nor] capitalism”. *Transition*’s signature mix of cutting-edge art and political non-partisanship attracted a wide range of readers and collaborators. With a large circulation, it was poised to survive the aftershocks of the CCF revelations, only for Milton Obote to throw Neogy into jail in 1968. After his release, Neogy tried to resuscitate the magazine in Ghana, and then passed the editorial reins to Soyinka, who could not keep it alive much longer.

Of all the CCF’s efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, the Transcription Centre came closest to entering the Cold War scrum. Unlike *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*, it was a CCF-owned and operated scheme to bring the thoughts of African intellectuals to global audiences. The costs for production equipment and rent (with a recording studio in London) consistently exceeded the CCF’s allowances, while Duerden’s frantic efforts to bring in revenue from sales of programming were not very successful. This made the outfit more susceptible to pressure from CCF headquarters. In 1962, after recording only a handful of pro-

Tu Fu In Academe

Autumn sun brings little hope of favour and a new name for the institution, the fourth in seven years. Once, it was boots-on-the-table mawkish egalitarians, who sapped our strength with remedies; now, it’s knowledge-entertainment and courtesy or else and a faulty radiator two years to fix if you go through channels. In the jargon of our paymasters we denounce ourselves. They commend the veracity of our assessment.

IAN HARROW

grammes, the CCF operative to whom Duerden reported urged Duerden to “give more serious thought to the social, economic and political side of the work so that the broadcasts are not exclusively literary”. After prolonged stalling, Duerden categorically refused to inject more political commentary into the broadcasts. Doing so, Duerden observed, would mean the loss of all credibility: “invariably people ask what is this organisation, what line is it putting over”, he warned his supervisors. In Duerden’s analysis, the CCF could not endorse a partisan stance on Cold War issues if it hoped to make inroads in sub-Saharan Africa, where intellectuals and audiences were not in thrall to either superpower.

When the CCF collapsed in 1967, there was a great deal of hand-wringing, back-tracking, pleading of innocence, moralizing and gloating. Since then, there have been a number of accounts by participants, journalists and scholars. The majority of these treatments have focused on the CCF’s activities in Western Europe, but the organization’s presence in decolonizing regions warrants greater attention: in sub-Saharan Africa, covert funding and the unwillingness of African writers to be drafted into the Cold War combined to ensure its neutrality. In “Africa and Her Writers”, a lecture delivered at Harvard in 1972, Achebe says, “As African writers emerge onto the world stage, they come under pressure to



Rajat Neogy c.1965

declare their stand”. Imperialism was not the issue: the international circulation of African writers depended on negotiating Cold War controversies. Achebe goes on to say that African writers should cling to their neutrality for

the betterment of African literature. As he puts it, the “recrimination between capitalist and communist aesthetics” is debilitating, especially for writers from the Third World. Aesthetic neutrality was a considered and tenaciously guarded position for many figures of the Makerere generation. The ironclad separation of politically conscious social realism from detached experimentalism was some way in the future. For much of the 1960s, the split between these two approaches was not irreconcilable, as it was for European writers.

The other major outcome of these CCF-sponsored activities was the establishment of a literary community that did not associate too strongly with the postcolonial nation state. The Makerere conference allowed a generation of widely dispersed writers to meet face to face, of course, but it also began their process of integration in a world literary system that was taking shape in the two decades after the Second World War. When this generation of African writers distanced themselves from authoritarian regimes on the continent, as they did in increasing numbers, they could do so confident in the knowledge that their criticisms would reach beyond the borders of the nation state. Speaking to international audiences could not guarantee their safety – on the contrary, it made them more threatening to tyrants – but it did encourage members of the Makerere generation to assert their independence both from systems of

colonial domination and from nationalist pressures. A by-product of these developments was the promotion of English as a pre-eminent literary language even as European imperialism was being challenged.

The demise of the CCF as a major international patron of anglophone African literature left a massive gap. The leading figures of the Makerere generation – Achebe, Ngũgĩ and Soyinka in particular – continued to command substantial international audiences. The English-language writers who followed them found the going much more difficult. Aside from the loss of professional opportunities, this change left African writers more exposed to the pressures of the Cold War, to the point of importing its entrenched aesthetic conflicts into African letters. The increasing polarity of the language debates represents one strand of this discussion. The attempt to discredit figures such as Soyinka by describing his work as derivative of European modernism is another. Like the Stalinists, who labelled experimental writing an expression of bourgeois decadence and cosmopolitan rootlessness, Soyinka’s critics censured him as an elitist because he identified too strongly with the metropolitan literati. This was a straightforward adaptation of Cold War aesthetic categories to a postcolonial context. It was an argument the Makerere attendees understood all too well, but rejected. It was not their fight.

FREELANCE

PAUL PICKERING

Step out of Bethnal Green tube station and, although the mean streets are more fashionable than they were, there are still a lot of hard faces around the market stalls and the shops selling old LPs next to Pakistani wedding jewellery and expensive stuffed animals. I am on my way to the Repton boxing gym, the holy of holies of the sport. I take a wrong turning under a railway bridge, treacle-black with smoke from Jack the Ripper’s day. When I ask directions a man says: “Straight up there, mate. Better keep on your toes”.

When an actor I was working with said he went to a boxing gym, I began to wonder why serious writers do not seem to write much about the sport, even though British boxers hold twelve world titles. Ever since childhood I have been interested in the difference between boxing and fighting. My father took part in an exhibition bout with the world light-heavyweight champion Freddie Mills while serving in the Army “fighting” the Japanese in Burma. After two rounds my father found himself gently lifted off the canvas with an uppercut he said he scarcely felt. Mills let himself be knocked out by me, aged seven, in his Manchester Chinese restaurant. My father and he remained friends.

You enter the gym by a dark side entrance, past new Ford pick-ups and through brass-handled swing doors. It is called the Repton because money was put up for the place by Repton Public School in 1884 to give “encouragement and opportunity” to young men from poor backgrounds. The main gym, in the centre of which is a boxing ring, is an assault on the senses. The place reverberates with life. It is not forbidding at all. It is joyous. Boxing posters from all over the world, from all times, are stuck on the painted brick walls, including one from the Spandau boxing club in Berlin from the 1930s. The primary colours of vests and shorts and the ring ropes all hit you the

moment you enter. The ring dominates the room, which is overhung with Meccano-style, bolted metal beams and old fashioned skylights. What struck me most, however, were the noise and the movement. Every yard of space is taken up with a would-be boxer skipping, shadow boxing, sparring or punching hell out of quarter-ton bags suspended from the ceiling. The rhythms generated are instant and addictive and part of the syntax of the place. It is more like going into a Brazilian samba school than the sepulchre pictured in the video. Everyone nods and smiles and is supremely friendly. The only one-upmanship necessary is that of the ring. In there you cannot lie. By then it is far too late.

One of the older, grey-haired trainers bursts out laughing. “Just smell that glove. Put your hooter against that.” I do what he says and sniff the glove, which smells of old leather and sweat from one of the young boxers’ exertions in the ring. The man who is to be his opponent is fiddling with the silver duct tape holding the cotton bandage to his hands that stops them breaking against the rock-like bags, or other boxers.

Another double-decker-bellied trainer shouts: “Lace it up, lace up that glove. It’s like lacing up a corset”. Jean Genet wrote that convicts are like flowers and there is a categorical and paradoxical vulnerability about both convicts and boxers. The boxer, laced up, smiles and tucks in his gum shield, puts on his padded helmet and goes into the ring and spars. Byron used to like this part: “I have been sparring with Jackson for exercise this morning; and mean to continue and renew my acquaintance

with the muffles [gloves]”. Sparring is fast, dandy, dancing stuff where you do not hit the opponent hard. It is surprisingly graceful and, at times, beautiful.

At my public school in Hertfordshire, we boxed but were introduced to the sport by “milling”. Here you stood toe to toe and took turns. You were forced to hit the other person hard and make him withdraw or your own head would be ringing until evening prayers. I think it was meant to put you off actually fighting, which it did very well. After Repton, I tried half-forgotten, cotton-wool careful sparring with a friend. You cannot help but be thrilled by the excitement if you break through the other person’s defence and have him on the run. Boxing attracted writers like Hemingway and Mailer because there is nothing of the desk, nothing of the isolation, as for once you have an opponent other than yourself. But these days the writer’s landscape is different and it is difficult to slip a punch while looking into the Narcissus pool of Facebook.

There are several slightly built young women training at the Repton too. “You come here and you are made so welcome”, says twenty-five-year-old Ciara, a graduate of Durham University. “They’ve been letting women train since 2015 and there is equality. It’s better than an ordinary gym. It’s so addictive and hard but as the club motto says, no guts, no glory.”

Not far from her, John Johnston is showing what raw power can be unleashed on one of the hanging bags. His trainer is unimpressed. “Babies in their prams work harder than you.” So Johnny lays it on, and any one of the blows produced by the perfectly timed tensing of muscles from the balls of his feet to the tips of

his knuckles could kill a man. Could probably kill a horse. He smiles and shakes his blond curly hair. He is only fifteen. “I love it. I got the European championship, which is good. My family don’t box, no, I just came in here and liked it.” He is next in the ring, light on his toes as a Nureyev.

Presiding over Repton is chairman David Robinson who has seen it all before. There is a certain Mad Hatter air about him. “You cannot train today as you are late”, he says to me. I nod, somewhat gratefully. On the wall near his office is a boxing poster with the names of both Ronnie and Reggie Kray, the gangster twins, on the bill. If the Repton afforded them “encouragement and opportunity”, it was not quite in the way intended, which brings me back to the world champion Freddie Mills. At the end of his boxing career, Freddie was making the leap into the world of entertainment but he offended Ronnie Kray, both in the ring and, reputedly, by not going to bed with him. Mills is said to have told Ronnie he had “hang-ups”. The result was Mills “committed suicide” in a car with a .22 rifle, not a suicide’s weapon of choice. More than that, Mills had been put “in the frame” for a series of savage murders of Notting Hill prostitutes.

Gangsters have always added a dark glamour, the “foul dust” that floats in the wake of Gatsby’s dreams in Fitzgerald’s novel. “I coulda been a contender, I coulda been somebody” – the compromised Terry’s despairing line in *On the Waterfront* (made famous by Marlon Brando) could not have been written about anything but the fight game yet it has instant universal resonance. It hangs there, existentially unbearable. The realization before the knock-out blow, the white-out, as you hit the canvas.

Walking back in the pigeon-grey drizzle from the Repton, I felt I understood much better the difference between boxing and a fight.