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Poem Noir Becomes Prizefight Film

First up on the screen is the studio logo, the RKO transmitter beeping its signal out to the revolving, black-and-white world. Then the names of the film's stars appear, followed by the main title—*The Set-Up*—superimposed on a shot of a prizefight time-keeper, his hammer poised above the bell. At the precise moment he drops the hammer we cut to two fighters in the ring, circling and feinting, dancing in and out. No music on the soundtrack: only the boos and cheering of the crowd. All this is standard for 1949 Hollywood, right up to the credit line “From the Poem by Joseph Moncure March.”

As unlikely as it seems—in the long history of the cinema, how many pictures, let alone boxing pictures, can have been based on a *poem*?—the line is perfectly accurate. In 1928 Joseph Moncure March published a book-length verse narrative which two decades later provided RKO with everything it would need for its film: a setting, a tough-as-nails title, and a story about two conniving fight managers and their aging black middleweight Pansy Jones. In March's poem, the managers and a crooked gambler set Pansy up to take a fall but say nothing to him about it. Why should they share their fifty buck payoff? Isn't Pansy going to lose the bout anyway? For a couple of rounds Pansy takes a beating, but then he realizes what's going on, and out of some reserve of resentment or blind anger,

No boxing now—
To hell with that!
He leapt in striking
Like a savage cat,

he puts his man on the floor, for the count. But victory in the ring only leads to defeat on the mean sidewalks outside, as the vengeful gambler and his thugs gather around Pansy in the dark.

For the screen, RKO kept most of the original's violent plot, tracked March's rapidly shifting moods of contempt, fear, and foreseen defeat, even devised brilliant cinematic equivalents for his pounding verse rhythms. But RKO made alterations too, some minor, some major—alterations of the kind March himself grew cynically to know when in the 1930s he was employed as a scriptwriter for the studios and made artistic compromises of his own. The story of what Hollywood did with and to *The Set-Up* is complicated, as complicated and intriguing as March's poem itself, and as much a mixture of dogged fidelity with shabby betrayal, of keeping the faith with making a buck. If, in the story of this adaptation, Art and Mammon seem to be fighting for the championship, neither side can be said to win in a knockout; it's a split decision between them, like most decisions in this particular arena.

Joseph Moncure March was raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, not far from Central Park, close to Harlem. In an unpublished autobiographical fragment among papers now preserved at Amherst College, he introduces himself as a middle-class boy who could look out the window of his lawyer father's house and see Italian street vendors settling quarrels with ice picks and tongs, or a white gang massing for an attack on a black gang (they were driven off).¹ When he was not attending his select private school or taking piano lessons, the young March played with slum kids and read with fascination Stephen Crane's grim novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. He also learned the rudiments of what A. J. Liebling would famously call the sweet science. "I lived in a district where the citizens had an intense and scientific preoccupation in the art of bouncing their knuckles off somebody's jaw," he wrote. From an early age, he took it for granted that being expert with fists was important.

Never a particularly good student, March was sent to the Lawrenceville School for finishing. There he felt lonely and was sickened by the casual brutality of boarding-school life—the older boys sometimes made the younger ones fight in bare-knuckle matches—but he also discovered an interest in writing. Previously, poetry had been "something they did to you at

¹ Joseph Moncure March Papers, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections; box 7, folder 17.

school”; now he completed his first effort in verse, a six-line rhymed lyric about a soap bubble.² Later, according to his 1968 reminiscence *A Certain Wildness*, he was called on to pen his Class Ode, and argued passionately over its metrical details with his classmate Randall Thompson, the future composer, when Thompson set the Ode to music.³

The writing and the arguing kept up at Amherst, where March arrived as a freshman in 1916. He boxed (his coach was a black ex-prizefighter, Doc Newport), studied, and did conventional writerly things, such as producing poems and stories for the college literary journal and translating Horace into rhyming verse. He also got himself into serious trouble by publishing a satirical protest magazine. This was full of undergraduate scorn for compulsory chapel and the like, and it led to a confrontation with the Amherst president Alexander Meiklejohn, followed by a forced apology to the college chaplain. The apology turned rapidly into another quarrel; there really was a certain wildness in March at this period, and an obvious impatience to cut through the gentilities of Amherst to get at life itself. In April 1918 he saved himself from expulsion and got at life in the most direct way possible by decamping for New York, then enlisting in the field artillery.

In a romantic gesture, March took with him to France two small volumes of poetry, by Keats and Shelley. Both books grew to seem “embarrassingly precious” amid the phosgene and the machine guns. He might have done better to take *A Boy’s Will* or *North of Boston*. Robert Frost, who had started teaching at Amherst in January 1917, was for March (and for generations of other budding collegiate writers) *the* essential guide in poetry. In particular, he stood for the “sense of form,” that special instinct or “delicate sense of balance,” as March called it, “that kept you from falling off on one side or the other: a kind of inner ear that kept listening until everything was exactly the way it should be . . .” March needed to cultivate a sense of balance. When he returned to Amherst in 1919, disturbing images of the war sometimes forced their way into his vision, screening out the mild Massachusetts landscape in a “kind of montage.” He flunked several classes

² Joseph Moncure March Papers, box 7, folder 17.

³ *The Wild Party; The Set-Up; and A Certain Wildness*, with introduction by Louis Untermeyer and illustrations by Paul Brusca (Freeport, Maine, 1968); not in print. Unless otherwise specified, quotations from March are taken from *A Certain Wildness*.

but in 1920 was allowed to graduate *honoris causa*, in recognition of his army service.

After college, New York City. March went to parties in Greenwich Village, discovered young women, married in 1921, later divorced, wore Ivy League suits and sported a walking stick, crafted verse, worked for the publicity department of the telephone company, got by. In 1926, *The New Yorker* started printing short poems by him, usually unsigned, to fill a column. By then he had become the first managing editor of the magazine, a position he held only briefly, until—that wildness in him, coming out again—he quarreled with Harold Ross. No matter: March had a better use for his time and he had a little money to live on, thanks to an allowance from his father. The best of his *New Yorker* column-fillers, “Going Home,” had been a melancholy impromptu about a man and a girl coming back from a party at five a.m., looking up “as we passed the places / Where our friends were sleeping with white faces . . .” Now March determined on writing a book-length narrative poem about hardened partygoers drinking and having sex and finally, drunkenly, resorting to gunplay. *Queenie: A Girl of the Sheets*, March might have called it, but instead settled on *The Wild Party*. Beginning with the opening couplet,

Queenie was a blonde, and her age stood still,
And she danced twice a day in vaudeville,

the poem introduced readers to a new-style heroine and an unusual way for poetic heroines to talk:

Her face was white as though newly plastered.
“You touch me—
I’ll kill you, you filthy bastard!”

Once March got Covici, Friede to publish *The Wild Party*, in early 1928, which took some doing, given its going-Stephen-Crane-one-better frankness, readers turned out to be fascinated by his staccato rhythms and clever rhymes: poetry here seemed to be glamorously slumming in a narrative about cigarette butts and hangovers. In its handsome hardbound volume, with illustrations

by March's Lawrenceville classmate Reginald Marsh, *The Wild Party* was a success; Louis Untermeyer introduced it with a fevered enthusiasm that seems to pick up on the poem's own wild energies ("vicious and vivacious," "night-clubbed, bootlegged, sex-ridden, tabloid-jazzed New York").

If March is remembered at all today, it is because of *The Wild Party*, a work which so perfectly captures the Jazz Age that it comes periodically back into circulation, a guide to 1920s dissipations that still can seem startling. Art Spiegelman reissued the poem in 1994 with seventy-five of his own black-line drawings, while in 2000, by unaccountable coincidence, two different stage adaptations of *The Wild Party* opened in New York, one by Michael John LaChiusa for The Public Theater on Broadway, the other by Andrew Lippa for the Manhattan Theatre Club. Years earlier, in 1975, Merchant Ivory Productions had bought the rights and made a film of the poem, possibly the least successful, not to mention least faithful, of all their literary adaptations (the action is conflated with the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, Raquel Welch appears as Queenie, there are musical numbers and a rhyming voiceover). Back in the 1920s, of course, March could foresee none of this afterlife for *The Wild Party*. After the success of one narrative poem he knew he had to keep his career going by moving on to new work; had not Untermeyer encouragingly called him a poet of genuine personality, knowledgeable about "his broads and his Broadway," full of future promise?

March's publisher provided an advance, and in a room on Fourteenth Street, looking out onto an air shaft, sitting at a kitchen table, the poet began thinking about boxing. *The Set-Up* would bring together many strands of his experience, the privileged background with its aspirations to poetry, those glances out the window to a more brutal world, fistfights in the streets or at school, the tutelage of Doc Newport, the tutelage of Robert Frost, what he saw in the fight arenas of 1920s New York, even a developing social conscience. From the start, March knew that the central figure would be black, a "Negro fighter who had already been defeated by race prejudice, but didn't know enough to stop fighting." This decision meant that *The Set-Up* would put the racial stereotypes of the period on full display, sometimes in dialogue, sometimes in March's own narration. At one point he would write that

[Pansy] made you think
Of the missing link.
He looked like something
To catch and cage:
Like something that belonged
In a Jungle Age.

These repellent lines seem to incorporate the very race prejudice the poem is ostensibly contesting. March no doubt typifies the sort of liberal who attacks an injustice without fully understanding his own involvement in it, who is more a denizen of his time and place than he knows. But it is important to see that the *attack* on prejudice in *The Set-Up* is heartfelt and relentless. From the opening couplet (“Pansy had the stuff, but his skin was brown; / And he never got a chance at the middleweight crown”) onward to the end of the narrative, March sustains his assault. He endows the poem’s villains with a truly virulent racism, and endows its black hero with pride and guts. At the end, Pansy “the jungle jinx” is destroyed, but he has learned to counter racism by the only means available to him and thus achieved a kind of tragic stature.

In all its considerations of blackness, whether regressive or progressive, the poem draws on the fame of Jack Johnson, the best-known black American of the early twentieth century. In 1926, the Broadway play *Black Boy* had starred Paul Robeson as the great and notorious heavyweight champion, notorious among other things for his involvements with white women, and for his imprisonment in Leavenworth on a Mann Act conviction (March would eventually make Pansy a bigamist and send him to the penitentiary for a five-year term: he checked with his father to make sure five years was the right sentence). As for fight-fixing, that was familiar enough in the 1920s. Hemingway’s short story on the subject, “Fifty Grand,” had come out in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1927 and probably provided March with one or two details for use in the poem—a Jewish gangster with a Central European accent, a couple of tough broads who backchat with the fight crowd.

The immediate source of *The Set-Up*, however, was a painting. The realist artist James Chapin was an old friend, and like March

a disciple of Frost. In Chapin's studio March gave the painter his poems to read, and there too, presumably, he first saw *Negro Boxer*. Chapin's portrait shows a stolid black figure sitting in his corner between rounds and staring meaninglessly into the ring, eyebrows drawn down low on a much-pummeled face, boxing gloves reposing gently on his knees. Meanwhile his middle-aged white handler leans back on the ropes in a carefree, hard-to-read posture—is he gesturing to some pal in the crowd? Smiling at the mockery of the fight racket? Just enjoying the moment and the way the light gleams on his pomaded hair? Whatever Chapin's intended meaning, March seems to have taken from the painting, so that later he could put it into his poem, a sharp awareness of the distance between those who fight and those who watch the fighting; those nakedly exposed and those covering something up.

That awareness underlies everything in *The Set-Up*, which March produced rapidly and published, again with Covici, Friede, in late 1928. The two conniving managers who fix Pansy's fight, Cohn and MacPhail, "lice of the ring," belong to the subhuman world of Herman's bar,

A joint for sneaks,
Tin-horn sports
And gutter sheiks.

Here they spar with each other and with the gangster Tony Morelli, using insults instead of fists. March's rendition of their dialect voices is crude but believable:

"You're some boy, Tony!
Where you get it from—Macaroni?
Ha!
My Gott!
Vot lousy veather!"

Pansy—not the best of names for a fighter, and in the poem he gets insults about it—speaks in dialect too, an Amos 'n Andy black voice ("‘Yas *suh!*’ he said: / ‘‘At shirt am grand!’’") that

March had tried out in one of his short *New Yorker* poems, “Rainy Day Taxi Blues.” Pansy’s speech is hard to take nowadays, but in the poem he says relatively little; he mostly acts. He strips in the dressing room, puts his gloves on, enters the ring, swings and jabs at his opponent Sailor Gray, takes punches in return, shrugs off abuse from the crowd, keeps on bobbing and weaving, absorbs low blows, falls, picks himself up off the canvas, is saved by the bell, comes out fighting, bloodies Sailor’s head, and under the lights of the ring, a more brutal but cleaner place than Herman’s bar, finally achieves the knockout of Sailor that ends the fight.

In the dressing room afterwards, in an eerie quiet, Pansy starts to think:

The echo of a roar
Swelled,
Died.
The silence rushed back
From every side:
Heavy,
Dense:
Implacable:
Immense.

Pansy knows what the price of his apparent double-cross will be, and putting on his street clothes, he goes out to pay it. The gang—Sailor Gray, Morelli, and others—surround him and start the beating. Pansy escapes momentarily when a cop looms up, only to be pursued again and trapped on a subway platform. Out comes a razor in the black man’s fist and slashes Morelli’s face, but it’s all too late, Sailor has wrestled Pansy over the edge, the black man is crouching helpless on the rails as the tunnel roars and light streams out:

The train screeched
And struck.
THE END

Here at the conclusion, and in fact everywhere in the poem, March’s short verse lines scream at the reader like tabloid head-

lines. Or they punch away at him: reviewers of *The Set-Up* outdid themselves in applying boxing lingo to literary critique (Untermeyer: “the words land with the impact of triphammer lefts and rights”; Marion Strobel, in *Poetry*: “the rhythms feint and lunge”). Unquestionably, the short lines keep everything brutally simple and moving right along. Meanwhile, roping line to line, the rhymes convey a sense of entrapment, the nightmarish claustrophobia of constricted spaces and big violent emotions, while underneath everything is a dull steady rhythm like the pounding of an angry crowd’s feet, all those paying customers looking down into the ring and screaming for action. There is no escaping Pansy’s fate; there is no getting away from March’s

Heavy,
Dense:
Implacable

style. What achieves this effect is nothing less than Frost’s “sense of form,” the instinct for words and their arrangement that keeps tinkering until everything is as it should be. The truly remarkable thing about *The Set-Up* is that in its best passages (there are clumsy or clichéd ones too) an aesthetic notion like “sense of form” does not seem grotesquely out of place among the dialect voices, crummy setting, and bloody action.

As a whole, *The Set-Up* is urban, gritty, tough-talking, and wisened-up, absolutely without illusions as to any chance of evading moral corruption and “Sudden disaster,” the “final hope-blaster.” In short, it is a noir poem. The cinematic term, still two decades away from its deployment by French critics, nevertheless seems right, because the poem’s images really are dark, literally and morally, and because March’s writing is so cinematic in technique. He and his reviewers freely acknowledged this, for both *The Wild Party* and *The Set-Up*. They noted phrases giving the effect of a receding photographic perspective, or images sharply isolated to make an emotional point. Untermeyer praised March’s omitting of commentary and his reliance on a “projection” of actor and action, or the way, for instance, that Herman’s bar is rendered in “cinematographic flashes,” as if in a slow pan across the decor. March himself confided in 1968 that his “school for storytelling” had been the cinema:

I had sat in theatres watching films like “The Last Laugh” and “Variety” over and over again, admiring their tremendous pace and economy, and the way the swift succession of images on the screen kept the story moving without any let-down. It didn’t take me long to recognize that cinema technique is highly selective: every image is significant; it fixes the audience’s attention on whatever is considered most important . . .

A 1928 letter to his father, written while March was in the midst of composing *The Set-Up*, is even franker about his indebtedness, indeed boyishly gushing:

I’m having an awful time keeping the narrative hard and swift moving, and still getting in all the necessary color. Also—thru necessity—am evolving a new sort of technique based on the expert lines of the moving pictures—god, those people are good! I don’t see how they do it. I learn something of value every time I see a picture, even if it’s rotten—and when it’s a really good one, my eyes pop out and I feel like taking up embroidery as a life work.⁴

After this, it comes as no surprise to learn that once *The Set-Up* made a hit, the poet left New York for Hollywood, ambitious to join those astonishing movie people.

Did someone at MGM, which put him under contract in 1929, pick up on the cinematic techniques of *The Wild Party* and *The Set-Up*? Perhaps the studio simply took note of *The Set-Up*’s place on the bestseller list and hoped the author would produce equally profitable screenplays. March did well at first. He helped to shape R. C. Sherriff’s World War I play *Journey’s End* into a talkie, and then gave Howard Hughes the story for another war melodrama, *Hell’s Angels*, an early sound vehicle and first big hit for Jean Harlow, who must have seemed to March the platinum-blond embodiment of Queenie. After that, he continued to work steadily for various studios and to earn good money, often Howard Hughes’s money, but the list of his writing credits makes for depressing reading: *Hot Saturday*, *Sky Devils*, *Transatlantic Merry-Go-Round*, *And Sudden Death*, *Hideaway Girl*, *Her Jungle Love* . . . one forgotten and now unseeable film after another. Like other established writers in Hollywood, March scripted terrible pictures for the sake of a paycheck while hoping to do real creative work in his spare time, but the long verse narrative which he had

⁴ Joseph Moncure March Papers, box 1, folder 3.