So this is how the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper.

-T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

"The Hollow Men," a 1925 poem written by Eliot, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, is not about boxing, per se, but it might well have been had its creator made one or two minor revisions.

For every Matthew Saad Muhammad and Arturo Gatti who are celebrated for reasons that have little to do with ring generalship and superior skill-sets, there are boxers who have been bestowed with breathtaking physical gifts yet lack those resolute qualities that endear them to fight fans who understand that superstardom is a delicate balance of talent and gumption, of a dancer's nimbleness and a warrior's iron will. While many might marvel at an athlete's natural ability, there is a tendency to more admire that which emanates from some deeper recess, where courage and defiance dwell.

Boxing is not alone in this separation of the tangible from the intangible. It's easy to imagine tennis great Jimmy Connors as a racket-wielding Gatti. In a sport where many players' conservative strategy is to keep a point going long enough until their opponent makes an unforced error, Jimbo, not quite as luminously talented as, say, Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe, threw himself into every point, hitting the ball hard and flat and going for winners at every opportunity. You almost had the impression that, instead of playing a final-set tiebreaker to determine the outcome of a close match, Connors would just as soon go bare-knuckles with the guy on the other side of the net. First one to put his rival down or to draw blood wins.

If he were a fighter instead of a gambling-tainted baseball player, scrappy hit king Pete Rose no doubt would be in the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y., instead of waiting for the call from nearby Cooperstown that probably will never come. It's easy to imagine legendary Chicago Bears linebacker Dick Butkus as a heavyweight beast, maybe an amalgamation of George Chuvalo's want-to and George Foreman's devastating power. If you think all those early Mike Tyson victims wore an expression of terror before the opening bell, check out the NFL Films archives for the "Oh, crap!" look on the faces of running backs who slid into a hole only to find it filled by a snarling Butkus, eager to rip their heads off.

The reverse of such mentally resilient athletes might be Scottie Pippen, who petulantly refused to return to the court with 1.8 seconds remaining after Chicago Bulls coach Phil Jackson tapped Toni Kukoc instead of Pippen to nail the game-winning shot a few moments earlier in a March 1994 game. (Michael Jordan was off playing minor-league baseball that season.) Former Pittsburgh Pirates and Cincinnati Reds outfielder Dave Parker was for a time the most talented player on the planet, but, upon signing his first guaranteed, multimillion-dollar contract, he packed on 40 pounds in the offseason (and not of muscle; this was baseball's pre-steroid era) and soon became a frequent visitor to the disabled list. Parker's plaque is not hanging in

Cooperstown any more than Rose's is.

And then there is boxing, where the gap between talent and desire is accentuated to a point where it becomes a Grand Canyonesque chasm into which potential Hall of Fame careers can plunge and vanish.

Remember us – if at all – not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The stuffed men

It must be stated that everyone who enters boxing does so with the understanding that there is a certain occupational risk involved, that pain must be absorbed as well as dispensed. No one who voluntarily enters the hurt game should be dismissed as a "stiff," "tomato can" or any other term used to denigrate those with enough stones to make that lonely walk to the ring and step inside the ropes. Even frequent losers – maybe especially frequent losers – accept punishment as part of their job description, offering bits and pieces of their bodies in exchange for purses. If there is any taint, it is on those who decline to at least go down fighting, who have become so acquiescent that they no longer give more than a perfunctory effort in bouts in which their best effort might have yielded a winning lottery ticket. There is no shame in a fighter devolving into a trial horse or a journeyman, however you want to phrase it, just so long as he doesn't come to see himself as a designated victim, even if the rest of the world does.

But there is a higher standard to which those with actual skills are and should be held. If there is a possibility of becoming something truly special, or moving up and out of a particular comfort zone to a higher place where the rewards are more substantial as are the risks, then a real fighter goes for it with all the heart and determination he can muster. Before anyone can hope to call himself great, he first has to dare to be great.

Some who never quite make it into the inner sanctum fail because of a lack of discipline; they eat too much, drink too much, snort too much, have a weakness for the ladies or the high life. Tony Tubbs and the late Greg Page were temporary alphabet-soup heavyweight champions with formidable boxing expertise, but too often they showed up with jiggly love handles lapping over the waistbands of their trunks, a sure sign that shortcuts again had been taken in training. Not every fighter is physically predisposed to have the sculpted physique of Michaelangelo's David, but sloppy-fat heavyweights have no one to blame but themselves when their potential goes largely unfulfilled. The same holds for those in lower weight classes who continually rise above their natural fighting weight because they couldn't lay off the pasta, beer and dessert.

Other gifted fighters are too sensitive or passive for their own good. Some simply don't subscribe to the theory that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. They fold up like a tent when, after mowing down a succession of lesser foes, reality-check time arrives and they're matched with someone who is capable of firing back and has no intention of backing down. It is

always interesting to see how a fighter who is used to imposing his will on overmatched opponents reacts when he finally is cut, contused and realizes that it is the other guy whose will is being imposed. This is the moment of truth, the point where the best of the best rummage around inside themselves to find the inspiration to elevate above their present circumstances. The Muhammad Ali of the “Rumble in the Jungle” and the “Thrilla in Manila” is as revered for that stage of his boxing life as was the younger, more lithe model who disassembled Cleveland Williams on what probably was the night when his extraordinary abilities reached their zenith.

In any other field, Gerry Cooney and the late Floyd Patterson would be lauded for the compassionate human beings that they are and were. Once confronted with adversity in the ring, though, the more gentle sides of their nature exposed a vulnerability that could be exploited.

Cooney had that wrecking-ball left hook, a weapon maybe even as lethal as Joe Frazier’s, and he used it to chilling effect when he was able to dominate early and settle into frontrunner’s mode. But once Larry Holmes – just ask him if “Gentleman Gerry” could bang – shook off Cooney’s biggest bombs, as he had shaken off those from Earnie Shavers, the Irish-American slugger noticeably wilted. After his first loss, he found himself apologizing to everyone he felt he had left down, even though no apology was necessary. He had done his best that night, but it wasn’t good enough. It happens. But instead of coming back better for the experience, Cooney, his aura of invincibility shattered, was never the same, and not even his laudable work with FIST (Fighters’ Initiative for Support and Training), the organization he founded to assist indigent boxers, fully negates the public’s impression that he somehow was a fraud. But that is too harsh an assessment; he merely allowed the introduction of self-doubt to chip away at his hard outer shell until there was little of it left to protect him from the fists of Michael Spinks and George Foreman.

The same might be said of the reserved and polite Patterson, who was empathetic in victory (kneeling in concern alongside Ingemar Johansson after he knocked him out with a leaping left hook in the second of their three meetings) and embarrassed in defeat (he left the building disguised in a fake beard and dark glasses after losing his heavyweight championship on a first-round knockout to Sonny Liston).

There are no eyes here

In this valley of dying stars

In this hollow valley

This broken jaw of our last kingdoms

It might be a thin line, indistinguishable to some, but there probably is a distinction between those, like Cooney and Patterson, who are too nice to be in a sport where a certain cruelty can be a professional advantage, and those who have a ticker problem.

Saying a fighter has “no heart” is the ultimate insult, along the lines of labeling someone a

racist, pedophile or serial killer. It suggests a soldier who remains in a foxhole while his comrades are advancing on the enemy, or a timid passer-by who ignores the pleas of a fellow citizen being mugged or raped. You don't necessarily have to be a fighter to be a hero, yet there is a reason we look up to regular folk who do what they have to do in moments of crisis. But those who are paid, sometimes quite handsomely, to engage can become objects of derision when they back down from a challenge or find some excuse for staying on the sideline.

Remember when British featherweight "Prince" Naseem Hamed was going to become HBO's Little Big Man? The dynamic southpaw from Sheffield, England, was knocking everyone out with punches delivered from unusual angles, creating a groundswell of anticipation for his next ring appearance. He was depicted as Mike Tyson in a more compact package, a destroyer who spoke brashly and backed up his braggadocio with action. In his first fight outside the United Kingdom and for HBO – remember all those huge billboards and banners all over midtown Manhattan? – Hamed retained his WBO 126-pound title on a fourth-round knockout of Kevin Kelley in Madison Square Garden on Dec. 19, 1997, a slam-bang affair in which each man went to the canvas three times.

But Hamed shrank from boxing after he was dominated by Marco Antonio Barrera in losing a 12-round unanimous decision on April 7, 2001, at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. His unorthodox style didn't bother the technically superior Mexican fighter in the least, and as round after round passed it became apparent that the air was being let out of Hamed's inflated ego. He fought only once more, retiring with a 36-1 record that includes 31 victories inside the distance.

A host of British writers have endorsed Hamed's candidacy for inclusion in the IBHOF, and his accomplishments are as good or better as some of those who already have been enshrined. But there are a number of skeptics, at least on this side of the pond, who can't get past the fact that he more or less gave up, not only against Barrera but on boxing once he realized he wasn't superhuman, as he had deluded himself into believing.

Is that any more a transgression than Roberto Duran's No Mas surrender in his second matchup with Sugar Ray Leonard? Ah, but the "Hands of Stone" scrubbed away much if not all of his shame but fighting on and on and on, reaffirming his valor any number of times in any number of arenas. Mistakes can be made, even one so egregious as to quit in the ring, but elite fighters as a rule are not predisposed to permanently take their leave with the matter of their very honor in doubt. Duran quit once, but no longer is perceived as a quitter; Hamed quit on himself and his sport, did virtually nothing to reverse that impression and is forever likely to wear the scarlet letter Q.

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the shadow

Cameron Dunkin was voted Manager of the Year for 2007 by the Boxing Writers Association of America. He has overseen the careers of fighters who have pulled guns on him, who abused their talent, who were incorrigible in every way that a psychologist can catalogue. But he continues to confound himself by remaining true to his guys, even though they have not always been true to him. In that way, he remains one of boxing's most dogged optimists. Dunkin recently signed WBO junior welterweight champion Timothy Bradley in the belief that he will be one of the fighters whose story will have a happy ending, following much success in and out of the ring. Then again, Dunkin always dares to believe that will be the case whenever he adds to his managerial retinue.

"When boxing is in your blood, it's hard to walk away from it," he said. "But it can break your heart sometimes."

The latest fighter to disappoint Dunkin is Anthony "The Messenger" Thompson, the junior middleweight from Philadelphia who had been with him since turning pro in 2001. Thompson was USA Boxing's top-rated fighter in his weight class and a favorite to make the 2002 Olympic team that competed in Athens, Greece, but he had bills to pay and children to support, so he went for the money early.

Dunkin, who admits to being smitten by Thompson's skills dating back to his amateur days, was more than willing to back someone he saw as a sure thing, a future world champion and possible superstar who someday would make a substantial return on his relatively modest investment.

"Anthony had so much talent, and he's such a nice kid, too," Dunkin said recently. "I really wanted him to make it, and I really thought he would make it."

By the time Thompson was 11-0, he was regarded as a hot enough property that Dunkin didn't have much difficulty convincing Bob Arum to sign him to a promotional contract with Top Rank, the company that holds paper on several of Dunkin's fighters. At a press conference in Philly to announce Thompson's addition to the Top Rank team, Arum even went so far as to say "I think this kid has a chance to become the best fighter ever to come out of Philadelphia ... A lot of things can happen. Anthony is a baby. But he has the skills and the temperament to be the best fighter Philadelphia has ever seen."

A lot of things can happen? Oh, they did. And almost immediately. Not only did Thompson's Hebrew Israelite beliefs prevent him from boxing from sundown on Friday until Saturday night, but, in his first bout under the Top Rank banner, a fifth-round stoppage of Dumont Welliver, he vomited before leaving the ring and again soon afterward.

Following Thompson's second fight for Top Rank, in which he whacked out Sammy Sparkman in four rounds, he skipped the ESPN2 postfight interview because he had to get to a rest room, pronto. Diarrhea.

Advised that Thompson had a penchant for such bodily functions before or after almost every one of his bouts, a grim-faced Arum said, “We will get to the bottom of it. All I know is that if he can fight this well when he’s sick, imagine what he can do when he’s well.”

Maybe Thompson wasn’t feeling queasy on Feb. 28, 2004, but Arum probably was after the Philly fighter who was going to make fans forget Joe Frazier, Bennie Briscoe and Bernard Hopkins was stopped by Grady Brewer in three rounds. That express lane to superstardom had become a minefield of obstacles, and Top Rank eventually cut Thompson loose.

Dunkin kept the faith, though. He still believed when he talked Chris Middendorf, CEO of TKO Boxing Promotions, into signing Thompson to a five-year promotional contract. In short order “The Messenger” signed a contract for a rematch with Brewer, the first man to beat him, for the fringe IBO 154-pound crown on Aug. 22 in Pala, Calif.

A couple of weeks before the fight was to take place, though, Thompson began acting erratically in training, then he stopped showing up.

“Bozy (Thompson’s trainer, Derek “Bozy” Ennis) called and told me, `You’d better be careful, Cameron. He’s going to do it again. I’m telling you, he’s scared to death of (Brewer),’” Dunkin said.

Thompson, who now says he is retired, claimed he had been fighting “partially blind” for three years and that, unbeknownst to his handlers, he had undergone LASIX surgery that had restored his vision.

“He was never blind in one eye. He passed every eye exam since he now claims to have had a problem,” Dunkin said. “When I spoke to him, I said, `Anthony, if you don’t want to be a fighter, it’s OK. Just don’t b.s. me anymore.’

“Was he blind when TKO gave him that poor little Mexican guy, Luis Lopez, who Anthony knocked out in, like 50 seconds of the first round? He got $7,500 to fight that bum and I didn’t even take my percentage; I gave Anthony all the money.

“Any time you put him in with somebody who throws back, he pulls out and can’t see. But if you put him in with another Luis Lopez for $7,500, I guarantee he’ll have 20/20 vision.”

Thompson received a $2,000 advance on his $15,000 purse, which Dunkin said he has eaten. “I’m out $68,000 and the years out of my life I spent on this guy,” he sighed.

Not that he claims to be conversant with the works of T.S. Eliot, but Dunkin can relate. Another whimper, another hollow sound to mark the end of one more boxing journey began but never really completed.