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Chapter Eight

The Executioner's Song

Mailer's Sad Comedy

I am one of those people that probably shouldn't exist.

– Gary Gilmore, in *The Executioner's Song*

This is an absolutely astonishing book.

– Joan Didion, "I Want to Go Ahead and Do It"

The time is right, I think, to reconsider the merits of *The Executioner's Song* (1979), Mailer's famous "true life novel" (the book's oxymoronic subtitle). Though the work received an extremely favorable reception from reviewers (more favorable than any of Mailer's other books save *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Armies of the Night*, and, curiously enough, *Existential Errands*),[1] *The Executioner's Song* remains an enigma in the history of Mailer's critical reputation. Since 1979 most essays on the book have been friendly, but they have all dealt with limited topics – Mailer's presence or nonpresence within the text, Gary Gilmore's "character," the validity of Mailer's claim to have written a true-life novel. It almost seems as if the book's sheer size has discouraged even its advocates from addressing such basic issues as the work's overall structure and informing themes. What are we to make of the final 500 pages, in which Mailer focuses on the intense legal and media activity that marked Gilmore's last three months? How should we assess the relationship between books 1 and 2, almost equally long but often thought to be of radically unequal narrative interest (the first book surpassing the second)? Perhaps most crucial, what are we to think of Gilmore? Is he a Maileresque hero, "fighting the whole liberal establishment for the right to choose his own death and expiation," as Robert Begiebing argues?[2] Or is he no more than a violent punk, as many readers no doubt suppose? Finally, what are we to make of

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Mailer's claim that his subject is "American Virtue," as he once considered titling the book?[3] This claim should lead us to reconsider Mailer's thematic intentions in general, intentions all too often downplayed because Mailer himself is so conspicuously "absent" from this huge book. Such a review should allow us to see that *The Executioner's Song* is Mailer's most ambitious attempt to "explain" America (*CC*, 99), his fundamental purpose in all his nonfiction but especially the series of books he published in the 1970s.

This reconsideration will allow me to address the concerns suggested by the two epigraphs that open this chapter. How are we to take such statements as Gilmore's severe self-judgment? Do they point to an exemplary self-understanding (and self-transformation) achieved during Gilmore's final days, or do they simply express an obvious truth that calls Mailer's whole enterprise into question? Is this book "astonishing" in any meaningful literary sense? I want to engage these questions while offering a thoroughgoing assessment of Mailer's accomplishment. First, however, I think we should reengage generic questions that Mailer's works have posed throughout his career as a journalist and/or nonfiction novelist. As I argued earlier in relation to *The Armies of the Night*, we must first understand what kind of book Mailer has written before we can presume to judge its relative success or failure.

Novels and True-Life Novels: The Question of Genre

> There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative.
>
> – E. L. Doctorow, quoted in *Newsweek*

> I love the idea of a novel; to me a novel is better than a reality. I mean as good as [*The Executioner's Song*] may become . . . it can never be as good as a novel.
>
> – Norman Mailer, in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*

Two days after Gary Gilmore's execution on 17 January 1977 – the first execution in the United States in almost 10 years – Larry Schiller invited Mailer to write the exclusive story Schiller had managed to secure during the preceding three months. When Mailer accepted Schiller's proposal, he must have been relatively unconcerned about

the generic or formal nature of his task. His first instinct was to do "a major essay,"[4] perhaps 20,000 words in length (Lennon 1988, 26) – a piece very much on the scale of "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," his essay on the first Patterson-Liston fight. His plan was to write "an essay on the nature of capital punishment, on what to do with our prisons, on why people murder, on karma, on a dozen different things" (Lennon 1988, 229). Though some would argue that he went ahead and did all this in more than 1,000 pages, most readers would agree that the final product bears little resemblance to this initial concept. Whereas he first hoped to do his "major essay" in 6 months, Mailer eventually spent 18 months and made six or seven trips to Utah, two or three to Oregon, and one to Marion, Illinois. Indeed, he ended up conducting about 100 interviews and working his way through some 16,000 pages of transcripts.[5]

Mailer's many paeans to the novel suggest that he disagrees with E. L. Doctorow's belief that there is no distinction between fiction and nonfiction. This point is of some consequence, for, as we shall see, many of Mailer's commentators share Doctorow's view and ascribe it to Mailer as well. Mailer's actual views are at best complex and at worst contradictory. In the afterword to *The Executioner's Song* he says that he has done his best to offer "a factual account" (*ES*, 1020). The chronology of events has been thoroughly researched, for "one understood one's characters better when the chronology was correct" (*ES*, 1020). The true-life story of Gary Gilmore's final nine months is told "as if it were a novel" (*ES*, 1022), but, of course, this construction implies that the book is something other than a novel. What it *is*, however, depends very much on one's literary definitions. As was the case with *Armies*, Mailer makes little pretense to strict documentary accuracy. Although the book represents a major effort to get the facts straight, "this does not mean it has come a great deal closer to the truth than the recollections of the witnesses" (*ES*, 1020) – and the witnesses here are probably no more reliable than those cited in the second half of *Armies* (*AOTN*, 260-62). Where participants offer different versions of the same event, Mailer has chosen "the version that seemed most likely" (*ES*, 1020). Gilmore's interviews and letters have been slightly edited; the old prison rhyme with which the book begins and ends was written by Mailer himself for his 1968 film *Maidstone*; and the reflections of one character in one scene were first formulated on a later and quite

different occasion from the one dramatized (*ES*, 1021). These literary "adjustments" may seem to betray Mailer's novelizing, but in fact Mailer sees them as distortions all but inevitable in the writing of history (a view John Hersey deplores with some eloquence).[6] When he calls his book a "novel," Mailer is thinking not of how the facts are distorted but of how they are presented.

Indeed, Mailer seems to agree with Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote that the extensive use of dramatic techniques is what really defines the nonfiction novel. Like Wolfe, Mailer develops an extended narrative in which all four of the New Journalism's defining features are prominent: (a) the frequent use of dramatic scenes; (b) fully recorded dialogue; (c) consistent attention to "status details"; and (d) the complex use of point of view to depict events as they unfold.[7] Like Capote, Mailer offers "a narrative form that employ[s] all the techniques of fictional art but [is] nevertheless immaculately factual" (Plimpton 1966, 41) (though Mailer would no doubt delete Capote's audacious adverb). Thus Mailer's claim, repeated in interview after interview, that *The Executioner's Song* is a novel in which everything is as true as he could make it.

It would be easy to conclude that Mailer is a bit fuzzy about his own generic claims. Sometimes he says his book can never be as good as a novel, or talks about what it would be like "if I'd written it as a novel" (Lennon 1988, 234), and sometimes he directly labels it a novel (most famously in his subtitle). The real nature of his experiment is best revealed, I think, by comparing it with Capote's *In Cold Blood*, the book most often cited in relationship to *The Executioner's Song*. The comparison is almost irresistible, for the two books deal with very similar subjects in what seems the same literary form. In each case the author describes a notorious murder case climaxed by the execution of the killer(s), the murderers and their victims are rendered in fulsome detail drawn from numerous historical documents presumed to be authentic, and the "plot" alludes briefly to the murderers' pasts while focusing on the crime itself and the events leading up to the execution(s). Both Capote and Mailer devote a great many pages to the character and especially the motives of their killers, whose explanations for what they did are ultimately endorsed by each author. (Indeed, both "explanations" involve a crucial displacement: Perry Smith says, "[The Clutters] never hurt me. . . . Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones

who had to pay for it [the accumulated resentments of his past] [Capote, 339]; Gilmore says, "I killed Jenkins [*sic*] and Bushnell because I did not want to kill Nicole" [*ES*, 672]. The only significant difference is that Gilmore points to a more immediate source of tension.) Each writer offers an exhaustive account of murder and its consequences (as Capote's subtitle puts it), dramatizing at great length what is usually summarized and then made the subject of editorial commentary.

As it happens, Capote rejects almost violently the notion that *In Cold Blood* resembles *The Executioner's Song*, a book for which he expresses nothing but scorn. (By contrast, Mailer has praised *In Cold Blood* as "a wonderful book" and "a very good novel.")[8] Capote's objections are in part personal – he can't respect Mailer's book because Mailer, unlike Capote, did not do 100 percent of the research on which his book is based (Grobel, 113) – but they are also literary: he does not like Mailer's attitude toward his characters, his point of view, or his style (Grobel, 113). Whatever they think of the book, most recent critics agree that *The Executioner's Song* is a very different kind of work. Each writer might seem to employ what Chris Anderson calls "the rhetoric of silence" (Anderson, 57), in which direct authorial commentary is eschewed for a strictly dramatic representation, but Capote is usually seen as intruding by means of conspicuous artistic manipulation. Whereas Mailer embraces a kind of perspectivism by employing no fewer than 100 Jamesian "centers of consciousness" in telling his story, Capote prefers omniscient narration and is reluctant to enter his characters' minds.[9] Capote's desire is to direct us toward what he frankly calls the "right" interpretation (*Plimpton* 1966, 41).

Of course, Capote has come under great fire for the nature of this "control." Phillip K. Tompkins argues that Capote's manipulations amount to outright distortion, even fabrication, as Perry Smith ("an obscene, semiliterate and cold-blooded killer") is transformed into the real hero of Capote's narrative.[10] Tompkins offers excellent evidence that Capote all but invents entire episodes, and Jack De Bellis effectively supports Tompkins's claims by revealing how many details – including facts – were changed in the 10 weeks between the initial appearance of *In Cold Blood* in The *New Yorker* and its subsequent publication by Random House.[11] Even if his critics are wrong about his distortions, however, Capote is happy to accept

their judgment that he shapes the narrative to reinforce his own interpretation of the Clutter murder case. Some of the more relevant textual features include the regular alternation of sections dealing with the killers and their victims-to-be; the authorial comments whereby Capote points up the impending catastrophe (Mr. Clutter heads home for the day's work "unaware that it would be his last"; Capote, 13); the almost-complete suppression of Capote's role in the later events; and the relative brevity of Capote's narrative, which condenses 8,000 pages of material into a book one-third the length of *The Executioner's Song*.

For better or worse, Mailer is usually seen as less selective, less insistent on his own views, and more inclined to *amass* his case than to shape it toward a single conclusion. Indeed, almost all discussions of *The Executioner's Song* begin by noting Mailer's stunning impersonality. Where once he offered "unabashedly subjective accounts of public events,"[12] now he seems to have become an Olympian artist à la Joyce: "Gone from *The Executioner's Song* are the familiar, patent Mailerisms – the baroque syntax, the hectoring tone, the outrageous epigrams, the startling bravura imagery, the political/metaphysical digressions, the self-conscious presence of the author in every line."[13] As Mailer himself has put it, Mailer seems to be "nothing but a conveyor belt" to disperse his fascinating material.[14] While many reviewers were delighted with this artistic about-face (as if Mailer had finally rejected his notorious indulgences), others felt that Mailer had gone too far and left his readers "unguided by the author and unconfronted with a meaningful shape of experience."[15] Friends or foes, all readers seem to agree that *The Executioner's Song* represents a radical departure in Mailer's career.

The Executioner's Song is not really such an unprecedented experiment, however. Mailer remarks the parallels with his very first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, and J. Michael Lennon points out that Mailer became less and less interested in his own role in public events throughout the 1970s (Lennon n.d., 28). (Indeed, Mailer comments on this trend in such works as *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, and *The Fight*.) Moreover, Mailer has offered quite specific reasons for adopting a severe narrative manner: to write about Gilmore in Mailer's own style would have risked the accusation of inflating Gilmore rhetorically; the nature of

the story required a faster narrative movement than many of Mailer's earlier books ("I wanted my book to *move*"); Mailer felt unusually humble in the face of his mysterious materials and did not think he had the "right" to generalize; and the material itself was "gold," if he had enough sense not to "gild" it (Lennon 1988, 270). We might ask whether these reasons adequately account for Mailer's narrative choices, but in any case *The Executioner's Song* is hardly the rudderless text so often invoked by Mailer's critics. Mailer once said that "to write was to judge" (*FOM*, 436), and this remark applies to *The Executioner's Song* as much as to Mailer's other works. What distinguishes his judgments here is that they are more tentative than in the past, not that they have disappeared altogether. They are not the judgments we associate with the books from *The Armies of the Night* through *The Fight*, because we do not get the formal conclusions toward which the earlier narratives move (through whatever serpentine stages). These judgments are real enough, however, and differentiate *The Executioner's Song* from those "novels" Mailer consistently honors in his literary criticism.

Yet the formal distinction between novel and history is more precarious now than it was when Mailer wrote *The Armies of the Night*. In 1967 Mailer characterized *Armies* as "history in the costume of a novel" (*AOTN*, 215), an apt and precise definition, and several years earlier he described *In Cold Blood* as a "documentary" (*CC*, 101). As we have seen, however, the author of *The Executioner's Song* speaks of *In Cold Blood* as "a very good novel" and is willing to label his own work a kind of novel, that is, "a true life novel." This shift may represent nothing more than literary politics, and it certainly involves Mailer's obvious fondness for the novel as *the* modern literary form – as if works like *The Executioner's Song* (or even *In Cold Blood*) could not be major if they were not novels. But it also involves Mailer's intuition that, formally speaking, *The Executioner's Song* goes well beyond what Mailer did in works like *Armies*. In part the difference involves excising the historical apparatus still visible in *Armies:* authorial commentary, whole chapters written as essays ("Why Are We in Vietnam?"), formulated conclusions at the end of the narrative. In part, however, the difference derives from Mailer's crucial decision to tell his story through the eyes of 100 different participants. The aesthetic results of this decision seem to

have persuaded Mailer that his book is indeed a novel, though not the *kind* of novel he had in mind when he praised the form in the past.

Mailer has always derided journalism and other forms of nonfiction because they require straightforward conclusions: "It's hard to think of a good book of nonfiction whose waters are not clear" (Lennon 1988, 244). Such "clarity" is never Mailer's literary destination, and especially not in *The Executioner's Song*, a book in which he stresses the mysteries of life more than in any earlier work. Here, of course, it is the mystery of real life that is stressed, for Mailer insists on his fidelity to what happened in terms that recall Capote's claims if not his practice. This mystery is rendered in hundreds of subjective accounts either transcribed or dramatized. Paradoxically, this radical perspectivism makes possible what Mailer calls "an objective picture of American society" (Lennon 1988, 238). I take Mailer to mean that the *nature* of American society is discovered even if its mysteries remain mysteries – indeed, mystery is often what is discovered. The formal result is "a social drama" (Lennon 1988, 238) that recalls the nineteenth-century novel but avoids made-up episodes and the sort of "tampering" to which Capote's critics object.

Should such a structure be called a novel? Obviously, the answer depends on what we mean by the label. When Mailer says that a novel is better than reality, he is thinking of an imagined fictional world he can alter as he pleases. By this standard *The Executioner's Song* is clearly not a novel. Unlike *In Cold Blood*, however, Mailer's book does not seem to be a documentary either. Doctorow would say that it is simply a *narrative*, but I think this is untrue both to Mailer's profound respect for the imaginative depths of the novel and to the innumerable real-life details that make up the texture of his book, for what distinguishes *The Executioner's Song* – what makes it almost sui generis – is its remarkable combination of the real and the novelistic. The two come together here because the real, for Mailer, is precisely the hundreds of subjective accounts from which he builds his story. Unlike Capote, Mailer does not wish to construct *the* interpretation of events by presenting the facts that support this reading. Instead, he offers what is made to *seem* like all the facts, all the "versions" or interpretations of the events he is

describing. And by presenting each event from the point of view of a participant, he ensures that the texture of each episode resembles that of a novel. The dramatic method employed here is such that we gain little by denying the book's claim to be fiction.

Yet there is also something misleading about the book's being honored with the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, for this is a *true-life* novel, very much to be distinguished from the novels Mailer grew up admiring so much. As such, it is subject to many of the same restrictions I noted earlier in such works as *Green Hills of Africa*, *In Cold Blood*, and *The Armies of the Night*. That the accuracy of his book has not been challenged[16] is not only to Mailer's credit but essential to the book's artistic rationale, for the "social drama" Mailer renders here is neither symbolic nor metaphoric but the thing itself. Such is Mailer's claim, at any rate, and such is the remarkably difficult "contract" he tries to fulfill by arranging hundreds of brief narratives in such a way as to interest us in their reality even as he uncovers their most fascinating – and "novelistic" – mysteries. Indeed, I believe we should judge Mailer's book by the terms of his subtitle or what I am calling his contract. The events and dialogue depicted must be as true to Mailer's sources as he can make them, yet they must also be presented so as to elicit the effects we usually associate with the novel. Anything less would call into question either the immense research underlying *The Executioner's Song* or Mailer's decision to dramatize every aspect of the story.

The task I describe obviously goes way beyond the transcription of reality or even the artistic "shaping" practiced by Capote, for even as Mailer fashions his narrative as subtly and decisively as Capote fashioned his, Mailer must preserve the illusion that his text is nothing but life itself, uncoerced by any one controlling "vision." He must eat his cake but somehow keep it too by employing structure and style to highlight what he thinks most suggestive in his massive materials, even as he persuades us that the book as a whole and not just a particular episode is "most likely" – perhaps *the* most likely of all Mailer's tales, fictional or nonfictional, imagined or transcribed. To justify these somewhat abstract generalizations, I turn now to the narrative structure of what often seems the most unstructured of Mailer's books.

The Structure of *The Executioner's Song*

> It's as if he has set a camera down in the middle of the event, in the tradition of Warhol and cinéma vérité, and simply recorded all that passed the camera's eye.
>
> – Chris Anderson, *Style as Argument*

When Chris Anderson says that *The Executioner's Song* resembles Warhol's more extravagant experiments, he is referring to his impression on first reading Mailer's book; according to Anderson, a second reading reveals the author's shaping hand in ways that recall Capote's in *In Cold Blood* (Anderson, 122). Anderson's comment is all too representative, however. It does take some time to appreciate that there is a "shaping consciousness" at work, as John Hellmann puts it (Hellmann 19, 57). For example, a number of critics have pointed to Mailer's habit of concluding narrative sections with telling comments phrased in his own voice, as when he compares Gilmore's trip home after being released from prison with the westward journey of Brenda Nicol's great-grandfather many years earlier (*ES*, 22). The passage in question "connects" a dedicated Mormon pioneer and the all-too-aimless Gilmore, a fine irony made available by the author and not one of his characters. And there are many other such moments, often, as noted, at the end of sections. But it is easy to exaggerate Mailer's "presence" in the book as a whole – a few summarizing remarks do not go far in a book of more than 1,000 pages. Thus, Anderson's allusion to Warhol; thus, Richard Stern's amusing comment: "Mailer's absence is so pronounced that it dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner."[17] To locate Mailer, I would suggest, we need to look not at explicit formulations but at the narrative structure itself.

Book 1 of *The Executioner's Song* is titled "Western Voices," and we do overhear many different western voices during the 500 pages devoted to Gary Gilmore's three-and-a-half months of freedom in Provo, Utah (after he spends 18 of his previous 22 years in prison and before he murders two men for no apparent reason). These many western figures, however, primarily observe and comment on Gilmore, who remains the unmistakable focal point of book 1. By presenting Gilmore from so many points of view, Mailer provides what seems as broad and objective a portrait as possible. Nonethe-

less, the details selected highlight certain features of Gilmore's character, as a brief review of part 1, "Gary," should confirm.

The first 15 pages offer a number of quite sympathetic moments or details concerning Gilmore's past. In these first pages his cousin, Brenda Nicol, remembers a seven-year-old Gary helping her during "a good family get-together" (*ES*, 17); the unattractive details of Gary's reform-school days in Portland are left out of the narrative; Brenda's sister, Toni, testifies to the impact of Gary's drawings, especially those which depict "children with great sad eyes" (*ES*, 19); one of Gilmore's letters is quoted in which he says of prison, "It's like another planet" (*ES*, 20), a haunting simile reinforced a bit later when he remarks that he seldom saw stars while in prison (*ES*, 55); Brenda is surprised when he comes out of prison "marked up much more than she had expected" (*ES*, 27); the pathetic austerity of his one tote bag, his inability to stop "gawking" at beautiful girls, and his ignorance of the fact that one can try on clothes before buying them all point up his abysmal past (*ES*, 33, 36); and Gary's sensitive interplay with the small children of friends is noted twice (*ES*, 44, 46). Later in part 1, when Gilmore meets Nicole Baker, those who know him are amazed at his positive transformation (*ES*, 73). These early pages consistently present Gilmore as a kind of waif, good at heart but deprived of the normal opportunities to express his goodness. Almost immediately, however, evidence from several sources begins to define Gilmore as what Mailer calls a "habit-ridden petty monster," "trapped" within his apparently unshakable selfishness (Lennon 1988, 256). During his first date in Provo Gilmore demands sex, refuses to listen when told he must *earn* things, and raises his fist against a woman who has done nothing to him (*ES*, 41); only a few weeks later he repeats this performance with a second date, finally breaking the windshield of her car when she refuses to sleep with him (*ES*, 66). In the midst of many conversations Gilmore launches into grim prison stories about beating a convict with a hammer (*ES*, 44-45), photographing a convict performing fellatio on himself (*ES*, 48-49), killing "this black dude . . . a *bad* nigger" (*ES*, 65), and tattooing a friend with little phalluses (*ES*, 76-77); indeed, this ominous repertoire of prison tales is trotted out whenever Gilmore makes a new acquaintance in book 1. Soon we observe Gilmore lying to his sympathetic parole officer (*ES*, 62) and shouting obscenities at a movie screen (*ES*, 67-69). Thus, Mailer establishes at

once the extraordinary difficulty of defining Gilmore's essence or even how one should respond to him.

This complex portrait is embellished throughout the remaining six parts of book 1. As developed in part 2 ("Nicole") and part 3 ("Gary and Nicole"), Gilmore's affair with Nicole deepens our sense of both his pathos and his viciousness. Mailer's treatment of their first days together is very sympathetic. He takes seriously their belief in reincarnation and presents without irony their separate assertions that they knew each other "from another time" (*ES*, 83, 88). He shows Gilmore playing the engaging youthful lover despite the fact he is 35 and Nicole 19. Gilmore labels Nicole his "elf" (*ES*, 93-94), carves their names on an apple tree (*ES*, 94), and tells her "that he hoped no unnecessary tragedies would ever befall them" (*ES*, 97). With Nicole he seems much more in control of himself, as when he tells her that the whole point of living is "facing yourself" (*ES*, 88). Yet Gilmore still seems compulsively violent: he forces Nicole into all-night sexual engagements to combat his impotence (*ES*, 89), clips off the speakers in a drive-in (*ES*, 113), hits Nicole at least twice (*ES*, 158, 162-63), throws a tape deck at a security guard (*ES*, 164), and gets drunk soon after promising to give up drinking (*ES*, 200-201). His frequent reflections on reincarnation betray his basic childishness, for at this point his faith is little more than a pleasant fantasy: "After death, he said, he was going to start all over again. Have the kind of life he always wished he had" (*ES*, 197). And so it is no surprise when Gilmore cannot sustain his relationship with Nicole, who leaves him toward the end of part 3. Indeed, the depressing histories presented in part 2 offer almost no hope that Gilmore and Nicole can reverse the pattern of failure that informs both lives.

The first three parts of book 1 create sympathy for Gilmore even as they document his "monstrous" character. This opening movement is crucial to the work's overall effect, for beginning with part 4, "The Gas Station and the Motel," Mailer is obliged to record Gilmore's ghastly performance in murdering for $100 one night and $125 the next. The almost-shockingly-flat account of the Jensen and Bushnell murders is followed by Gilmore's pathetic effort to make love to Nicole's 15-year-old sister, April (*ES*, 238); his absurdly amateurish lies to the police (*ES*, 263, 277-81); his repulsive boasting about the 70 to 100 "successful" robberies he committed as a kid (*ES*, 292) and the murder of Bushnell (*ES*, 356); and his extremely

evasive stance at the subsequent trial, where he claims that he had no control over himself when he committed the murders (*ES*, 381), that it was *fated* for him to kill Bushnell (*ES*, 435-36). In part 5 ("The Shadows of the Dream"), part 6 ("The Trial of Gary M. Gilmore"), and part 7 ("Death Row") we see Gilmore at a much greater distance, back in jail and no longer the somewhat sympathetic figure of the early sections. During Mailer's clinical account of the murders and Gilmore's subsequent arrest, trial, and sentencing, our "hero" often seems little more than the "recidivist" John Hersey takes him to be (Hersey, 13). There is precious little to corroborate the initial hints that Gilmore is partly the victim of a system that imprisons a man for almost his entire adult life for relatively petty crimes. By the end of book 1, however, a strangely positive side to Gilmore does emerge, one that will become a major subject in book 2.

I refer here partly to Gilmore's relative stability when he once again becomes a convict. Early in his jail stint in Provo Gilmore tells a fellow convict, "I am in my element now" (*ES*, 357), and the final sections of book 1 tend to confirm this claim rather than to undercut it as another instance of Gilmore's cheap self-inflation. But I also refer to the odd capacity Gilmore seems to develop to judge his life with apparent objectivity. Soon after his arrest he tells an officer, "I can't keep up with life" (*ES*, 293), as accurate a comment on his frenetic three and a half months in Provo as anyone is able to offer. A bit later he writes a long letter to Nicole in which he says he cannot be the devil, because he loves Nicole and the devil cannot love. "But I might be further from God than I am from the devil," he adds. "It seems that I know evil more intimately than I know goodness" (*ES*, 305). This remarkable letter is followed by others equally fascinating, letters in which he praises Nicole's fearlessness ("Fear is an ugly thing"; *ES*, 327), speaks of the unendurable pain he felt when he thought he had lost Nicole (*ES*, 328), celebrates their two months together while referring again to the thousands of years they may have known each other (*ES*, 329), and affirms courage as the ultimate virtue (*ES*, 345). Perhaps the most important letter is the one in which he tells Nicole, "I believe we always have a choice" (*ES*, 344).

Gilmore's choice now is to die rather than allow his soul to deteriorate further in this life. This logic leads him to reject any appeal of the death penalty, a decision that soon makes him nationally famous and confirms Mailer's portrait of Gilmore as profoundly ambiguous.

This man who acts like a barbarian at one moment and quotes Emerson at another is a "mystery," Mailer has said, "malignant at his worst and heroic at his best" ("PW Interviews: Norman Mailer," 9). Book 1 does not verify Gilmore's heroism, but it does project a man whose complications are as vivid as his unforgettable malignancy. Although Gilmore as habit-ridden monster is the key to book 1, we are made to ask whether that is all there is to say about the man. Book 2, of course, will offer many more words, as Mailer pursues the mystery of Gary Gilmore through another 500 pages.

Before turning to the lawyers and media figures who dominate book 2, I should say something more about the many relatives, friends, acquaintances, and victims who share the stage with Gilmore in book 1. These people are observers who contribute to the composite picture of Gary Gilmore, but they also help Mailer achieve the broad social panorama he admires in writers as different as Tolstoy and Dreiser. Indeed, Mailer has chided himself for doing so little with the secondary characters in his previous novels, a "flaw" he hoped to correct in *The Executioner's Song* (Lennon 1988, 260). Here Mailer develops virtually every "minor" character and permits each to speak in something like his or her own voice, however much the several idioms blend into the flat, colloquial style for which the book is famous. Mailer's defense of his unadorned prose might apply to the minor characters themselves: "one's style is only a tool to use on a dig" (Lennon 1988, 266). Like the style by which we know them, the secondary characters are supposed to contribute to the book's larger formal ends.

One such end is to "examine" the American reality exposed by the strange saga of Gary Gilmore. Joan Didion sees Mailer as capturing two crucial features of western America. The first is "that emptiness at the center of the Western experience, a nihilism antithetical not only to literature but to most other forms of human endeavor."[18] The second is an inability to direct our own lives, a failing so pervasive that all the characters seem to share in "a fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events that will end in Gary Gilmore's death" (Didion, 81). I believe that Didion's insights are exaggerated, but they do point up suggestive connections between Gilmore and the people who surround him. Bessie Gilmore, Brenda Nicol, Vern Damico, Kathryne Baker and her daughters Nicole and April – all are "trapped" in their futile

efforts to find a life worth living. Indeed, almost every woman in the book first marries at 15 or 16 and eventually marries at least three or four times, and the men seem equally caught up in the "fatalistic drift" Didion notices. Although Didion does not do justice to the admirable stability of people like Brenda Nicol and Vern Damico, the wasted and wasteful lives of those around Gilmore suggest that his own fate is only an exaggerated instance of the moral emptiness Didion hears in the book's western voices.

In this respect as in others, Nicole Baker is the second most important character. Mailer has called her "a bona fide American heroine" (Lennon 1988, 270), but most readers will think she is instead the quintessential American victim. Promiscuous at 11, institutionalized at 13, married at 14 and again at 15, Nicole suffers three broken marriages before she is 20. "Sex had never been new to Nicole," we are told (*ES*, 143), and it is more than plausible when she runs off with an older man because "she didn't care where she was going" (*ES*, 117-18). Yet Nicole has virtues to match her troubling irresponsibility. As Gilmore sees, she is fearless and fiercely loyal. These are the very qualities he counts on when he manipulates her toward a suicide pact. In his many letters from jail he pleads with Nicole not to make love with other men (*ES*, 350), to give up sex altogether (*ES*, 403-4), and to join him on the other side in death (*ES*, 472). At the end of book 1 he leads her into a double-suicide attempt that epitomizes both his romanticism and his selfishness, even as it climaxes Mailer's portrait of Nicole as an endearing victim. Later Nicole will be denied the "clean" resolution of death, will emerge from yet another institution to tell Larry Schiller (and Mailer) the story of her love for Gary Gilmore, and will finally drift off to Oregon to new lovers if not a new life. Nicole's story is a familiar one among her family and friends: years of acute aimlessness followed by an utterly hopeless commitment. Surely it is no accident that Nicole comes to love Gilmore most fiercely when he is cut off from her forever. For the Nicoles of this world (and perhaps this means for all of us), there is no consummation except in an imagined future.

The stories of Nicole and the other witnesses point to one of Mailer's most crucial decisions in structuring book 1. Rather than trace Gilmore's grim history from reform school through his term in Marion, Illinois, Mailer chooses to focus on Gilmore's last months in Provo in 1976. The reasons for this arrangement no doubt include

Mailer's desire to achieve greater dramatic unity and to emphasize Gilmore's "mystery" instead of the familiar stages of American crime and punishment. But another important reason is to allow Mailer to flesh out the human context in which Gilmore plays his final role or sings his final song, as the title would have it.[19] This context is dominated by the same hateful "habits" that take more spectacular forms in Gilmore. Yet the human resources displayed in book 1 should not be dismissed quite as easily as Didion's formulation would suggest. Here we get example after example of human folly, western-style, but also many instances of what Mailer calls "American virtue," the American's dogged determination to do his or her best in the worst of circumstances. The range of such portraits is extraordinary, from Gilmore's mother Bessie, to Brenda Nicol, to the Damicos, to the irrepressible Nicole. One of the earliest reviewers called *The Executioner's Song* "a remarkably compassionate work,"[20] and the truth in this judgment should remind us that book 1, like Mailer's portrait of Gilmore, is structured to highlight the human frailties as well as the abominations of American life.

It might seem that book 2 offers a less sympathetic, more satiric history of Gilmore's last months. The very title of part 1, "In the Reign of Good King Boaz," signals a new kind of irony. Here lawyers and the press are omnipresent, and one 82-page section, "Exclusive Rights," is devoted to virtually nothing but Larry Schiller's and David Susskind's efforts to corner the Gilmore market, so to speak, by securing exclusive rights to his story. Packs of reporters are everywhere, confirming Mailer's worst fears about the press. The many lawyers introduced are often distinguished by one bizarre detail or another, as when Earl Dorius, Utah's assistant attorney general, is *excited* at the prospect of an execution and proceeds to work himself into a near-breakdown to ensure that the state of Utah gets its execution on 17 January (*ES*, 500), or when Dennis Boaz, Gilmore's second lawyer, supports his client's desire to be executed until it occurs to him that Gary would prefer to live if he could have connubial visits from Nicole (*ES*, 590-91), perhaps in Mexico (*ES*, 611)! Gilmore's final lawyers, Bob Moody and Ron Stanger, are a good deal less eccentric, but they too partake in the grim legal struggle in which the state of Utah pursues its pound of flesh and the ACLU and other liberal groups fight stubbornly to save a man who does not want to be saved. The ironies here are obvious and may even seem

undramatic. In the film version of *The Executioner's Song* (1982), scenarist Mailer and director Schiller chose to leave out most of the materials of book 2, as if they were less relevant than the more "immediate" events of book 1.

My own view is that book 2 is at least as interesting as book 1, a remarkable feat when one considers that the protagonist is all but unavailable and the heroine is locked up throughout. Once again Mailer gets great mileage from his so-called minor figures, a few of whom (for instance, Boaz, Schiller, and Barry Farrell) are among his most memorable characters. Of real interest for their own sake, they also provide perspective on Gilmore. For example, the producer David Susskind and his prospective scenarist, Stanley Greenberg, help define the moral nature of Gilmore's decision to die. Greenberg supposes that Gilmore must be "out of his head" to want to die (*ES*, 587), thus expressing the liberal position on life and death that Mailer has been attacking at least since *Cannibals and Christians*. Both Susskind and Greenberg come to think of the Gilmore saga as "no longer a story about the breakdown of the criminal justice system"; for them, it becomes "a farce . . . bizarre and sick" (*ES*, 613). For Mailer, one suspects, it was never a story about the breakdown of the criminal justice system, though it was always a story well beyond the rational categories of the Susskinds and Greenbergs.

Other minor characters contribute in large or small ways to the sympathetic portrayal of Gilmore in book 2. Gary's brother Mikal is at first reluctant to allow his brother to die and participates in legal actions to prevent it. When he finally talks with Gary, however, Mikal is won over by his brother's seriousness and depth of feeling. Mikal acknowledges the force of Gary's character by withdrawing his opposition to the execution and by embracing Gary at their final meeting. As they part, Gary first kisses Mikal and then utters perhaps the most haunting words in this very long book: "See you in the darkness" (*ES*, 840). A cellmate of Gilmore's named Gibbs also effectively testifies in Gary's behalf. A police informer, Gibbs refers to Gilmore as the most courageous convict he has ever seen (*ES*, 759). And Gilmore's relatives, especially Vern Damico and Toni Gurney, find themselves moving ever closer to Gilmore as he approaches death, thus confirming the man's odd appeal. Toni's relationship with Gilmore is especially moving. She first visits him the day before he is to be executed and is overwhelmed by his gentle affection (*ES*,

874-75). Later that day, after her own birthday party, she returns to the party Gilmore has been permitted at the prison and again experiences Gary's new warmth (*ES*, 884-86). Toni is sufficiently moved to try to attend Gary's execution (*ES*, 929). This sequence blends with many other small but affecting moments to verify the change sensed by many people during Gilmore's final weeks.

Mailer uses Barry Farrell and Larry Schiller to temper the more sentimental implications of book 2, but ultimately these veteran journalists also testify to Gilmore's surprising depth. The title of book 2, "Eastern Voices," seems to refer to all those safely established in the social system, whether in the East or the West: lawyers, reporters, producers, assistant attorney generals, and so on. Farrell and Schiller are such voices. Each brings a heavy load of urban skepticism to the Gilmore assignment, hating Salt Lake City, as Farrell does, and believing there is no "center" to this story, nothing of real human resonance (*ES*, 577). When both men come to see Gilmore in a very different light, Mailer is able to bring his book to something like a genuine climax.

Farrell is at first confident that nothing sets Gilmore apart but his willingness to die. If Gilmore is not executed, Farrell suggests, he will become indistinguishable from the hundreds of others condemned to die but never executed (*ES*, 611). As he works with Gilmore's responses to hundreds of questions, however, Farrell notices that Gilmore "was now setting out to present the particular view of himself he wanted people to keep" (*ES*, 711). Later Farrell responds profoundly to Gilmore's tapes: "Barry was crying and laughing and felt half triumphant that the man could talk with such clarity" (*ES*, 804). Farrell still thinks that Gilmore "had a total contempt for life" (*ES*, 805), but this makes it all the more impressive when Gilmore responds so "humanely" to the massive attention of his last months (*ES*, 805). Farrell is stunned at Gilmore's apparent complexity. In the transcripts Farrell spots "twenty-seven poses," 27 different Gilmores ("racist Gary and Country-and-Western Gary, poetic Gary, artist manqué Gary, macho Gary"; *ES*, 806). Farrell begins to pursue the single Gary who presumably stands behind these multiple poses, but he is "seized with depression at how few were the answers" to his inquiry (*ES*, 811). Though there is an "evil genius" in Gilmore's planning Nicole's suicide, much else in Gilmore's life suggests sheer ignorance (*ES*, 812); though Gilmore's relations with his mother,

Bessie, seem a potential key, the answers to many related questions provide no "hope of a breakthrough" (*ES*, 827; 844). Continuing to ponder Gilmore's transcripts just before the execution, Farrell turns to yet another possible solution to the Gilmore mystery: Gilmore's fascination with small children. But this "answer" is also unsatisfactory: "It was too insubstantial. In fact, it was sheer speculation. . . . [B]eware of understanding the man too quickly!" (*ES*, 855). Beware indeed. Farrell's final comment on Gilmore takes us back to the passage from André Gide ("Please do not understand me too quickly") Mailer first used as his epigraph to *The Deer Park*. Farrell's conclusion should caution us against reductive readings, psychological efforts to pluck out Gilmore's mystery. Indeed, Gilmore's complexity should impress us as much as it does Farrell, whose prolonged efforts to understand Gilmore are, of course, akin to Mailer's.

Larry Schiller's role is in part like Farrell's. Schiller also looks for the human side to Gilmore, the "sympathetic character" buried inside the cold-blooded killer (*ES*, 629), because Schiller cannot imagine making a successful book or film unless he first makes this discovery. Like Farrell, Schiller begins with many doubts and ends up convinced of Gilmore's essential seriousness, especially on such matters as life after death (*ES*, 670-71). Schiller shares with Farrell the scenarist's desire to grasp his subject, to "reduce Gary's mystery, attach him to conditions, locate him in history" (Chevigny, 191). Together Farrell and Schiller prove that it is impossible to achieve this "reduction" no matter how many materials are scrutinized. Schiller's role is larger than Farrell's, however, for it also includes Schiller's personal drama. Both Farrell and Schiller make interesting discoveries about Gary Gilmore, but Schiller makes such discoveries about himself as well.

In book 2 Schiller's importance surpasses Nicole's and rivals Gilmore's. Much of book 2 is organized around Schiller's efforts to sign up the principals in the Gilmore story and to get information from Gilmore before the execution. This intricate, frustrating process educates Schiller about Gilmore but also constitutes a belated rite de passage for Schiller, who becomes "part of the story," as he himself notes (*ES*, 694). Before coming to Utah Schiller has achieved "a terrible reputation" (*ES*, 581) as a journalist. The last man to interview Jack Ruby, the author of "a quick and rotten book" about Susan Atkins (*ES*, 585), Schiller describes himself as a "communicator" (*ES*,

585) but is laughed at by people who take him to be a hustler or, worse, "a carrion bird" (*ES*, 698). Even his fiancée labels him a "manipulator" (*ES*, 620). With the Gilmore story Schiller struggles to be a good businessman as well as a good journalist (*ES*, 620-21); however, he often seems to lose this fight as he worries about whether there are any "sympathetic characters" in the plot he has purchased, works out alternative scenarios depending on whether or not Gilmore is executed, and schemes to get at Nicole, the love interest in this "democratic Romeo and Juliet," as Boaz describes the Gilmore tale (*ES*, 611).

Yet Schiller turns out to be much more than a carrion bird. He deals more honestly with everyone involved than most of us would have done; he suffers acute physical and emotional stress in deciding how far to go in exploiting his material; and he ends up committing himself to doing the best he can for the story rather than his bank account, even rejecting an offer of $250,000 from the *New York Post* (*ES*, 833). In his afterword Mailer says that Schiller "stood for his portrait, and drew maps to his faults" during their interviews (*ES*, 1022). As Mailer says elsewhere, Schiller "wanted the best book that could be gotten out of what had become the biggest event in his own life, and so he did not spare himself, he offered himself."[21] As a result, Schiller's faults and his final integrity in confronting them are deeply embedded in Mailer's text.[22]

Schiller's role in *The Executioner's Song* is a bit like Mailer's in *The Armies of the Night*. I have referred to Schiller's experience as a rite of passage, and, of course, that is the nature of Mailer's experience during the March on the Pentagon. In each case a man of mixed motives, even a mild cynicism, comes to believe in what he is doing and to act more honorably than we would have thought possible when introduced to him. Schiller is only one of many important characters in this large book, so he is not as central as Mailer is in *Armies*. As we shall see, however, his story very much resembles Mailer's in bringing out the book's more positive implications. The point to be made here is that Schiller's late-blooming integrity confirms Mailer's portrait of Gilmore as a man of unsuspected depth. The more we come to believe in Larry Schiller, the more we believe in his conception of Gary Gilmore.

This is not to say that Mailer's Gilmore is saintly. In fact, Mailer has noted his distaste for Gilmore: "When I started *The Execu-*

tioner's Song, I thought I would like him more than I did" (Lennon 1988, 348). In book 2 as much as in book 1, Mailer does ample justice to what is unattractive, even hateful in Gilmore. As Mailer says, Gilmore was "a bad man, a dull man, a mediocre man" (Lennon 1988, 349). Gilmore's intense racism is evident throughout book 2[23]; he never expresses any real contrition for his crimes[24]; he is a man with "surprising veins of compassion or real feeling" but also "large areas that were absolutely unfeeling" (Lennon 1988, 237); his diatribes against "publicity-hunting lawyers" are amusing but foul (*ES*, 797), exhibiting the "little mean streak" Gilmore is still exposing just before his death (*ES*, 878); and to the nurses who treat him after his first suicide attempt he is simply "spiteful, revengeful, obscene" (*ES*, 597). Joseph Wenke points out that after his arrest Gilmore becomes "more and more demonically manipulative as his futile, despairing, and incredibly selfish desire to possess Nicole assumes control of his being" (Wenke, 207). Indeed, Gilmore is still demanding celibacy of Nicole in his last letter (*ES*, 914), just as he is still asking his lawyers to help him to escape after supposedly resigning himself to a death that is best for his soul (*ES*, 879-80, 886-87).

Yet Mailer's Gilmore is a man with "a capacity to grow" – for Mailer, the most crucial heroic quality (Lennon 1988, 256). Mailer agrees with Boaz, Farrell, and Schiller that Gilmore is "serious about dying with dignity" (*ES*, 517). For Gilmore, this means recognizing "the need to take responsibility for our deeds" (*ES*, 543) and acknowledging that we can choose death as well as life. In an interview Gilmore says, "In death you can choose in a way that you can't choose in life" (*ES*, 673), an assertion that reveals not only Gilmore's great difficulty in making choices in life but also the seriousness of his belief in karma. Gilmore's earlier remarks on karma and reincarnation may seem juvenile, but his later statements impress Mailer (as well as such witnesses as Farrell and Schiller) that Gilmore achieves a genuine philosophical conviction. Thus, Gilmore is able to say, when asked if there is anything worse than taking someone's life, "Well, you could alter somebody's life so that the quality of it wouldn't be what it could've been. . . . I think to make somebody go on living in a lessened state of existence, I think that could be worse than killing 'em" (*ES*, 808-9). Mailer obviously sympathizes with this view, just as he shares Gilmore's belief that "the meaning of the events in any given life can't be comprehended entirely by what one's done in one

life" (Mailer's definition of karma; Lennon 1988, 258). Gilmore's desire to die rather than to continue to deteriorate appeals to Mailer not only as an act of self-definition but also as morally valid; as Mailer says in an interview, "we have profound choices to make in life, and one of them may be the deep and terrible choice most of us avoid between dying now and 'saving one's soul' . . . in order, conceivably, to be reincarnated" (Lennon 1988, 263). Thus, Mailer describes Gilmore's belief in karma as "profound" (Lennon 1988, 263) and highlights Gilmore's growing ability to analyze his own moral condition, as when Gilmore says, "I was always capable of murder. . . . There's a side of me that I don't like. I can become totally devoid of feelings for others, unemotional. I know I'm doing something grossly fucking wrong. I can still go ahead and do it" (*ES*, 906). No one in *The Executioner's Song* offers a more persuasive psychological profile of Gilmore than Gilmore himself.

Gilmore's capacity to "grow" is impressive, then, but it does not lead Mailer to forget Gilmore's viciousness. Instead, it leads him to conclude that it is hard to draw conclusions. Mailer says that as he learned more and more about Gilmore he "knew less and less" (Lennon 1988, 229). His efforts to define Gilmore are no more successful than Farrell's or Schiller's, unless it is a success to realize that Gilmore is finally "too complex" to label (Lennon 1988, 349). Mailer's Gilmore challenges civilized society's "firm premise that we have one life and one life only and that if we waste this one life there is nothing worse we can do" (Lennon 1988, 257), but his sordid acts and unalterable meanness call into question the coherence of his personality. For Mailer, this makes Gilmore "another major American protagonist," someone who "comprehends a deep contradiction in this country and lives his life in the crack of that contradiction" (*PW* Interviews: Norman Mailer," 8-9). But this means Gilmore is only partly "a modern man in search of his soul, wondering whether he might be closer to God or Devil, wanting to make himself whole, willing to pay his debts until he is right and clean and able to 'stand in the sight of God,' " as Begiebing would have it (Begiebing 1980, 189), for Gilmore is also a habit-ridden monster whose essence is contradictory, if indeed he *has* a definable essence.

This balanced assessment of Gilmore is the key to the work's structure. Book 1 tends to highlight Gilmore's violence and book 2 his capacity to "grow," but each presents Gilmore's strengths and

weaknesses through the eyes of many witnesses who try to understand this profoundly enigmatic figure. The very mode of representation stresses the many perspectives on Gilmore, who is the one significant character never seen from "within." In addition, the book's sheer size underlines the many facts any theory about Gilmore must finally encompass. Whether witnessing Gilmore's grimmest acts (as in book 1) or pondering his most intelligent self-assessments (as in book 2), we are all but overwhelmed by the difficulty of reducing the material or the man to manageable dimensions. While some have felt that Mailer aggrandizes Gilmore by presenting his affair with Nicole in "tragic tones" denied to Gilmore's victims,[25] Mailer's handling of Gilmore's last hours illustrates the more complicated effect of his narrative method.

Toward the end Mailer continues to present Gilmore as he is seen by others in relatively detailed accounts of Gilmore's last-night party (*ES*, 875-88), the execution (*ES*, 945-63), the autopsy (*ES*, 980-84), the memorial service held in Gilmore's behalf (*ES*, 988-93), and the dispersal of Gilmore's ashes after cremation (*ES*, 993-94). In these final sections, however, the views of the several witnesses blend into a common awe at Gilmore's cool acceptance of his fate. This effect is most pronounced during the execution scene, in which Mailer shifts the point of view 20 times among seven characters yet seems to present an event perceived in much the same way by everyone present. The effect is awesome – indeed, the scene is perhaps the most powerful in all Mailer's writing – but not in such a way as to exonerate or glorify Gilmore. Gilmore's courage is acknowledged here much as his monstrousness is acknowledged in the depiction of the Jensen and Bushnell murders. Mailer's comment on the autopsy scene also points to the nature of his narrative interests: "That's why I took the execution right through the autopsy – because that was something that I wanted the reader to feel. That's what it means when we kill a man. That even this man who wanted to die and succeeded in getting society to execute him, that even when he was killed, we still feel this horrible shock and loss" (Lennon 1988, 247). We feel shock and loss despite what we know of Gilmore's selfishness and despite our now-intimate knowledge of what he has done. In part we respond because of what we have come to know of Gilmore as lover, Gilmore as poet, Gilmore as philosopher, and especially Gilmore as self-critic. In part we respond

because, all his faults fully acknowledged, Gilmore remains complexly human. Like the book itself, our response is a complicated one that we can only try to dissect, as I have just done. To try to get at the meaning of such responses, as I am about to do, is an effort that Mailer makes a part of his very subject in this massive, painful, but fully articulated masterpiece.

The Meaning of *The Executioner's Song*

> He appealed to me because he embodied many of the themes I've been living with all my life long.
>
> – Norman Mailer, in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*

> I used to hate America for what it was doing to all of us. Now I hate all of us for what we're doing to America.
>
> – Norman Mailer, quoted in *Publishers Weekly*

There are of course many meanings in *The Executioner's Song*, but the one to which I refer at the end of the previous section has been especially popular among Mailer's more recent critics. Noting Mailer's challenge to traditional generic definitions and his insistence on Gilmore's ultimately impenetrable "mystery,"[26] these critics argue that Mailer's theme is "the necessity of fiction for the apprehension of complex reality" (Hellmann, 56-57), "the fictionality of all narrative" (McCord, 66), or the view that "all history is in the end fiction."[27] Mailer's sympathy with such views is both real and long-standing. As long ago as his 1954 essay on David Riesman, Mailer referred to the need for a sociological "fiction" to make sense of American life (*AFM*, 196); at the end of *The Armies of the Night* he makes fun of journalistic pretenses to complete accuracy; and in his afterword to *The Executioner's Song* he acknowledges the editorial contributions (however minor) that went into the making of his book. I suspect that Mailer would agree with Phyllis McCord that *The Executioner's Song* demonstrates the subjective nature of all truth (McCord, 71). But it is harder to accept the notion that this is Mailer's *principal* theme, central to everything he does in this huge book. To accept such an idea is to place Mailer among the metafictionists – something I cannot imagine doing without major qualifications.

Mailer's social interests in this book are simply too obvious to push aside as illustrating the fictionality of all narrative. Though Mailer dramatizes the difficulty of achieving even an unsure grasp of his material, his task is nonetheless to examine the American reality embedded in this material. We should recall that Mailer felt his material was "gold" if he "had enough sense not to gild it" (Lennon 1988, 270). I think we must ask what gemlike themes inform *The Executioner's Song*.

The possible answers to this question begin with Mailer's characterization of Gilmore. For many readers, Gilmore is a reconceived, more artistic version of the hipster first glorified in Mailer's "The White Negro" (1957). For one such critic, Gilmore is "the figure of the artist of the self, defining and redefining his personality, controlling events and other characters, projecting a world."[28] For another, Gilmore walks in shackles between guards but "looks freer than they, and people visiting him suspect *they* are the ones in prison" (Chevigny, 191). I have already suggested that these are very selective views of Gilmore, half-truths at best. Gilmore is no more adequately described as a hipster than Marion Faye is in *The Deer Park*. Neither the fictional Marion nor the real Gilmore commits himself to "that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" by which Mailer identifies the hipster (*AFM*, 304). This is especially true if we recall that the hipster's "journey" is a sensual one, quite literally an adventure of the senses. As I argue in chapter 3, Marion's "black heroic safari" (*TDP*, 328) is a matter of will and intellect, and Gilmore's actions prior to his final arrest are so aimless that they can hardly be called a quest for anything. Even Gilmore's efforts to die with dignity derive from his will and spirit, not his senses. To think of Gilmore as a sexual rebel is to see at once how little he resembles Mailer's late-1950s ideal.[29]

I suggest we might better see Gilmore as Mailer sees him: a man who lives his life in the crack of a deep American contradiction. To one side of this crack is the nihilistic emptiness Didion emphasizes, the "estrangement" Wenke rightly sees in most of the younger people in book 1 (though I would add older women, such as Brenda Nicol and Kathryne Baker, each of whom marries four times).[30] Gilmore's mistreatment of several women permits Mailer to present a seemingly endless chain of victimized women, young and old. Didion hears resignation in their voices, the belief that they cannot influence

events (Didion, 81). Perhaps the most memorable voice is that of Kathy Maynard, the young woman who discovers Nicole after her suicide attempt. In an interview Kathy describes her own life in the flattest tone imaginable: married at 16 for no particular reason; witness to her 17-year-old husband's suicide with a hunting knife; married again two weeks later to a man she met at her husband's funeral; stranded at 17 with two small children, no husband, and no particular sense of what she will be doing next week (*ES*, 563-67). Mailer has said that this interview is the one transcript he did not even abridge, for it was "a found object" he could not improve (Lennon 1988, 269). One might describe Kathy as stoical – Didion's term for all the book's women – but stoicism implies recognition of the horrors one is resigned to and Kathy seems merely oblivious. Her brief tale should remind us of the real desert that surrounds these small Utah towns and the metaphoric desert to which Didion alludes.

Kathy Maynard's story is one side of *The Executioner's Song* in miniature, but there are many other memorable examples. My own favorite involves Nicole's mother, Kathryne Baker. When Gilmore retrieves a gun from Kathryne just before he kills Jensen, Kathryne realizes she does not even know his last name (*ES*, 222) – this, after Gilmore has lived with Nicole for two months. At such moments the book's Westerners appear to be what Wenke calls them, "the beat legatees of the spiritually and politically exhausted hipsters, hippies, and left radicals whom Mailer derides at the conclusion of *Of a Fire on the Moon*" (Wenke 203). But they are in fact a much broader cross-section of the American social order, represented by the conventional Mormons who become Gilmore's "new jailers" (Lennon 1988, 237) (and his victims, for both Jensen and Bushnell are Mormon), the Utah lawyers who prosecute and defend Gilmore, and the many lower-class and lower-middle-class figures whose lives resemble Nicole's but who could not define a "left radical." What they share is a less extreme version of Kathy Maynard's tolerance for the intolerable.

Gilmore is the figure in the book who seems to rebel against this aimless society, just as he is the one who scorns the liberal establishment that takes him up as a "cause" in book 2 – thus, the common view of Gilmore as a Maileresque hero. The partial truth to this view is suggested by Mailer's statement that Gilmore embodied themes Mailer had lived with all his life, among them the heroic indi-

vidual's passionate (and often-destructive) attempt to reject the deadly social environment endured so stoically by the book's western women. This attempt can also be seen in Gilmore's rejection of life in prison, his "dignified" preference for whatever succeeds this life. Indeed, Gilmore's concern for the hereafter is another of the themes to which Mailer no doubt refers, for the religious dimensions of Gilmore's thought correspond to Mailer's oft-expressed convictions or intuitions. Yet Gilmore is no less estranged than the people who surround him in prison or Provo, no less self-destructive, no less frozen in those "habits" to which Mailer relentlessly draws our attention. In his last days Gilmore may have achieved some perspective on his own compulsions and aspired to something more dignified, but he is also the primary example in the book of someone who cannot endure life as it is experienced by all the other characters, from Kathy Maynard to Larry Schiller. Gilmore is a mystery and not a model, a man who embodies Mailer's themes but not his solutions.

I do not mean to imply that Mailer offers answers to the overwhelming problems his characters confront. But *The Executioner's Song* is much less pessimistic than many of its admirers suggest. Mailer says that one of the lessons he learned is that the system is "fairer" than he had supposed (Lennon 1988, 239): "The ways things work in America are not necessarily as sinister as I always assumed. There may not be this grand paranoid network after all" ("PW Interviews: Norman Mailer," 8). This discovery lies behind Mailer's remark that he used to hate America for what it was doing to all of us but now hates us for what we are doing to America. Behind Mailer's hatred for America lay the paranoid's assumption that "they" are in conspiracy against an innocent citizenry; behind hatred for us is the romantic's faith that we know not what we do. Mailer's beliefs might be compared with the transcendental notion that we always pursue the good but don't know what the good is – see Emerson's "The American Scholar" and Thoreau's *Walden* as primary texts.[31] Thus our aimlessness or compulsive materialism, our mindless conformity or violent resistance; thus the world represented in extremis by Gary Gilmore.

As Mailer says, however, this world seems to be fairer and less sinister than he had always supposed. Indeed, the unifying theme in Gilmore's story is what Mailer calls "American virtue." In Mailer's view, everyone involved here wished to do "the right thing" and

went to some trouble to act accordingly. This dedication to principle is the other side of the American contradiction embodied in Gilmore. Rocklike conservatives seeking the death penalty, dedicated liberals seeking to avoid a state execution, lawyers on all sides, friends of Gilmore, friends of his victims, men such as Barry Farrell and Larry Schiller – all did their best as they understood the best. Schiller is perhaps the most notable example, but only because his "best" involves personal growth – virtue in its most positive form. Many other examples of American virtue are grim reminders of why Mailer "hates" us for what we are doing to America. Like Gilmore, however, these other Americans are captured in the richly detailed (if depressing) context of their dull habits and assumptions, a context elaborately built up page by page as Mailer offers the most compelling "social drama" (Lennon 1988, 238, 259) in his long career.

If we read this book as Mailer conceived it, we must feel compassion for nearly everyone – for Kathy Maynard as well as Larry Schiller, for Earl Dorius as well as Kathryne Baker, for the youthful April Baker as well as the elderly Bessie Gilmore. Finally there must also be compassion for Gary Gilmore, just as there must be "hate" for what Gilmore and the rest of us are doing to one another. The least judgmental of Mailer's works, *The Executioner's Song* is also the book in which Mailer's love for America is most impressively in evidence. Mailer has said that he learned from the Gilmore saga that society might be not evil but, rather, "a sad comedy" (Lennon 1988, 240). This phrase also applies to the "astonishing" book he wrote in the wake of this discovery.

Chapter Eight

1. I draw this conclusion from J. Michael Lennon's "A Ranking of Reviews of Mailer's Major Works," an unpublished guide to more than 300 reviews; hereafter cited in text.

2. Robert Begiebing, *Toward a New Synthesis: John Fowles, John Gardner, Norman Mailer* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989), 120; hereafter cited in text.

3. J. Michael Lennon, ed., *Conversations with Norman Mailer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 139; hereafter cited in text.

4. "PW Interviews: Norman Mailer," *Publishers Weekly*, 8 October 1979, 8; hereafter cited in text.

5. For these facts, see Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 267; Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 584; and Mailer's afterword to *The Executioner's Song*, 1024.

6. See John Hersey, "The Legend on the License," *Yale Review* 70 (October 1980): 1-25; hereafter cited in text.

7. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 31-35.

8. See, respectively, Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 234, and Lawrence Grobel, ed. *Conversations with Capote* (New York: New American Library, 1985), 116 (hereafter cited in text).

9. For Capote's use of omniscient narration, see John Hellmann, *Fables of Fact* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 20 (hereafter cited in text), and Phyllis Frus McCord, "The Ideology of Form: The Nonfiction Novel," *Genre* 19 (Spring 1986): 71 (hereafter cited in text). For Capote's tendency to avoid entering his characters' minds, see Anderson, *Style as Argument*, 53.

10. See Tompkins, "In Cold Fact," 125, 127, 166-68, and 170-71; the quotation about Perry Smith is on 171.

11. See Jack De Bellis, "Visions and Revisions: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 7 (1979): 519-36.

12. Bell Gale Chevigny, "Twice-Told Tales and the Meaning of History: Testimonial Novels by Miguel Barnet and Norman Mailer," *Centennial Review* 30 (Spring 1986): 183; hereafter cited in text.

13. Steven G. Kellman, "Mailer's Strains of Fact," *Southwest Review* 68 (Spring 1983): 130.

14. Quoted in Ted Morgan, review of *The Executioner's Song*, *Saturday Review*, 10 November 1979, 57-58.

15. Earl Rovit, "True Life Story," *Nation*, 20 October 1979, 378.

16. The exception here is Hersey ("The Legend on the License"), who does question Mailer's accuracy. Others argue that everything in *The Executioner's Song* is fictive and that Mailer's primary point is precisely the fictionality of all so-called nonfiction. I address this more common reading in the concluding section of this chapter.

17. Richard Stern, "Missingeria and Literary Health," *Georgia Review* 34 (Summer 1980): 422-27.

18. Joan Didion, " 'I Want to Go Ahead and Do It,' " in *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*, ed. Lennon, 82; hereafter cited in text.

19. Mailer's title has an interesting history. He first used it as the title of a poem published in a magazine called *Fuck You* in 1964; the poem was reprinted in *Cannibals and Christians*, 131-32; and in 1975 Mailer used the title again as the title for chapter 15 of *The Fight*. Though others have tried

to relate Mailer's meaning in these earlier works to *The Executioner's Song*, I can see no significant connection. The title does work something like Capote's does in *In Cold Blood*, for in each case the title refers both to the killers who execute their victims and to the social order that in turn executes the killers.

20. John Garvey, "'The Executioner's Song,'" in *Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 140.

21. "Letters: Norman Mailer," *Hollywood Reporter*, 3 January 1980, 3.

22. For other brief but good discussions of Schiller, see Kellman, "Strains of Fact," 132 and Wenke, *Mailer's America*, 211.

23. See especially 590, 677-78, and 762-63 of *The Executioner's Song*.

24. Mailer notes this point himself; see Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 241.

25. Mark Edmundson makes this point in his forthcoming essay on *The Executioner's Song*, "Romantic Self-Creations: Mailer and Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*"; see 1992 issues of *Contemporary Literature*. William Buckley sees a similar bias in Gilmore's favor in the book's final sections; see Lennon, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 229-30. For a contrary view, see Begiebing, *Acts of Regeneration*, 191.

26. For the best discussion of Mailer's insistence on Gilmore's mysteriousness, see Robert M. Arlett, "The Veiled Fist of a Master Executioner," *Criticism* 29 (Spring 1987): 215-31.

27. Robert L. McLaughlin, "History vs. Fiction: The Self-Destruction of *The Executioner's Song*," *Clio* 17 (Spring 1988): 237.

28. Judith A. Scheffler, "The Prisoner as Creator in *The Executioner's Song*," in *Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer*, ed. Bloom, 184.

29. Edmundson ("Romantic Self-Creations") includes an interesting discussion of Gilmore as hipster.

30. See Wenke, *Mailer's America*, 201-2.

31. For good discussions of Mailer's affinities with the American romantics, see Cowan, "Americanness," in *Critical Essays on Norman Mailer*, ed. Lennon; "Mailer's Cosmology," in the same source; and Wenke, *Mailer's America*.