NORMAN MAILER
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

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GARY GILMORE ROBBED THE UNRESISTING SERVICE-STATION ATTENDANT, told him to lie down, and then shot him in the head. Twice, fast. The next day, Gilmore robbed the unresisting motel-manager, told him to lie down, and then shot him in the head. Once only, because the gun jammed, and so the man died slowly. Convicted, Gilmore chose to die as quickly as the law would allow, and chose to be shot. He had at this time spent 18 of his 35 years locked up, and he wanted no more of it, knowing that whatever lifetime he might gain could be only a deathwatch. He waived his right of appeal, and flung himself on the justice of the courts. That shook them. But in the end, in January 1977, after every stay of execution had been prised off by the combined efforts of Gilmore and his prosecutors, Gilmore's bad life came to a good end. He was then brave. He was dignified. Generous, too, giving his eyes to someone young who needed them, and giving his pituitary gland to the sick child of his cousin Brenda, the woman who, though she still loved him and had been the one to get him released on parole only nine months earlier, had since turned him in and had given her undeviating testimony. Gilmore was generous, and humorous with it. "Well, Moody, I'm going to leave you my hair. You need it worse than I do." Thy need, or necessity or whatever, is greater than mine.

Norman Mailer's book about Gilmore is a work of genius in its range, depth, and restraint. It has speed, which Gilmore had, and patience, which he had not. It has lucidity, even when dealing with legal entanglements. It has forbearance, even when witnessing brutalities and insensitivities. Its justice is larger than indignation, and its responsible equanimity is at one with its equity. Nothing is extenuated, and nothing set down in malice. For this mur-

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derer we need words which acknowledge an undying recalcitrance, words like those which Dr. Johnson needed for Othello: "yet we cannot but pity him."

There are a hundred or more people to whom justice and mercy must be done if they are to be done to Gilmore—from Gilmore's beloved Nicole (19 years old, with three broken marriages, two low-profile children, and now this very high-profile ex-convict who, for these few months, loved her madly and sanely), through Gilmore's family, out to the cell-mates, the warders, the lawyers and judges, and finally the journalists, bookmakers and entrepreneurs of what became a mass-media undertaking. The only person missing is Mailer. True, Mailer hadn't been on the scene, and it is a posthumous Gilmore whom he, and not only we, must meet. But this is a fact of the matter, not the whole truth of it. Mailer here has better things to do with his self than to attend to it or upon it.

You could call the book a feat of self-abnegation if the word "feat" didn't suggest a bravura. Gilmore, who had no self-control once he had decided to throw a switch inside his head and to vent the pent, but who had gigantic self-control once the imminent death was not that of another but of himself, is here complemented by an artist who most unexpectedly shows in this sane and magnanimous book a high form of self-control: a control over the extent to which, and the ways in which, self is present at all even to be controlled exactly. The author of *Advertisements for Myself* is here advertising nothing, least of all himself.

How does Mailer effect this? He does not himself have a voice in the book, which is divided in two, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices." But the book's amplitude allows there to be little of him which goes unvoiced. So Nicole's deranged sister April is not a mouthpiece or surrogate for Mailer, but her spooky ways of thinking, and of not thinking, are strings which vibrate in sympathy with his strings without his ever having to touch hers. Likewise with the different concurrence between Mailer and the psychiatrist Woods, on Gilmore and high risk: "Gilmore had been keeping in touch with something indispensable to be in touch with." It is a question of Mailer's being in touch with all these people who are not he, and not of his doling himself out through the book.

Pre-eminently it is the monstrous, amiable, ruthless and disconcertingly candid Lawrence Schiller who stands in or weighs in for Mailer in the second half of the book—Schiller, "something' of a carrion bird" (before Gilmore, he had been the mass-mediator for Jack Ruby on his deathbed, and

for Susan Atkins in the Manson trial), detested by those whom he outdoes ("Schiller is a scavenger, a snake"), and yet having the kindly effrontery to introduce himself to Nicole with "I'm the big bad wolf, Larry Schiller." Schiller mediates between Gilmore and Mailer. The book is copyright Norman Mailer, Lawrence Schiller and the New Ingot Company Inc. But Mailer is big enough to incorporate even Schiller, whose wheelings around, like his dealings, do have a burly power. Sometimes he was "ready to cry in his sleep that he was a writer without hands," so it is good that he fell into Mailer's hands. The creator of the film *The American Dreamer* meets his match in the man who now redeems *An American Dream*.

There may have been much of Mailer in Gilmore, too, the religious, superstitious, existentialist Gilmore. But it is part of the simple sanity of the book that such things are now subjected to an intimate vigilance. "Whether the life is criminal or not," Mailer once notoriously said, "the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself." *The Executioner's Song* is something wiser: it contemplates the life and death of a criminal, and seeks to encourage the steady contemplation of the psychopath in him and in oneself, but not only of that.

Diana Trilling, in an essay which paid Mailer the compliment of fear as well as of admiration, was rightly horrified by what Mailer said in 1961 about a brutal murder. What he said was this:

> Let's use our imaginations. It means that one human being has determined to extinguish the life of another human being. It means that two people are engaging in a dialogue with eternity. Now if the brute does it and at the last moment likes the man he is extinguishing then perhaps the victim did not die in vain. If there is an eternity with souls in that eternity, if one is able to be born again, the victim may get his reward.

Let's use our imaginations again. *The Executioner's Song* thinks again, and feels anew. American dreams are now pushed back to where they belong, and what is contemplated by daylight is an American tragedy.

For the unlikeness between Mailer and Gilmore is as unignorable as any likeness. Sparring, Gilmore said: "I don't lead, I'm a counterpuncher." Mailer knows that as a writer he's a counterpuncher, but it's the fact that he is not assimilating himself to Gilmore which allows him not to be a tub-thumper.

Mailer is here the element, which is very different from his being in his element. He is the medium, not the message. Better still, there is no message. Probably nobody but Mailer could have written this book, in that there may be no other writer of such synthesizing power who so knows the massiveness both of the world's facts and of the self's fantasies. Yet the book, though it marshals a great many of Mailer's enduring concerns, has a powerful sense of having written itself. It makes compelling reading partly because it was written not from Mailer's compulsions but with its own impulsion.

Mrs. Trilling turned upon Mailer T. S. Eliot's praise of Henry James as having a mind so fine that no idea could violate it: "Of Mailer we can say that his novelist's mind is peculiarly violable by idea, even by ideology." But the greatness of *The Executioner's Song* is, surprisingly, in Mailer's having manifested a mind, not so fine exactly, but so strong, that no idea can violate it, even ideas about the hideous violation done by Gilmore and to him. "His mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas," Eliot had mused.

Spurred by the obvious affinities between Mailer and Lawrence, we might call up another moment in Eliot's criticism, when, four years after those words on James and ideas, Eliot spoke in 1922 of Lawrence and theories:

> He has never yet, I think, quite surrendered himself to his work. He still theorises at times when he should merely see. His theory has not yet reached the point at which it is no longer a theory, he stilI requires (at the end of *Aaron's Rod*) the mouthpiece for a harangue. But there is one scene in this book—a dialogue between an Italian and several Englishmen—in which one feels that the whole is governed by a creator who is purely creator, with the terrifying disinterestedness of the creator. And for that we can forgive Mr. Lawrence his subsequent lapse into a theory of human relationships.

Mailer has surrendered himself to this work, and is content to see. His disinterestedness is in his being so little afraid of what may unjustly be said of his disinterested justice.

This book promulgates no ideas or theories, though it contains a great many, as well as intelligent speculations, all voiced or thought by others. Mailer sustains in his daytime world what Empson praised in Spenser's dream-world—the artist pouring quite different allegiances into his even

work with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind." The issues are here only as they issue from other minds, for instance the unmuddy mind of Gilmore (his heart is another matter):

> But what do I do now? I don't know. Hang myself?
>
> I've thought about that for years, I may do that. Hope that the state executes me? That's more acceptable and easier than suicide. But they haven't executed anybody here since 1963 (just about the last year for legal executions anywhere). What do I do, rot in prison? Growing old and bitter and eventually work this around in my mind to where it reads that I'm the one who's getting fucked around, that I'm just an innocent victim of society's bullshit? What do I do? Spend a life in prison searching for the God I've wanted to know for such a long time? Resume my painting? Write poetry? Play handball? Eat my heart out for the wondrous love you gave me that I threw away Monday nite because I was so spoiled and couldn't immediately have a white pickup truck I wanted? What do I do?

The Executioner's Song has a respect for ideas, and yet ideas are not to the book's own purpose. It is Gilmore and the others who are entitled to purposeful ideas, as when Gilmore addresses the Pardons Board: "He did not rise to this occasion like a great ham actor, but chose to be oblivious to it. Merely there to express his idea. Gilmore spoke in the absolute confidence of the idea, spoke in the same quiet tone he might have employed if talking to only one man." The book's own level tones are therefore different from those of dedicated professionals, those of the psychiatrist or lawyer no less unshockable than Mailer but differently so. Unlike the gratuitousness of Gilmore's murders, the book has the freedom of art. It does not seek to make anything happen: it seeks to show what happened, and it finds. It does not despair of knowing why, but it knows that it doesn't know.

Every imaginable explanation of Gilmore and his conduct is given the right to be heard. The book is long and large, not only because its magnanimity asks room for the large hearts of many others; and not only because there were a great many participants; but also because there are so many pos-

sibilities for the understanding of it all. Should we see Gilmore as nursing a kid's low threshold for frustration, so that he just had to have that newly-painted truck instead of his dud car? Two deaths, at about $125 each, towards the $400 which was due? Or Gilmore as a lover, maddened by the break with Nicole who had said she was through with him and was now nowhere to be found? "l killed Jenkins and Bushnell because I did not want to kill Nicole." Or Gilmore as a callous killer from way back, boasting of a killing done in jail? Cold steel. Questioner: "How would you describe your personality?" Gilmore: "Slightly less than bland." Or Gilmore as somewhere afraid of himself as a would-be child-molester? Or as hating Mormons (his victims were Mormons, not that this is unusual in Utah) because of how the Mormon Church had treated his mother? Or Gilmore as the devil, or as evil? "I am one of those people that probably shouldn't exist." Or Gilmore as the victim of evil medication? "They shot me with that foul drug Prolixin and made a zombie out of me for four months." Or Gilmore as the victim of society at large, or of its not having allowed him to be at large? "He was in prison so long, he didn't know how to work for a living or pay a bill." Or Gilmore as the victim of his young life, with a criminal father who had too many aliases, and with a mother who.…? Yet Gilmore turns the tables upon the questioner who sits so sly. "What do you think of your mother and her role in your early life?"

> I love my mother. She's a beautiful strong woman. Has always been consistent in her love for me. My mother and I have always had a good relationship. Besides being mother and son we're also friends. She's a good mother of pioneer Mormon stock. A good woman. What do you think of your mother?

Why? "That night I knew I had to open a valve." A danger valve, for others and for Gilmore. Everybody asked why. "I don't know," he mostly replied. When the question was pitched less high, he could send up the whole idea of such whys and wherefores. "Why did you take things without paying for them—beer—guns?" "Didn't always have time to stand in those long check-out counter lines."

But the real question stays. "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Or out of nature? And what of these hearts which can throw a switch in the head, from tender to hard? With Regan and Goneril, there are

reasons enough why our nearest may not at all be our dearest. Nobody has managed not to hurt each and every member of the family. But then it is not any lack of reasons which makes the mystery, it is the chasm between the piled reasons and the snatched act. For Gilmore's murderousness we have more reasons than we know what to do with. He remains eternally distant, this man who could set down in answer to the question, "Did Jensen resist and did Jensen show fear?":

> Jenkins did not resist.
> He did not show undue fear.
> I was struck by his friendly, smiling, kind face.

Respect is the heart of the book. Those who wouldn't respect Gilmore's wishes (which were not a death wish—till the end he was serious about ways of escaping from the prison) didn't respect what was worthy of respect in him. "The only thing I ask is just respect my own thoughts about death." When they said he was mad or suicidal or publicity-seeking or up to some ploy, they lacked respect for more than just Gilmore. Mailer isn't sentimental, for he flinches from nothing about Gilmore which is contemptible. But from the beginning, Mailer respects that which should be respected, very various too, in all of those whose lives touched Gilmore's life and death, including those whom he killed. Gilmore's cousin Brenda, the first person we meet in the book, is a triumphant evocation of a person who triumphs over everything. But then the whole book is astonishingly free from scorn or condescension; even the preposterous Dennis Boaz (writer, lawyer, hippy, changer of his own mind but of no one else's) is acknowledged for his intrepidity and for the directness of his speech on behalf of Gilmore's wishes.

A great many intelligent and sensitive things are said about respect in the course of the book, none of them by Mailer, since he is not there to speak, but all getting his due as well as their own. A small example would be the presentation (not treatment) of Gilmore's parole-officer, Mont Court, where the contrast would be with the cheap collusion between the plot and the audience in the treatment of the parole officer in the Dustin Hoffman film about a murderous recidivist, *Straight Time*. But a more incriminating example, just because of its hateful influence on Gilmore himself, would be the film of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Gilmore loved the film; he said that

he'd watched them film it, and that he'd even been sent over to that very same mental-institution. He had seen the film before; then he took Brenda to it and behaved throughout with odious aggression; and then, after killing the gas-station attendant, he took half-crazy April to it: "This is one movie I want to see again." Skilled, unscrupulous, the film ministered to all that was worst in Gilmore (and not only in him). In the perverted intelligence with which the film infects the audience with its systematic injustice, in its assurance that nobody except its favorites has either a character or a belief which could possibly be respected, it is the perfect and deplorable contrast to Mailer's admirable and discriminating respect. Such is Mailer's justified confidence here that he can even allow us to acknowledge that Gilmore was alert about pseudo-respect:

> When a girl finally decided to let you fuck her she'd always put on this act like she was being taken advantage of and 9 times outa 10 the girl would say 'Well, will you still respect me?' Some goof-ball shit like that. Well the cat was always so hot and ready to go by then that he was ready to promise anything, even respect. That always seemed so silly, but it was just the way the game was played. I had a chick ask me that once, a real pretty little blond girl, everybody really was hot for her ass and I had her alone one nite in her house. We was both about 15 and necking pretty heavy both getting worked up and I was in and I knew it and then she came up with that cornball line: 'Gary, if I let you do it would you still respect me?' Well, I blew it, I started laffing and I told her: 'Respect you? For what? I just wanta fuck and so do you, what the fuck am I sposed to respect you for? You just won a first place trophy in the Indianapolis 500 or something?' Well, like I said I blew that one.

"Don't I have the right to die?" Whether the life is criminal or not, this is a question for our time. Whose life is it anyway? Much of the power of the story of Gary Gilmore comes from some cruel parallels between judicial justice and what passes for medical mercy. Gilmore is a contemporary of Karen Quinlan and of many others whom modern medicine deprives of a dignified death. The ironical words of Clough have been turned to a different irony and to a decent injunction:

> Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive
> Officiously to keep alive.

Officials of the American Civil Liberties Union strove officiously to keep Gilmore alive. "Rather than live in this hole, I'd choose to be dead." He knew what his co-operative enemies ought to have meant when they said of the death penalty: "that's too good for him."

"You sentenced me to die. Unless it's a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it." Going ahead meant that the jokes could be on them. As when, the courts continuing to lurch into concurring with Gilmore, and the ACLU still wishing to save Gilmore from himself and to save others on Death Row from the likely consequences of Gilmore's execution, Gilmore asks: "What else can they do? Go to the United Nations?" None of the prosecuting jokes is as good as those which Gilmore makes in defense of his right to die, or as good as those which are simply a way of seeing the bizarre circumstances themselves. After Gilmore's first suicide attempt, a newspaper cartoon showed him in a hospital bed: The nurse was saying, "Mr. Gilmore, wake up. 'It's time for your shot.' At the foot of the hospital bed was a five-man firing squad." But this is less sharp than the mere radio report: "Dr L. Grant Christensen said Gilmore can leave the hospital and return to Death Row if he continues to improve."

Gilmore's humor and wit were real, but they could be really brutal:

> "'It was like in a movie," I say to them, "and I couldn't stop the movie.' "
>
> "Is that how it came down?" asked Gibbs.
>
> "Shit, no," said Gilmore. "I walked in on Benny Bushnell and I said to that fat son of a bitch, 'Your money, son, *and* your life.' "
>
> "Hell," said Gilmore, "the morning after I killed Jensen, I called up the gas station and asked them if they had any job openings."

Yet you can understand his reaching for whatever dark humor he can find through which to contemplate the eclipse of his own life, and he goes straight on from those brutalities to a self-inflicted one:

> "What's your last best request when they're hanging you?' he asked, and answered, 'Use a rubber rope.' Pretending to be bouncing on the end, he put his face in a scowl, and said, 'Guess I'll be hanging around for a while."

He sent an invitation to his execution:

> BANG! BANG!
> A real live Shoot'em up!
> Mrs. Bessie Gilmore of Milwaukie, Ore cordially invites you to the execution of her son: Gary Mark Gilmore, 36
> Place: Utah State Prison. Draper, Utah
> Time: Sunrise
> EARPLUGS AND BULLETS WILL BE FURNISHED

It has to be admitted that the "real live" is dauntless. They couldn't stop Gilmore, who gazed at all the money-making and dilated on it:

> Oh, hey, man, I got something that'll make a mint. Get aholda John Cameron Swazey right now, and get a Timex wristwatch here. And have John Cameron Swazey out there after I fall over, he can be wearing a stethoscope, he can put it on my heart and say, 'Well, that stopped,' and then he can put the stethoscope on the Timex and say, 'she's still running, folks.'

Nothing, not even his worst witticism, is as bad as the armchair esprit of those who never find it necessary to have what Gilmore, in a repeated pun, called the courage of their convictions ("Don't the people of Utah have the courage of their convictions? You sentence a man to die—me—and when I accept this most extreme punishment with grace and dignity, you, the people of Utah want to back down and argue with me about it. You're silly").

> If you had a choice, would your execution be on television?
> No.
> Too macabre.
> Would you like *your* death televised?
> At the same time, I really don't give a shit.

This is a human voice which comes from someone who had done many inhuman things, and as a voice it is preferable to this:

> SEE SELVES ON "VIDEO"
> THEN TWO DIE IN CHAIR
>
> Chicago, April 21, 1950—(AP)—Two condemned murderers saw themselves on television last night and a few hours later died in the electric chair … The doomed men … were filmed in death row yesterday afternoon. The film was then put on a 7 p.m. newsreel show and viewed by the men on a set loaned them by the warden.

And is preferable to this, the prompt commenting voice of Marshall McLuhan: "This situation is a major feat of modern news technique. Hot spot news with a vengeance." Mailer's book is hot spot news that stays news, and it is without any vengeance.

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