THE FATHER AND SON OF AMERICAN REALISM: THE SECOND ACTS OF DREISER AND MAILER

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NORMAN MAILER'S LITERARY DEVELOPMENT AND HIGHEST ACHIEVEMENTS FIND their parallel in the work of Theodore Dreiser, known as the "Father of American Realism." Mailer took up that baton in the wake of World War II. Even their flamboyant personal lives and reputations as womanizers are strikingly similar. Each, more than a few might say, lacked everything but genius. They both began their first published novels with personal experience as the basis of their fiction—*Sister Carrie* (1900) and *The Naked and the Dead* (1948)—and concluded, unlike the great majority of notable American writers, with a "second act": the publications of *An American Tragedy* (1925) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979), both journalistic in their use of facts in fiction. They overwhelmed the literary world first with stories out of their own lives and subsequently matched, or perhaps exceeded, those accomplishments with novels based on the real lives of victims of the American Dream. Each one, incidentally, also spent six months in the Soviet Union at the close of his career. And each one wrote a book either about or involving Russia—Dreiser's *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928) and Mailer's *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), an overlooked book incidentally that rivals *The Executioner's Song* in naturalistic drama.

Dreiser came from poverty, the twelfth of thirteen children. *Sister Carrie* came right out of his family history. Legend has it that at the urging of a friend he sat down in front of a pad of yellow paper and scrawled the title

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"Sister Carrie" across the page, without knowing exactly what it was about until the words flowed from the pages. The heroine is based on the exploits of one of his sisters, the character of George Hurstwood on the lover she ran off with, after he stole from his employer's safe in Chicago. Having honed his writing skills in the 1890s as a journalist and magazine writer, Dreiser told the nearly unadulterated truth in *Sister Carrie*, all the way down to using the same names of the people and places involved, something that had to be changed when the manuscript went to his reluctant but legally bound publishers, who nevertheless did all they could to suppress their own publication. Doubleday or his wife strongly objected to the presentation of average people involved in immoral acts. It was all right to depict the Irish as pitiful, as Stephen Crane had done in *Maggie Girl of the Streets* (1893) or Frank Norris in *McTeague* (1899), but Dreiser's characters were not identified as immigrants or American minorities. If he had made Carrie and Hurstwood German-American like himself, it would also have been okay.

The suppression and poor sales of *Sister Carrie* sent Dreiser into a tailspin that kept him from publishing another book for the next eleven years. *Jennie Gerhardt*, based on the life of another sister, appeared in 1911. He mined his personal background for one more novel in *The "Genius,"* which didn't appear until 1915 and was quickly banned under the obscenity statutes of the day. Everything else, with the exception of his early short stories, came from active research, prodigious research that produced *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and—in 1925—*An American Tragedy*, which was based in part on a murder committed in 1906. With that novel, he returned from relative obscurity to become not only a famous author again, but—like his "son" Mailer—a public figure who was consistently in the news during the last fifteen years of his life for one controversy after another.

Norman Mailer was strongly influenced by Dreiser; in my brief studies of him to date I've encountered only a few direct references. One is to *Sister Carrie* in his book on Marilyn Monroe in 1973; another is to be found in the final words of the Oswald book. As an undergraduate at Harvard, Mailer took a course called "Modern American Literature" taught by Howard Mumford Jones and read among other writers Faulkner and Dreiser. According to Mailer's authorized biographer, J. Michael Lennon, Mailer used *An American Tragedy* as his model in writing *The Executioner's Song*. An earlier biographer, Carl Rollyson, states that he acquired his naturalistic approach to literature from reading James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, so

immersed in it that this Jewish writer from the middle class sometimes thought of himself as Irish. Well, the Dreiser connection remains because Farrell worshipped Dreiser and in fact finished his second posthumous novel, *The Stoic*, published in 1947.

While Dreiser seemed to fall almost effortlessly into the writer's life, Mailer worked hard for it, from the very beginning. The concept of the professional writer, of course, was rather loosely regarded in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when Dreiser came of age. But Mailer in the next century had many models, especially Hemingway, whose most memorable characters realize that they "can die but once" and so seek to live life without hesitation or cowardice. In fact, young Mailer couldn't wait to become a writer, having started as an undergraduate. In rejecting "A Calculus at Heaven," which subsequently appeared in the good company of such established writers as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Arthur Miller, in the 1944 edition of *Cross-Section*, a collection of literary pieces from all genres, one editor praised Mailer's novella but added: "I worry about your writing only because you have that damned facility to write about things you haven't experienced, and they're real and for the most part honest and sincere" (Amussen). "A Calculus at Heaven" was a story about World War II in the South Pacific, and Mailer hadn't even been there yet. Like *The Naked and the Dead*, it dissects the past of soldiers facing possible death in combat.

Interestingly, both *Sister Carrie* and *The Naked and the Dead* came close to being banned for "obscenity." For Mailer's book it was not only the swear words, all but "fuck," elided into "fug," but the fact that he failed to depict his soldiers with the clean-cut image of the U.S. Army recruiting posters. The novel, as we know, was partly based on letters he wrote from the Pacific to his first wife, Bernice Silverman. As a realist in the Dreiserian tradition, he wanted his story to be as frank and realistic as possible. In a letter to her from November 22, 1945, he tells of hearing about a sergeant who has a private give a Japanese prisoner-of-war first water, then food and a cigarette, before he shoots the prisoner through the temple. This individual, of course, became the basis for the character of the sadistic Sergeant Croft in *The Naked and the Dead*.

Dreiser was twenty-nine when he published his first novel, Mailer twenty-five. Both, of course, published a number of books before coming back to the heights of their first; each was in his fifties when he did so—Dreiser was fifty-four, Mailer fifty-six. Both had stayed in the news as writers in the interim. With *An American Tragedy*, it was a comeback. With *The Executioner's Song*, it

was a reinvention that was followed by *Harlot's Ghost* and, of course, *Oswald's Tale*. Dreiser as an original writer was literally exhausted after the publication of *An American Tragedy*, devoting the rest of his public life to political causes.

Mailer had drifted towards the non-fiction narratives since the late sixties with *The Armies of the Night*. In fact, my interest in Norman Mailer was rekindled by reading *The Fight*, published in 1975. I found the same spontaneity of prose in *The Fight* that I had encountered in *The Executioner's Song*, which I had first read when it appeared in 1979. I had naturally been exposed over the years to all the negative commentary on Mailer. One criticism that rings with a little truth is that he was at his best when he wasn't trying to *be* "Mailer." I think that is so in *The Fight*. For me it was almost a direct link to *The Executioner's Song*, whose title was first used as the title of chapter 15 in *The Fight*. In that little book where Ali, the underdog, lies as to how he's going to fight George Foreman:

> "Yes, we're going to dance," said Ali, "we're going to dance and dance."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "Yes, we're going to da-ance," cried Ali, and said again to Broadus, "You tell him to get ready."
>
> "I'm not telling him nothing," muttered Broadus.
>
> "Tell him he better know how to dance."
>
> "He don't dance," Broadus managed to say as if to warn: My man has heavier things to do.
>
> "He don't what," asked Ali.
>
> "He don't dance," said Broadus.
>
> "George Foreman's man," cried Ali, "say George can't dance. George can't come to the da-ance!"
>
> "Five minutes," somebody yelled out, and Youngblood handed the fighter a bottle of orange juice. Ali took a swig of it, half a glass worth, and stared with amusement at Broadus. "Tell him to hit me in the belly," he said. (171)

In recreating this scene in Ali's dressing room before the fight, Mailer magically reproduces the vernacular, the tone, even the throbbing pulse of that night of the "The Rumble in the Jungle."

One of the most noteworthy aspects of *The Executioner's Song* is Mailer's

way of telling the full story in the vernacular of the downtrodden and the criminal that populate it. It is one of the greatest accomplishments in narrative since Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where the author tells the full story through the rhetoric of a fourteen-year-old. In Mailer's book, we look through the eyes of the various characters that surround the condemned Gary Gilmore. "When Vern met his lawyer, Bob Moody, on Monday morning," Mailer writes in Chapter 9 of Part II of *The Executioner's Song*, "he thought he was a quiet, confident, intelligent man. Moody was well built, and half bald, and his eyeglasses looked competent" (640). To this shoe repairman who gave the fated ex-con a job and who was physically stronger than Gilmore, in spite of his reach in years, baldness and eyeglasses would register as signs of intelligence. Vern's daughter, Brenda, is described as "almost good looking enough to be a Charlie's Angel-type girl" (714).

Mailer somehow steeped himself in this world, helped immensely along by the research of Larry Schiller but also visiting the principal scenes of the story in Utah. One aspect of that preparation that fascinates me is Mailer's correspondence with Jack Henry Abbott. Hearing that Mailer was at work on a book about "Violence in America," Abbott wrote him on February 9, 1978, saying that he had once escaped from the Utah State Prison, "out of the same security section that Gilmore was in." A career criminal, or more correctly a career prisoner, Abbott offered to give the writer invaluable insights into prison life, assuring him that he'd never get a better chance "to obtain material as valuable to the subject of violence and prison as I am offering you." Mailer responded on the twenty-third that he was in the middle of writing *The Executioner's Song*, that he had only six months to meet his publisher's deadline before, he added, "I'm dead broke." "You say you'll tell me stories," he added. "Well, I'm here to listen if you care to drop me some lines" (Letter to Jack Abbott).

Most everybody here undoubtedly knows the end of *that* story. Mailer was so impressed with Abbott's authorial "voice" in the letters written from prison that he got his agent to have a selection made, which became part of *In the Belly of the Beast*, published in the spring of 1981. Dreiser had visited death row at Sing Sing in preparation for writing *An American Tragedy*. Mailer visited Abbott at the penitentiary at Marion to give him a copy of *The Executioner's Song*. When Abbott got out on parole, Mailer arranged for Abbott to work as his "editorial assistant" at $150 a week. On the day on which Terrence Des Pres's enthusiastic review of *In the Belly of the Beast* ap-

peared in the *New York Times*, July 19, 1981, Abbott, who was still residing in a halfway house in the Bowery, was on the lam—having knifed fatally a waiter at an East Village restaurant that early morning. He fled to Mexico City in the hope of immigrating to Cuba, where his Marxist-Leninist views would find favor. He never got out of Mexico and was captured in Louisiana while working in an oil field and returned for trial in New York, where he was convicted of second-degree murder and returned to prison for a term of fifteen years to life. Mailer was blamed for getting this two-time killer out of jail, but actually his time in federal prison had expired in 1979 and the Utah prison authorities decided, though under pressure from Mailer and other writers, that Abbott was eligible for parole in an earlier crime in Utah. Abbott was found dead in his cell in 2002, apparently a suicide.

Ironically, while Mailer had written his version of *An American Tragedy* about Gary Gilmore, he as a result became involved with an equally interesting criminal, one who like Gilmore had been "state-raised" and spent most of his adult life in prison. Both men had particular talents. Gilmore could draw, and Abbott could certainly write. Indeed, as a self-educated prisoner whose vocabulary included mostly words he had never heard spoken or pronounced correctly, Abbott could have become under more favorable circumstances a professor of philosophy. Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths was based on Chester Gillette, who also died in the state of New York, in an execution in 1908. Dreiser may have thought Gillette, or "Clyde," was a victim of the American Dream, but he also thought him mediocre in character. Mailer said upon hearing of Abbott's death that he "never knew a man who had a worse life" (Worth). Yet in a 1992 interview in the *Buffalo News*, Mailer said that his involvement with Abbott was "another episode in my life in which I can find nothing to cheer about or nothing to take pride in" ("Jack Henry").

Abbott was the illegitimate offspring of a Chinese prostitute and an American soldier of Irish descent. This couple also sired a daughter two years later. Mrs. Frances Amador today resides in Seattle, Washington. It was she who brought her brother the books in philosophy and literature that turned him into the writer he became. One often wonders about the fate of relatives, or more particularly the siblings, of the condemned—those who live on with the books about their wayward kin. Chester Gillette, Dreiser's Clyde, also had a younger sibling. Paul Gillette was a boy of fifteen when Chester was executed in 1908. Afterward, the family moved out west and the boy eventually

graduated in civil engineering from Texas A&M University, Class of 1913. Under his yearbook picture, it is noted that he was known as "P.C." for Charles Clifford. "It took this little man two years to find his place," the entry adds. He was also known as the "most honest cadet on campus." No doubt young Paul Gillette was still flying under the radar of his brother's infamy, one that Dreiser would make even more infamous twelve years later in *An American Tragedy*. He died in 1973 in Hawaii, probably taking the secret of his relationship to a condemned murderer to his grave.

Gary Gilmore's younger brother Mikal talked about the painful stigma in a *Rolling Stone* article following his brother's execution and in the book entitled *Shot in the Heart*, published in 1994. "I tried going on with my life," he wrote. "I had told my close friends about what had happened to Gary—I felt I owed them a chance to decide whether they wanted to be the friend of a murderer's brother" (Gilmore 326). At one point, a girl friend broke up with him because of his blood connection with a murderer. Dreiser and Mailer wrote about the criminals and their victims, but their dramas never included *all* the victims, certainly not those who had to bear the legacy of their brothers' crime and punishment.

NOTE FOR PAUL CLIFFORD GILLETTE

On his World War I Draft Registration Card, Paul indicates that he has a dependant mother. At that time (1917), he was living in Madison, Wisconsin. Under occupation was written "civil engineer" which had been crossed out and "student" entered. Residence was on University Ave.

University of Wisconsin Alumni Directory: Gillette, Paul Clifford, C. 13. 18. Civil Engr. 319 Morreil P1., Johnston, PA

"I tried going on with my life. I had told my close friends about what had happened to Gary—I felt I owed them a chance to decide whether they wanted to be the friend of a murderer's brother" (326).

"I learned . . . what it's like to live on in the aftermath of the punishment: as a relative, you have to take on some of the burden and legacy of the punishment" (357).

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