AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY AND *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG*: RECEPTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

JEROME LOVING AND J. MICHAEL LENNON

On October 24, 2013, at the Eleventh Annual meeting of the International Norman Mailer Society, Jerome Loving and J. Michael Lennon discussed, comparatively, Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy *And Norman Mailer's* The Executioner's Song. *The panel was moderated by Barry H. Leeds*

Barry Leeds: Jerome Loving is the author of a number of fine and well received biographies, most notably on Dreiser—which is the topic for today—Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and he's currently working on a book that I find fascinating even in its inception: Norman Mailer and Jack Henry Abbott; so I know I want to read that as soon as it comes out. Mike Lennon, I've said this before at one of these conferences, Mike is either the hardest guy in the society to introduce if you try to list all of his accomplishments or the easiest because you all know him. So I'll say quite simply that he has inherited from Bob Lucid the title, I think, of "Dean of Mailer Studies" as is most clearly evinced by his magnificent landmark biography that you're all aware of, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. Over his career he has also published with Donna Pedro Lennon a bibliography, *Works and Days*, and *On God*, interviews with Norman about God and religion, and he edited *Pieces and Pontifications* and a host of other major works on and about Norman Mailer so I am just going to turn it over to these guys, and after I'll call on you for questions. Thank you.

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Loving: Thank you Barry. Mike and I are going to make introductory remarks and then we are going to talk about this subject. It's very nice to be at my second Mailer Meeting. Cathy, my wife, and I came to it last year in Provincetown. I've never been to a literary meeting in which the subject of the meeting seems as if he has just left the room, and everyone in the room seemed to know the subject. I'm a nineteenth-century scholar of Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser, and of course in writing about them there were no living witnesses that you could ever talk to.

So, our subject is the critical and general reception of *An American Tragedy* and *The Executioner's Song*. I wrote my biography of Dreiser about eight years ago, and there were two works of Dreiser's that stood out, *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. *An American Tragedy* was based on fact more or less; it was based on the Chester Gillette case. He, in 1906, got caught . . . well it was the American Dream, the idea, he was poor and he wanted to be rich, marry a rich woman. He goes to work for his uncle in a skirt factory, I think it was at the time, and even though he is related to the rich people they ignore him so he makes friends with the workers, including one young lady who he gets romantically involved with. She becomes pregnant at the same time he's finally going to be accepted by the rich relatives and integrated into their wealthy lifestyles. And so he's caught in a bind. He solves his dilemma by murdering the poor girl to marry the rich one and ends up in the electric chair. This is, again, the American Tragedy instead of the American Dream. The book came out in 1925, the same year as *The Great Gatsby*, which also criticizes that notion which goes all the way back to Ben Franklin, I imagine. Writing in the shadow of the era of William Dean Howells and the Realists, Dreiser had been disdained by critics for what would be called "sterner realism," or Naturalism, which allows for no romantic end to an otherwise realistic crisis but views its subjects as almost totally victims of heredity and environment. Hence, it is a misnomer to call Dreiser the "Father of American Realism," as he is generally known.

The difference is that realism is really what in the last century we've called modernism, I guess; it is a romantic idea that even though forces beat you down, you'll come out in the end if you maintained your balance like Isabelle Archer in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* or Howells' famous novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* where Silas resists saving himself by committing something immoral and so he rises as he falls; Howells celebrated the idea of the individual whose sense of morality kept him from succumbing to the

animal forces within him, like Frank Norris's McTeague in the novel of the same name or George Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*. This ideal was displaced in the 1890s by literary naturalism in which mainly Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer popularized the notion that you are pretty much a victim of your heredity and your environment. If it's a good combination then you do better and if it's not you don't do so well. Well, Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, is the son of a street preacher, and he's ashamed of them. All he wants to do is rise up in the world, and we see what happens to him as a result of this egoism.

Dreiser even visited Sing Sing Prison to write the book. When it was published, critics asked in disbelief, "Could this be art? He just copied the facts, pretty much." But the author in Dreiser's case (as well as in Mailer's) breathes artistic life into these facts and brings us back to them in the most dramatic way. Anyway, the complaint about Dreiser was he got very good reviews for *An American Tragedy* and that was the turning point in his general popularity. Critics had complained earlier, especially one well-known critic, Stuart P. Sherman, a professor of English at the University of Illinois. His complaint against Dreiser was that the real distinction between Howells' generation and Dreiser's is in "the thing which each takes for its master truth." Sherman observed, "Dreiser and his fellow naturalists have simply come up with a new theory, the Darwinian idea that all life is exclusively and selfishly devoted to its adaptation and survival." Dreiser's characters, he complained, glorified the vulgar in humanity.

One of the big complaints against *Sister Carrie* in 1900 was that it didn't focus on immigrants, the scapegoats of the middle class in the nineteenth century and beyond. It wasn't even about the Irish Frank Norris would characterize negatively in some of his books. Rather, Dreiser's "realistic" novel was about average, white, middle class people, such as Hurstwood and Carrie who are led by their libidos rather than their intellectual sense of morality. As Sherman put it, "the male of the species is characterized by cupidity, pugnacity and a simian inclination for the other sex." So that's the world in which Dreiser was writing. Sherman even complained about the way some of Dreiser's characters dressed. Sondra Finchley in *An American Tragedy*; her clothes too closely followed the shape of her body.

This all broke up at the end of the teens, the 1910s, and it was mainly broken by Dreiser's autobiographical novel *The Genius*, which had initially been suppressed and censored and couldn't be legally published for four years.

Finally all those forces of censorship, which had held sway since the publication of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* just disappeared overnight as we got into the 1920s, and as a result the effort to clean up *The Genius* was abandoned, and Dreiser was able to publish it as was originally written.

The breakthrough for *An American Tragedy* was that even though Americans were depicted as "below average" on the accepted moral scale of the 1920s, Clyde is still punished for his crime. The problem Dreiser depicted—that of a naturalistic world where success and failure came from a roll of the cosmic dice—was turned back into a Christian world of good and evil. This problem extended to the two or three movies made from the novel. Screenwriters simply dropped the first part of *American Tragedy,* which showed those forces that were misshaping Clyde and concentrated instead on his crime and thus his deserved punishment.

The book reviews otherwise were quite favorable, the book sold mightily, it made Dreiser rich and that was effectively his last book. After that, he wrote a few more but more or less disappeared into politics. And so that's the general reception. His former best friend, H.L. Mencken, had a personal quarrel with him and so he gave him a terrible review. In fact, he said of the two-volume book (which you can't do anymore): "Whatever else this vast double header may reveal about its author, it at least shows brilliantly that he is wholly devoid of what may be called literary tact." Mencken went on to denounce the book as, "a shapeless and forbidding monster. A heaping cartload of raw materials for a novel with rubbish of all sorts intermixed, a vast, sloppy, chaotic thing of 385,000 words, at least 250,000 of them unnecessary." We know Mencken had eviscerated many books before in his long career, but he had been Dreiser's champion through many literary battles, and I ultimately concluded in my biography of Dreiser that—and I admire both of these men—that Mencken was just a little jealous of Dreiser. Dreiser had bested him. Maybe Mencken was a better master of syntax than Dreiser, but Dreiser could tell a story, which is something we know Norman Mailer could do as well.

Lennon: When I finished writing the biography, one of the very first books I turned to was Jerry's wonderful biography about Dreiser, and I was knocked out by the parallels between Mailer and Dreiser. Both of them had leftist inclinations; Dreiser had joined the communist party famously just before he died; and Mailer was also a man of the left. Both spent time in

Hollywood trying to write scripts, neither terribly successful, Dreiser more so than Mailer. Both of them had numerous affairs with women. Both of them had written a lot for magazines; they were magazinists. They wrote for all kinds of magazines and had moved around from publisher to publisher. Both lived mainly in the cities in the East although Dreiser spent a lot of time in California. And they had similar temperament that was the same, and they also wrote big long books of hundreds of thousands of words. *The Executioner's Song* is over 400,000 words.

Mailer was very influenced by Dreiser; one of the models for *The Executioner's Song* was *An American Tragedy*, and Mailer famously names *An American Dream* in homage to Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. So they have an awful lot in common, and Mailer always had good things to say about Dreiser. He used to quote a Harvard professor of his, Howard Mumford Jones, who said, "Dreiser's car runs on wheels that are square, everything clunks along, but he is a terrific story teller."

I think that Mailer was much more of a stylist than Dreiser, but Norman could be long winded too, as you know, and had his periods where he went on and on, for example, his 266-page digression to Uruguay in *Harlot's Ghost*. It's about 90,000 words, and Don DeLillo said, "It's a terrific book if it weren't for Uruguay." Gary Gilmore, of course, has a great deal in common with Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser's novel, and he, like Gilmore, was executed. I'm going to read you just a page from the opening of chapter 11, "Death Wishes Gilmore and Abbott." It provides a context for remembering Gary Gilmore:

> Gary Gilmore was in the news at the end of 1976, the Utah double murderer had not really acquiesced in his death sentence. Speaking to the judge at a subsequent hearing he said, "You sentenced me to die, unless it's a joke or something, I want to go ahead and do it."

His determination caused consternation among those opposed to capital punishment and cultish fascination among his admirers. He received over 40,000 letters in his final months and his face was everywhere, including the cover of *Newsweek*, under the caption "Death Wish." Mailer, like half the nation, was following the story. He recalled being struck by how handsome

Gilmore was in the photographs. Mailer wrote, "It was an arresting face particularly that one shot, the famous one, of the long narrow face.

Legal maneuvers followed for months and Gilmore tried twice to commit suicide. One of these attempts led to a memorable radio report. Dr. L. Grant Christianson said, "Gilmore can leave the hospital and return to Death Row if he continues to improve." His first suicide attempt was in tandem with that of a young woman named Nicole Baker Barrett, a beautiful, young woman. "Nicole and I have known and loved each other for thousands of years," Gilmore said. [Gilmore was a bit of a transcendentalist, too, which also attracted him to Norman.] She was young, beautiful, and devoted to him. Mailer found the story getting more engrossing.

On the day of Gilmore's execution, January 17th, Mailer saw Larry Schiller on the evening news. "I could see he was going through something," Mailer said. Two days later, Molly Cook told him that "Schiller had called and wants you to do some writing for him." Schiller had already done interviews with many of those involved, including over 30 hours with Gilmore to whom he paid $60,000 for exclusive access. In February he sent Mailer an interview that he and Barry Farrell had done with Gilmore. It appeared in and was the longest interview that magazine ever published.

Mailer thought, it might "be the best single interview of its sort I've ever read." On March 4, he and Schiller signed a contract with Warner Books for their third collaboration. It called for 80,000 words on "the life and death of Gary Gilmore," to be submitted no later than March 1978.

That's the background of the story. The reception of the book was extraordinary. The two finest reviews that Norman ever received in my judgment, others might disagree, were the front page review by Alfred Kazin in the *New York Times Book Review* for *The Armies of the Night*, a book, as you know, that won Mailer his first Pulitzer in 1969. The second was Joan Didion's review on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* in 1979 for *The Executioner's Song*. It was a review that transcended reviews, a review that was literature, and done in the wonderfully understated, laconic style of Joan Didion.

Norman was grateful to her for that review. I put it in a book of essays on Norman, and at his memorial service at Carnegie Hall, Joan Didion read it. It is a review that she is forever associated with. I'll read you a little bit about it from the bio. Mailer's wife Norris said that when he got the second Pulitzer for *The Executioner's Song,* it gave him an emotional boost. It was also a fi-

nalist for the National Book Award. It is probably the Mailer book that is taught most often today in English, journalism, American studies, criminology, sociology classes. Here's the quotation:

> There was disagreement over the relative merits of the book's halves partly because of Schiller's recording of the final moments of criminals and celebrities in his earlier work, partly because of the media's disinclination to read about its own avidity for the sensational, and partly because of the force of "Western Voices." The second part of the book, "Eastern Voices," was generally less admired. Didion points out that the dominant speakers in "Western Voices" are those of women, while the dominant speakers in "Eastern Voices" are men. Didion wrote, "Men tend to shoot, get shot, push off, move on. Women pass down stories." She quotes what Bessie Gilmore said after she learned that Gary was under arrest for murder, "I am the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of pioneers on both sides, if they can live through it, I can live through it." Didion calls this "the exact litany which expresses faith in God, west of the 100th Meridian." Her key perception, however, is that the first half of the book, because its strongest speakers are women, is "a fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events that will end in Garry Gilmore's death. These western women do not generally believe that events can be influenced. A kind of desolate wind seems to blow through the lives of these women." Conversely, the men of "Eastern Voices," the lawyers and reporters and prison administrators, "move in the larger world and believe they can influence events." The contrast, she says, gives the book its immutable form, a symphony in two movements. She concludes her review: "This is an absolutely astonishing book."

Discussing Didion's characterization of the two parts of the book, Norman said, "Yes, she's absolutely right." But he didn't see it at the time; when he was writing "Western Voices" he was thinking of cowboy movies, and for "Eastern Voices," he had a vision of media hordes coming from New York. He said, "I saw the first half of the book as masculine and the second half as feminine." After reading her review, he realized that the opposite was also

true: women playing a masculine role in the first half and men playing a feminine role in the second half. "It was not done intentionally," he said. "If it emerges out of something you haven't thought about, out of the unconscious preoccupations of your mind, where you sort of half see what you're doing, and someone else, Joan Didion, sees the other half, that's always the ideal." Years later he offered another metaphor for what he often referred to as "the navigator," which reinforces his comments on the composition of the book. "What I found as a writer is that signals from the unconscious are faint. It's as if you are an outpost on the North Pole and your radio is weak and you can barely hear what people are saying."

Leeds: Do we have anyone willing to ask the first question?

Audience member: Mike, am I remembering correctly that Joan Didion was Larry's first choice to write the book?

Lennon: Yes, you are remembering correctly, Joan Didion was Larry's first choice to write the book but for various reasons that did not work out and he immediately turned to Norman because he'd already worked with Norman on *Marilyn* and *The Faith of Graffiti.* But their relationship was not, let's say, real brotherly at that point. It was a raspy relationship; they fought with each other and sometimes didn't speak to each other for six months at a time. But he ultimately concluded that Norman was the one to do the book.

Audience member: Did Larry feel, originally, that a female voice and sensibility would be most appropriate for the story?

Lennon: You really have to ask him that question.

Audience member: Was Norman aware that Larry was thinking of Joan?

Lennon: I don't know.

Audience member: I have a question for Jerry. I've always thought that Dreiser's one of the most underrated American writers. Five decades plus of strong writing. Do know if he was ever seriously considered for the Nobel Prize?

Loving: Absolutely, he was! He was a serious contender and he lost out to Sinclair Lewis, who was the first American to win it. One of the theories about that was that Dreiser was always kind of banging at America, you

know, with *An American Tragedy*, but not as badly as Lewis did. With *Babbitt* and *Main Street* Lewis really undercut, attacked his own country much more harshly than Dreiser did and that's why he got the Prize, at least that was one view—that the stronger anti-American theme play better to the Swedes. It was a great disappointment to Dreiser.

Audience member: What rankles me is Pearl Buck got the Nobel Prize, even Winston Churchill got the Nobel Prize for Literature and I've always been amazed that major figures like Dreiser have been overlooked.

Lennon: James Joyce was overlooked.

Loving: James Joyce, my God

Lennon: But to return to the first question, Larry Schiller in some of his interviews said that he was considering Joan Didion, but he mentioned other people as well.

Loving: Did he actually ask her?

Lennon: I can't recall whether he actually asked her or not, I'm not sure. I wanted to comment on what Jerry was saying about the ending of *An American Tragedy* which ends in the execution of Clyde Griffiths when the forces are closing in on him. The same thing happens to Gilmore. Of course, Mailer was struck deeply by this coincidence that Gilmore was also going to be executed, but with a couple differences: Gilmore insisted on being executed and by so doing, Mailer felt, made himself a candidate for the position of Saint Psychopath; there was something saintly about Gilmore, especially at the end when he gave away all his organs, gave away all his money, insisted on being executed, wrote these fabulous love letters to Nicole Baker. He somehow transcended his own fate and there was a kind of redemption in his willingness to be executed that makes him different from Griffiths.

Loving: Well I think that finally Clyde does admit that he'd done what he'd done, even though he had denied it all the way up. As he goes to the Chair one of the guards says, "Now he knows what is on the other side." So there was some repentance there, but one of the things that came out of this, for me, if I just digress for a second, the man on whose case this was based, Chester Gillette, had a younger brother about 7, 5, or 6 years younger, who after the execution of his older brother moved with his family to Houston

and became a student at Texas A&M, graduating in 1913. He went on to become a ranking officer in our Armed Forces. All through his undergraduate days, he never told anyone about his older brother. For that story, see my "An Aggie with a Secret" in the online version of *Texas Co-op Power*, March 2014

Leeds: I was going to ask Mike at first to deal briefly with the naturalistic elements that obviously make *The Executioner's Song* parallel to *An American Tragedy*, but it seems to be in light of what you just said, Mike, perhaps you would agree that Gilmore, in seizing control of his own fate at the end, ultimately is an existential character trapped in a naturalistic world.

Lennon: You said it right there, you nailed it! Norman came out of the naturalistic tradition and *The Naked and the Dead* is often called a naturalistic novel because the soldiers are puppets; they're pawns of this Prospero-like General Cummings, who thinks he controls everything, but ultimately nature intervenes: the mountain, the weather, the Japanese, all of those other forces are arrayed against him. The Americans defeat the Japanese, but General Cummings is stymied because it took him too long. He knows that he is not going to get his third star and will not be a force in the postwar world. After that, Norman became much more interested in existentialism, and therefore it's fair to say, as you put it, he is an existentialist trapped in a naturalistic world. The first half of *The Executioner's Song* shows that Nicole and Gary are pulverized by the forces out there in Mormon Utah. They're pushed right down to the bottom and they fall into lives of misery and crime and drugs and what have you, but both of them are remarkable people and they could have lived a remarkable life together—they certainly loved each other dearly. That's the Romeo and Juliet aspect of the story; they try to commit suicide. The story is really a catch-all for so many different motifs of western literature.

Audience member: Just pressing on from what you were saying, this is for both of you. I wonder if this is a building of *The Executioner's Song* on from *An American Tragedy* because it seems to me in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer really comes to say, "I don't have an answer," it's like *Moby-Dick*, he looks at Gary Gilmore from all sides: the law, psychology, the media. And I think he said that, "I thought I had the answer." So, I wonder. Your thought about that, so it comes the way we don't know, but did

you feel Dreiser in *An American Tragedy* felt he did understand and the critique is stronger?

Loving: You mean that "Did Clyde realize the forces that were shaping him?"

Audience member: Yes, and is Dreiser really, obviously criticizing American society in a way that Mailer kind of backs off from.

Loving: He absolutely is criticizing American society, there's no question about that. Dreiser was a naturalist, grew up very poor; one of his brothers became a life-long petty criminal. Dreiser thought cosmic forces were overpowering. But, he went through a change and in the end he died as a Quaker. He was born a Roman Catholic and hated it for all its oppression, but at the end he kind of made his peace with God, if you will. And became quite religious so he kind of got out of his naturalistic mode, perhaps the way Mailer went from naturalism, which I think he is clearly born into, and into existentialism which was reflecting a later time in his career.

But, in terms of the Gilmore thing, still that was so naturalistic. In *Shot in the Heart*, Mikal Gilmore wrote closely and personally about the family life of Gilmore. His father was on the run from the law in Texas when he was born, and then after he was born, the father abandoned both the mother and the son in Missouri, and that's how Gary Gilmore started. So, it absolutely is a naturalistic book and I think that Mailer does very well on that, in breathing into those facts his genius for narrative, and he had a lot of them thanks to the Schiller tapes and everything else available to him. When *An American Tragedy* came out, as I said, some critics said it wasn't fiction, but mainly fact. Which kind of rings a bell, for the original subtitle for *The Executioner's Song* was called a "true-life novel"—a phrase he dropped from subsequent editions of the novel.

Lennon: Originally, he called it a "true life novel," but later said one of the great mistakes he ever made was to call it that. I can remember sitting and having dinner with him at Barbara Wasserman's place in Provincetown and he said, "It was a terrible mistake."

Loving: Didn't he do that though to make sure he was in the category of fiction rather than non-fiction?

Lennon: Yes he did. He wanted the book to be read as fiction. He would say, "Look, let's get over this false fiction / non-fiction distinction." As you know, it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Loving: What Mailer did with those facts is what Dreiser did with *An American Tragedy* and I want to read an example. Dreiser had this report by one of the persons who found Roberta's body in the lake. What follows is an excerpt from that actual account which Dreiser used but modified in his book: "Her forehead was barely cut from the hairline of her left forehead across the right eyebrow and looked as though it had been struck by a fairly sharp or medium blunt instrument. Heavily enough to lay the scalp wide open. She was dressed in a white shirtwaist, green, light green shirt, skirt, and button shoes and stockings. I do not remember too much about what was done with the remains, after being taken to the hotel but I do recall that the men searched about an hour for the body of her companion, and after hearing about his having taken his suitcase etc., with him in the boat, their native shrewdness told them there was more to this than an accidental drowning."

Here is how Dreiser described the scene in his novel. "But what created far more excitement, after a very little time, was the fact that at high noon, one of the men who trolled, John Pole, a woodsman, was at last successful in bringing to the surface Roberta herself, drawn upward by the skirt of her dress, obviously bruised about the face, the lips, and nose, and above and below the right eye. John Pole, who with Joe Rainer at the . . . was the one who had succeeded in bringing her to the surface, had exclaimed at once on seeing her, 'Why, the poor little thing, she don't seem to weigh more than nothin' at all. It's a wonder to me she could 'a sunk.' And then reaching over and gathering her in his strong arms, he drew her in, dripping and lifeless while his companion signaled to the other searchers who came swiftly. And putting back from her face the long brown thick hair which the action of the water had swirled concealingly across it, he had added, 'I do declare, Joe, look a here. It does look like the child might've been hit by something. Look a here Joe.' And soon the group of woodsmen and inn guests in their boats were looking at the brownish blue marks on Roberta's face." Now the difference there is the difference between Larry Schiller's records, recordings, and what Norman Mailer did for that story. He breathed life into it.

Leeds: We have a lot of hands but I think that Bill Lowenburg was the first.

Lowenburg: Couple quick points. For those of you who don't know me, I'm a librarian to set the record straight. We have *The Executioner's Song* catalogued as fiction in my high school library. On the other hand we have *In Cold Blood* categorized as non-fiction, for what that's worth. Jerry, something you said, you mentioned Mikal Gilmore, and I remember when I found out who he was in relation to Gary, I had read many of his articles in *Rolling Stone* . . . the record critic . . . and really enjoyed his writing. And I remember being astonished that he could be Gary Gilmore's brother. That they had both come, you know, from the same family and how, what different paths their lives had taken.

Loving: He was so much younger that he got treated as the baby of the family. Even by his terrible father, and his mother, who was also flawed as a parent.

Lowenburg: Can I comment on that too?

Loving: Yes, he had an older brother who served time in jail. Another Gilmore brother did as well.

Lowenburg: As some of you know, I spend most of my time writing about criminal justice, and related subjects. Most predatory killers you study do come from what we'll call "bad backgrounds," for lack of a better term.

Audience member: Are they the first born, by any chance?

Lowenburg: Interestingly enough, generally they are. But not always.

Audience member: Do you know what Mailer saw as the distinction between the adjectives true life and non fiction . . .

Lennon: In the end he did not see any distinction between them. He felt the distinctions were false.

Audience member: Yeah.

Lennon: He believed that historians chose which chain of facts they would emphasize, which characters they would focus on, just as a biographer would. What are you going to leave in, what are you going to leave out? The way you present the facts, the way you cast light on them, slanting here, bending there, shapes your story, just any novelist would do. On the other hand, he always clung to the fact that his nonfiction books scrupulously ad-

hered to facts that could be substantiated. Now, Bill says that Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is classified as non-fiction in the library, but it's been pretty well shown that Capote made stuff up in *In Cold Blood*. Capote said, "I never used a tape recorder," because, as he said, in effect, "I have a perfect memory; I can remember conversations 95% correctly." Well, you know, that was a lot of baloney.

Dave Thomas: Mike, I was wondering about Mailer and Mormonism . . . because I think you know that I'm from Utah, but I'm not a Mormon, and I read *The Executioner's Song* again last year, and I got a new perspective on it. I thought somewhere along the line that he missed some really good Mailer . . . chances to dig a little deeper through that Mormon vein. I'll give you one example, you just read Gilmore's mother, right? I'm telling you that that's a Mormon mother speaking. There's just something, you know, when things go bad you pick yourself up and you make do. I was surprised that Norman didn't play off of that blood atonement thing that goes on with Mormons. You can do great evil on Earth and Mormonism believes you need to shed blood.

Audience member: I think he did.

Thomas: Did he do that?

Lennon: There's no commentary in this book. Norman is absent; he's like the empty chair at a dinner party, as somebody put it. You notice that he's not there because you're so used to his hectoring, shaping, urging, narrative voice in all of his other books.

Thomas: I'm not talking about him being overt, I get that, what he was doing . . .

Lennon: Well, I got a pretty good sense of Mormonism from the book, but you know, if he made the book a hundred pages longer . . .

Audience member: Just to go back to the fiction or non-fiction, Creative writing programs across the country struggle with this, so they created another category because we don't really decide, so it's called creative non-fiction. So, I mean the debate goes on, but there's another category.

Loving: . . . If you look at *The Executioner's Song*, just the very beginning, where it opens up with Brenda, the older cousin, who's going to be so instru-

mental in this whole story and you get the sense of doom almost right there and then, that's something that the author has to convey that it is not something that comes out of a newspaper or out of a tape and I think that runs through that book, the way it runs through *An American Tragedy*. I'm not sure what you want to call it, maybe creative non-fiction is the best term. At the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, they keep non-fiction out. That is taught in the English department.

Lennon: Let me read you just one or two sentences from *The Executioner's Song*. Brenda, Gary's cousin, is Mailer's point of entry into the story. She picks him up at the airport after being in jail for fifteen years.

> With all the excitement Brenda was hardly taking into account that it was practically the same route their Mormon great-grandfather took when he jumped off from Missouri with a hand cart near to a hundred years ago and pushed West with all he owned over the prairies, and the passes of the Rockies, to come to rest at Provo in the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret just fifty miles below Salt Lake.

Well, that's a sentence, a terrific periodic sentence.

Leeds: I'm sorry to preempt the hands going up I just wanted to say one thing: Erica Jong wrote years ago in the *New York Times Book Review* section that one of the greatest fictions in literature is that particular kind of non-fiction. She was dealing with autobiography, and the great fiction is that autobiography and fiction are two distinct genres, she said, because they are sliding forms. One is always sliding into the other, autobiography to fiction, and vice versa.

Jeanne Fuchs: Yes, I think that there is a parallel discussion in twentieth-century theater, where comedy and tragedy are not distinguished any longer. There is no longer any sharp division. It's something that's very comic and tragic at the same time, and that occurs throughout.

Loving: As a biographer of Mark Twain noted, that is the reason his humor is so lasting is because all great humor is tragedy. It's there to make fun of someone, define someone in a hypocritical situation, which is a bit of tragedy

in a way. So I would agree with you that the two are bound together. Two sides of the same coin.

Audience Member: Why did Norman think calling it a true life novel was a mistake?

Lennon: He felt that it was corny. He felt that it was a pulp fiction kind of a thing. He felt that it wasn't elevated enough, for the book. He felt that he was bending to commercial imperatives more than he was following his artistic star.

Audience member: Wasn't he trying to be different from non-fiction novels?

Lennon: He also wanted to distinguish it from Capote's book. He didn't want to say "non-fiction novel." He didn't like the term.

Loving: Did Capote thank Dreiser?

Lennon: No, I don't think so. But they both thanked Lillian Ross, at different times, for writing a book called *Picture* in 1952 about the making of *The Red Badge of Courage*. She used an anonymous narrator.

Audience Member: Jerry, I just wanted to ask the stupidest question. Why is *Sister Carrie* taught in virtually every American Literature course but *An American Tragedy* is not?

Loving: Length is one reason. Another reason: I'm teaching a course on the American Novel before 1900, it ends with *Sister Carrie* in 1900. *An American Tragedy* is 1925. By that time, you are into psychological naturalism, Faulkner's in there. But mainly it's length. It's too long, I've taught it once in my career, and that was in a Dreiser seminar where you naturally couldn't skip it.

Leeds: There were so many hands up, on and off, and we only have about five minutes left, so I would like to relinquish the role of moderator and have you each speak in turn as you see fit. I know a lot of people have been waiting patiently to have their say. There were a lot of hands up earlier.

Loving: That happens to me in class.

Audience member: Just going back to Dave's point about how Mormonism is treated in The *Executioner's Song*. I got the feeling reading through it, that, particularly on Larry Schiller's part, there was a natural concern to keep the local power base, which obviously is Mormonism, reasonably happy in terms

of getting interviews, and you know they couldn't slam Mormonism too much, otherwise at the earlier point of interviews, otherwise the thing might fall apart. Am I misreading that?

Lennon: They had fifteen thousand pages of interview transcripts. There were plenty of people in those interviews who said nasty things about Mormonism and there were plenty people who praised it. There was a whole range of opinion. Norman picked what he wanted to put in there. Could he have done more? Sure. We always want more, don't we?

Audience member: To me the tone came out as fairly neutral you know, that it could have been Catholic or whatever, but it happened to be Mormon Utah.

Lennon: Well there was a big difference between the Jack Mormons, you know, that Nicole, and her clan came from, and the orthodox Mormons.

Loving: What are Jack Mormons?

Lennon: Jack Mormons are sort of fallen away, they're lapsed Mormons.

Loving: It's where Abbott came from, too.

Lennon: Right. That's where Abbott came from too.

Leeds: I'm sure there are other questions.

Marc Triplett: My most recent read of *The Executioner's Song*, which has been within the last five years, and I brought my own baggage to it which was as I spent part of my time as a death penalty litigator and it always struck me that if Gary Gilmore's case happens today he gets represented by Judy Clark and he does not get the death penalty. She manages him to the point that he doesn't even want to die. Someone like her is just spectacularly able.

Lennon: Even in Utah?

Triplett: Even in Utah. She represented Susan Smith, the woman in South Carolina who had her kids rolling into the water and all that stuff, and what I'm getting to is, to me, and to people like the lawyer I was just talking about, Gary Gilmore is not a terribly interesting guy, because he is like so many others we've met. I can think of two or three clients who just seem like Gary Gilmore all over again. And when Larry Schiller spoke about *The Executioner's Song* and we played the movie several years ago, I asked him the question, "What was Norman's main interest in it?" And I understand that other

people come at Gary Gilmore differently than I would, but he said it was Nicole, she was the story.

Lennon: Nicole's story meant so much to the book, it really humanized Gilmore. But remember, Norman was very interested in him because Gilmore felt that your soul could expire before your body. Norman said that was the theme that had preoccupied him for the last thirty or forty years. Mailer was deeply drawn to the love story. When he met Nicole in New York City, they went skating in Rockefeller Center, and she had never been to New York, and Mailer was just knocked out by Nicole. Her beauty, her poise, the fact that she was still functioning, given all she had been through, suicide attempts, two or three marriages, children, more men than you can count, and yet there was still a kind of a purity about her that he admired deeply.

Loving: I don't think Gilmore was that mystical during most of his life.

Lennon: When he got into prison he was.

Loving: You know, people do tend to be more spiritual near the end. For instance, Abbott started as a Mormon, more or less, and ended up as a Jew.

Lennon: Naomi Zack told me the only reason he became a Jew was he thought it might help.

Loving: Is that right? I haven't gotten to that point.

Lennon: He read all the Zohar.

Loving: Yeah I know he did.

Lennon: Zack said it was calculated.

Loving: Well it is, well . . .

Leeds: Despite the fact that I'm sure many people including myself have other questions and comments, I'll just see Mark about it afterwards. Thanks for coming.