IN THE DESERTS OF THE HEART: *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG*

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WHEREIN LIES THE "EXCEPTIONAL" NATURE OF THE UNITED STATES? How do we solve what Dave Eggers calls "the enigma of America" (xiii)? Amid America's political and cultural conflict, shall we find any kind of consensus? What relevance does Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) have to American identity in this second decade of the third millennium CE? This last question may seem to be a strange one. After all, Mailer's work—receiving the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction—is connected to a complex web of events arising from two murders committed by Gary Gilmore (1940–1977). These occurred in July 1976, while the USA was awash in celebrations of the Bicentennial, conscious—maybe—of a shared understanding of national identity. It is doubtful if we possess a shared understanding today, but an attempt must be made.[1]

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF GARY GILMORE

The setting of the murders is the State of Utah. Geographically, western Utah is part of the Great Basin—the largest desert region of the United States.[2] The murders, it is true, took place in Provo and Orem, two cities south of Salt Lake City.[3] But in Utah the desert is never far away.[4] In my title, I use the phrase "the deserts of the heart," believing that it highlights significant themes in *ES*. The phrase comes from the poet W. H. Auden (1907–1973), who concludes his 1939 poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" with these words,

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In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. (*Selected Poems* 83)

This poem has provoked "extraordinary elegiac conversations of our time" (Martyris).[5] But Auden's phrase provides us a useful metaphor illustrating the life and death of Gary Gilmore. The phrase suggests also a larger American mythology.

The name Gary Gilmore has a strange resonance. For later generations, his name may signify nothing. The facts are unremarkable. On April 9, 1976, Gary Gilmore was released on parole from the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, IL (*ES* 1087). Gilmore was thirty-five, having spent half his life in reform school or prison. Arriving in Provo, Utah, he was welcomed by a cousin, Brenda Nicol, her husband Johnny, and later by his aunt and uncle, Vern and Ida Damico. Soon Gilmore met and had an intense but stormy relationship with the beautiful Nicole Baker.

Just a hundred days after his release, despite help from family and others, Gilmore in cold blood murdered two men—Max Jensen on July 19th at a gas station in Orem and Ben Bushnell on July 20th in a motel in Provo. Gilmore's sojourn was in strong Mormon country.[6] After the killings, he was quickly arrested: most in the community—even his own family—suspected that Gilmore was responsible. When Ida asked Vern about the killings, he answered, "Yeah, he did it, the stupid shit" (*ES* 267). It was America's Bicentennial.

On October 5, 1976 the trial began for the murder of one of the victims, Ben Bushnell. It took place in "Judge Bullock's courtroom, 310 in the Utah County Building, largest edifice in downtown Provo, a gray, massive, old lion of a legal temple . . ." (*ES* 431). From today's vantage point, the trial was over quickly—in just three days. Perhaps little defense was possible: certainly none was offered by his lawyers—Craig Snyder and Mike Esplin—provoking Gary's understandable anger.[7] On the third day of the trial, October 7th, the Jury "brought back a verdict of Guilty in the First Degree" (453).

That same afternoon, the second part of the legal process began—the Mitigation Hearing—to determine whether Gilmore would receive life in

prison or the death sentence.[8] The verdict was death. "The Jury was polled. In turn, each one of the twelve said: Yes, and Gary looked across at Vern and Ida and shrugged. When the Judge asked him, 'Do you have an election as to the mode of death?' Gary said, 'I prefer to be shot'" (467). Gilmore's execution, scheduled originally by Judge Bullock for November 15th, presented several notable features,

> The death penalty had been reinstated in 1976, after a ten-year moratorium, and Gilmore was the first person executed in the modern era of capital punishment in America. His execution reignited our national taste for vengeance. Since his execution, over 1,000 others have been killed by the government of the United States. (Eggers viii)

After the sentence, many weighed in for and against the death penalty. Lawyers and interest groups fought over his fate: America looked on with grim satisfaction. Notably, Gilmore himself "wanted to die" (Eggers viii). On January 17th, 1977, Gary Gilmore died by a firing squad—the first U.S. execution in ten years. These facts might have earned Gilmore a historical footnote. Yet this death has become the symbol of something more lasting, raising significant legal, cultural, and religious issues—issues that continue to haunt the United States.

A great deal of primary material lies behind *ES*. The court records, public debate over the Death Penalty, media reports, documents and transcripts, letters between Gilmore and Nicole Baker, and interviews of over a hundred people—first by Lawrence Schiller and later by Norman Mailer—lay the foundation for this remarkable book.[9] In Mailer's novel, the tragic figure of Gary Gilmore—and the tangle of family, culture, and religion surrounding him—comes to the heart of America's identity, and to the paradoxes implicit in that identity. *ES* is sung in the voices of Gary and Nicole—star-crossed lovers—and by a choir of surrounding characters. For good or ill, it is also the song of the American justice system. Praised by many as one of Mailer's best, the novel is described by Joan Didion as "an absolutely astonishing book" (82). Here, I want to examine character, setting, and focus in the work, using the three motifs of heart, desert, and dream. It is with heart that I begin.

THE HEART: CHARACTER IN *ES*

The heart has long been regarded as the seat of the emotions, the center of reason, and the focus of character. Although the clinical heart—the heart as pump—begins with William Harvey in the 17th century, as James Hillman has said, "there are more hearts than the one that shows up in clinical imaging" (119). Our psychology, literature, and myths are saturated with heart language. In her book, *Heart* (2001), Gail Godwin points to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—the oldest-known story in the world—to illustrate that from the beginning the heart was seen both as "the life-giving centerpiece in our breast" and also as "the wellspring of our human emotions (Godwin 22).[10] Here is Gilgamesh mourning Enkidu,

> Bitterly Gilgamesh wept for his friend Enkidu; He wandered over the wilderness as a hunter; he roamed over the plains; in his bitterness he cried, "How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead." (*Epic of Gilgamesh* 97)

"Despair is in my heart," says Gilgamesh. A little later than the Sumerians, we find the Greeks using the word *kardia*—from which we get cardiology. Theo Sorg writes, "Especially in Homer and the tragedians, *kardia* received a considerably extended range of meaning. It no longer indicated merely the centre of the body but also the intellectual and spiritual centre of man as a whole" (180).

Hebrew and Christian usage is similar, and for New Testament writers the concept of *kardia* is close to "*nous*—mind" (Sorg 182). In other words, traditionally, heart and mind were close together. But, since Harvey and Descartes—who on this topic can mark modernity for us—"the great rift between heart and head" has developed (Godwin 112).[11]

The seventh and final part of *ES*, chapters 39–44, is entitled The Fading of the Heart. There is little overt discussion of heart, but on January 17th, 1977 Gary Gilmore was shot through the heart by a Utah firing squad. Metaphor became harsh reality. Two decades later, in 1995, Mikal Gilmore, Gary's younger brother and a senior *Rolling Stone* journalist, published his memoir called *Shot Through the Heart*. He provides a powerful, and less detached, counterfoil to Mailer. Mikal writes of a long history of abuse from the father—and of strange Mormon beliefs—that in Mikal's judgment shaped

his brother Gary, indeed the whole family. Elizabeth Wolgast suggests, "[g]iven this picture of the offender we are now less inclined to speak of evil, but instead of a man permanently damaged by an abusive relationship that is too close to analyse" (150).[12]

What is Mailer's approach to character? First, character is a complex and problematic trope. Mailer learned well from the modernist tradition: since Darwin, Freud, Einstein, Heisenberg, and others, we find it harder to believe in older, more fixed concepts of human nature. Indeed, that change in consciousness is part of what we call the revolution of modernism. The change was expressed in 1914 by D. H. Lawrence[13]:

> You must not look in my novel for the old stable ego of character. There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same single radically-unchanged element. (182)

In the works of modernist literature—British or American—we encounter this fluidity of human character, noticeably different from 19th century Victorian or Realist writing.

In Mailer's work, character is woven into a complex web of significance. Phillip Sipiora writes, "One reason for the novel's complexity lies in its dense tapestry of plot, theme(s), and character" (231). Although writing about *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), Sipiora's words are no less true of *ES*. All the traditional literary elements—character, story, plot, theme, metaphor—weave in and out, dancing together—rather as particle and wave do in contemporary physics. In his 1940 poem "East Coker," T. S. Eliot, wrote of man and woman, "Keeping the rhythm in their dancing / As in their living in the living seasons" (124). In 1928, W. B. Yeats posed the question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (217). The pioneering modernism of D. H. Lawrence—scorned as wildly unscientific and even dangerous (by T. S. Eliot) in his own time—may now seem closer to the nature of this mysterious Universe—as mapped, for instance, by Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Chaos Theory, and Dark Matter.[14] Both artist and scientist may now agree that—whether in physics, poetry, fic-

tion, or other arts—we encounter character only as revealed in the dance of life.

In Mailer's hands character becomes a pathway into a complex metaphorical landscape—a mindscape only partly captured by the word setting. Joseph Comprone writes: "Half Mailer, half ego-driven character in his own right, Rojack becomes the conduit through which dynamic and dangerous realities in 1960s New York City become the shadow looming over American urban cultural change" (241).

The character of Rojack can be this conduit to a new setting, a pathway to another reality, a kind of wormhole to a parallel universe.[15] In Mailer, there is always this strong element of indeterminacy: in his works we enter a fictive world characterized by complexity and uncertainty. As I have said, this is not unlike the strange physical world revealed by Einstein and Heisenberg, also indelibly marked by indeterminacy and mystery.

What do we find in *ES*? First, the title introduces a different metaphor, not the dance of life but the song of death—the executioner's song. The title points two ways. Merrill suggests that the title works, "something like Capote's in *In Cold Blood*, for in each case the title refers to the killers who execute their victims but also the social order that executes them in turn" (146). Eggers reminds us that Gilmore's crimes were not unusual, for "[m]en go on similar killing sprees every week in this violent nation" (viii).

ES is a complex and polyphonic novel—an American choral masterpiece sung in an American vernacular—sung by many voices and from multiple points of view. We would expect no less from Kapellmeister Norman, although it is a new departure in style—far more Choirmaster and far less baritone solo by Norman. Is it too fanciful to see *The Executioner's Song* as a darker version of *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942) or *Appalachian Spring* (1944) from Aaron Copeland (1900-1990)? Copeland was another *maestro di cappella* of the American vernacular, composing the song of the common man during the dark days of World War II. But the phrase American vernacular takes us back to Mark Twain and his *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1844). In that one novel, as Donald Kaufmann has said, Twain "enhanced the national vernacular into high art" (50).[16] Mailer followed Twain's lead, using a yet more startling narrator than thirteen-year-old Huck. For his narrator, Mailer uses a whole choir of

American vernacular voices—but primarily those of killer Gilmore and his girl Nicole.

ES is divided into two movements—Book One of western voices and Book Two of eastern voices. Merrill gives a good, detailed account of the various voices. Didion suggests that the western voices are "most strongly of women," while the eastern voices are "largely those of men—the voices of the lawyers, the prosecutors, the reporters, the people who move in the larger world and believe they can influence events" (81). While the gender split between the two books may be exaggerated a little, Didion has made a good point. To me, the most telling words in her quotation are that those eastern voices "believe they can influence events." The confident trust in cause and effect—in the "old stable ego of character," an equitable balance between crime and punishment, justice at State and Federal level, indeed justice on some cosmic plane—all these confident claims are heard in the eastern voices. Beneath their naiveté, however, we hear a deeper sound of indeterminacy—an uncomfortable reminder of an underlying chaos, skepticism, and entropy.[17] Like the deepest 32-foot pipe on a great cathedral organ, this sound is felt rather than heard. This, too, is part of Mailer's considerable narrative achievement.

Beyond the voices of *ES* is the mystery of Gary Gilmore himself. Listening to the Song, what do we learn? Do we better understand his motivations for the murders? Can we see into his heart? Mailer may have seen Gilmore as reminiscent of the psychopath in his earlier essay "The White Negro," as Mark Edmundson and others have suggested.[18] Certainly, there are parallels. Yet, Gilmore himself remains an enigma. In his 1981 essay on Capital Punishment, republished in *Mind of an Outlaw* (2013), Mailer says, "perhaps we look for enigmatic figures who will haunt our consciousness after they are gone. Nobody is more mysterious than the murderer we have helped execute" (373).

The heart may remind us of another figure, Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1901).[19] His final words, recalled by Marlow as "a cry that was no more than a breath" (177), were "The horror! The horror!" (178). Cedric Watts writes,

> The words "The horror! The horror!" thus serve as a thematic nexus, a climatic but highly ambiguous utterance which sums up, without resolving, several of the paradoxical themes of the

> tale. As is customary with symbols, the various meaning suggested do not exhaust the phrase's potential: it retains some opacity. (Note 178, page 215).

These words of Kurtz are a signifier of modernism. I believe that they may play a similar role to Hemingway's phrase from the vignette in his *In Our Time* (1925), "Scared sick looking at it" (21)—as I suggested in a 2010 article (Vince 335). Without doubt, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* retains its iconic and paradoxical nature. Novelist Gail Godwin says the work "remains one of the most haunting, and most critiqued, journeys in modern literature" (203).

Does Gilmore's journey still haunt us? Are there parallels between *ES* and *Heart of Darkness*? Both Kurtz and Gilmore ultimately seem unknowable, but I wonder if Gilmore can take the weight of significance that Conrad placed on Kurtz—who is, after all, a fictive character.[20] Lee Harvey Oswald presents a similar problem for Americans. Surely, we say, if he alone killed President Kennedy then Oswald cannot be a nobody, otherwise the Universe would be unacceptably absurd.[21] Yet Edmunson concludes, "No one can describe to anyone else's satisfaction why Gilmore committed the murders" (445), suggesting that there seems a lack of "fixity" and "form" to Gilmore's character.[22]

This is why Auden's phrase, the desert of the heart—referring to both character and setting—seems to me an appropriate one. In Gilmore, we seek a human heart but instead find a place of abandonment—a kind of human desert. In this violent but tragic human being, we encounter a metonymic landscape, as found in "The Waste Land" (1922), "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sand road / The road winding above among the mountains" (lines 331–33, 47). Eliot's poem is another signifier of modernism. We search for understanding: we discover a desert.

And yet. And yet, in the words and art of Gary Gilmore—many examples of both are found in *ES*—we do discover a humanity. Some have said, why write such a large book about a murderer? To that, Eggers would reply, "murderers are fully human, too, and there is beauty to their lives, and joy in their days, and love, and music, and even aspirations of bliss or at least peace" (viii). Perhaps, most of all, in his attitude to death Gilmore surprises us, suggesting a larger and more tragic heart. When Vern asked his nephew why he wanted his uncle Vern there at the execution, Gilmore replied, "I've

already shown you how I live . . . and I'd like to show you how I can die" (1014).

Gilmore's final words, "Let's do it," serve to undercut the sense of tragedy, making him almost into a parodic figure. That may be appropriate perhaps, in a media-driven, postmodernist age.[23] The link between his last words and the Nike slogan "Just Do It" only increases this perceived lack of gravitas in Gilmore.[24] We may feel that Gilmore cannot bear the weight of significance that society—and Mailer himself—has put upon him. In 2013, when the Nike slogan celebrated twenty-five years, the Gilmore connection was duly reiterated.[25]

So, despite the eleven hundred pages, and the three hundred interviews (Song, 1087), in *ES* there is no simplistic analysis of Gary Gilmore—no easy answer to the problem of evil. Ultimately, do we find a coherent sense of Gilmore's character or of the human heart? Was American justice served by the execution of Gilmore? Each reader will answer differently. At the end, we are left with more questions than answers, and—as Christopher Ricks put it—"more reasons than we know what to do with" (489).[26] But maybe, in a world of modernity, from an author like Mailer, we expect no less.

THE DESERT: SETTING IN *ES*

At first glance, setting is simple as *ES* takes place in the Utah desert. But this location is not merely setting: the motif of the American desert is at the center of this book. David Cowart says that *ES* "unfolds as heteroglossic tapestry. It concerns its settings as much as it concerns Gilmore and those with whom he crossed paths" (164). As we know, the murders were committed close to the largest desert region of America. That desert is characterized by Didion as a "vast emptiness at the center of the Western experience" (80). Joseph Wenke speaks of an "imaginative paralysis" that comes from living like an outcast, fated to live "in the middle of nowhere" (202). Lu Ann Price, Gary's first date after prison, spoke of the desert. "The desert was at the end of every street, she said, except to the east. There was the Interstate, and after that, the mountains. That was about it" (*ES* 30).

The original meaning of desert was a place that was "abandoned, deserted, left waste," although the word is now used more commonly for an area that is arid and waterless.[27] Terms have changed greatly from 19th cen-

tury understandings of desert.[28] One could argue that the setting is accidental. Murders, after all, may occur anywhere—city or wilderness. The analysis of US murder rates is complicated, but it seems clear that those rates have decreased from the era of Gary Gilmore.[29] Yet, when murders do occur amid the wastelands of Kansas, Utah, or North Dakota, they seem to have a peculiar hold on our imagination—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), Mailer's *ES* (1979), or the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996). Is it the unexpected occurrence of such crime, or a contrast with a faith more common in rural communities?

In either case, perhaps we fear that a primal chaos is breaking into our carefully maintained order. Violent crimes do not gain power because we have calculated the probability that it could happen in our community. Statistically, the chances may be small. Nevertheless, we fear that the world is ultimately irrational—and not a place of "sanity, cleanliness, and order."[30] The haunting power of Fargo and stories of that ilk depend more on our imagined fears, less on experience. This is similar to the violence of terrorism. Both depend more on imagined terrors: both are strongly influenced by myths and images.[31]

From earliest times, wilderness was contrasted with the cave. The former was a place of danger, haunt of wild animals and alien tribes. It was a place of "random violence," devoid of meaning.[32] The cave was home, place of family and clan, promising security. The border—the liminal region in between—was still dangerous: wilderness always threatened to engulf home. Did Gilmore present such a threat to the Mormon clan in Provo? If so, they responded appropriately: they executed him. Today, most of us live in cities or suburbs, regarding wilderness as rare and exotic. Yet a third of our land surface is desert: none of us are far from wilderness—real or mythological.

The desert plays an enormously significant role in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In both Greco-Roman and Hebrew worlds, wilderness was a place where God might reveal himself in an epiphany. But it was also to be feared as "the habitat of demons" (Böcher 1004–1005). This is true also of New Testament usage. Today, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have become largely urbanized and sophisticated world faiths. But each was born in the desert. As Kenneth Leech has said,

> It was in the desert, barren, unpredictable, surprising, that the people of God were to learn the lesson and privilege of dependence upon Yahweh in the simplicity of naked faith. It was in the desert that Israel was found, receiving her identity in the howling wastes of the wilderness (Deut. 32:10). It would be in the desert that renewal would take place, there that the wastes would rejoice and blossom. (Is.35:1–6) (127)

In the earliest biblical parables, Adam was driven from the Garden, settling "to the east of the Garden of Eden" (Gen 3:24, REB). Cain became "a wanderer, a fugitive," also fated to dwell in a wilderness "East of Eden" (Gen 4:14, 16). In the wilderness at the Burning Bush, Moses met Yahweh. After the Exodus from Egypt, the faith of Israel was formed in their "journey through the Sinai wilderness" (Redmount 58).[33] In the desert of Judeah, John the Baptist preached repentance and renewal. In the Temptation, Jesus consciously chose to enter the desert, in order to "take the offensive" in facing Satan and evil (Mark 1:12–13).[34] In Mecca, close to the Arabian Desert, Muhammad (570-632) received his revelation from Allah.

Nearer our own time, in the deserts of Utah, the faith of the first Mormons was forged, as was the faith of other settlers in other wilderness areas. In 1946, at Qumran in the Judean desert, the first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, perhaps to be linked with the ancient desert community of the Essenes. Today, tensions between desert and city, tradition and modernity, fundamentalism and liberalism, still shape Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each is searching for authenticity amid the challenges of modernity.[35] In these faith traditions, desert is a site of ambiguity: a space for the Divine but also a place of demons.

The American desert was the site of the first atomic bomb, detonated July 16th, 1945 at the Trinity site in the Jornada del Muerto desert in New Mexico. That day was the dawn of the nuclear age. In a discussion of four biographies of J. Robert Oppenheimer—the father of the atomic bomb—Lindsey M. Banco emphasizes the role of the desert in the Manhattan Project, and in the atomic bomb itself.[36] "For many reasons," he writes, "the physical landscape is important in conceptualizing the atomic bomb" (Banco 493).

The brief novel by Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (2010) is a contemporary

wilderness tale.[37] Set largely in the desert of Anza-Borrego, California—part of the Colorado Desert of seven million acres—and in the year 2006, it tells of Richard Elster, a scholar who advised analysts in the Bush Administration on the Iraq War. Elster had been in secret rooms, "to conceptualize, his words, in quotes, to apply overarching ideas and principles . . ." (19). But now—whether in guilt or loss—he has retreated to the desert, "[T]o eat, sleep, and sweat, here to do nothing, sit and think" (18). Elster is joined by a young filmmaker, Jim Finley, and Jessica, Elster's daughter—who later disappears, whether through "rendition" by a third party or by her own volition is not resolved. Briefly, these three form a quasi-family and a desert community, in retreat from the city. What was Elster's mission? For the US military and the war planners, in his "conceptualizing," Richard Elster created a kind of haiku of war:

> What I wanted was a set of ideas linked to transient things. This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to plain sight. See what's there. Things in war are transient. See what's there and then be prepared to watch it disappear. (29)

What does desert represent in DeLillo's novel? Desert as contrasted to the city—certainly. Desert as vast space—yes. But more, desert as an expanse of time. "There's none of the usual terror. It's different here, time is enormous, that's what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us" (44). In the desert, "the landscape unravels and reveals, it knows future as well as past. Sterile thunder seemed to hang over the hills" (87). There is much more in this highly complex story, especially in the New York City Psycho sections. But it seems clear that—in a post-Terrorism, post-Iraq setting—DeLillo is updating Eliot's modernist wasteland.

In *ES*, the desert setting is complex. There is the contrast between western and eastern voices—in part the divide between the faith of the desert and the skepticism of the city. Of course, the Utah desert is integral to *ES* because it began as Gary Gilmore's Mormon story. In a more mythical sense, the desert is a mindscape integral to the larger story of America itself, to the American Dream. And there are darker aspects to that mindscape. Desert draws on the biblical wilderness—the world East of Eden—where not only Cain but all of humanity is fated to wander.[38] Desert also draws on the modernist wasteland of T. S. Eliot, the nuclear desert of the New Mexico Trinity

site, and the post-Terrorism wasteland of DeLillo's *Omega Point*. For Mailer, setting is clearly not without intention.

THE DREAM: FOCUS IN *ES*

What is the focus of Mailer's work? Cowart sees the "self-effacement of the author" (164). Similarly, Didion hears "a meticulously limited vocabulary and a voice as flat as the horizon" (79). Many have stated that Mailer's focus is ultimately America—indeed, the American Dream. Cowart says that Mailer has "badgered the nation to live up to its splendid promise, to make the doctrine of American exceptionalism something more than a tired trope of political science" (166). Merrill regards the novel as "Mailer's most ambitious attempt to 'explain' America" (130).[39] Wenke agrees,

> For Mailer's subject is preeminently America: throughout his work he is involved in trying to discover our identity as a nation by relating the promise and the debasement of the millennial idea of America to the complexities of the contemporary American scene. . . . Mailer dramatizes both the best and the worst of American life by connecting the lives of his characters to the life of the nation. (3)

Wenke is talking about the totality of Mailer's work, but his words are certainly applicable to *The Executioner's Song*. However, amid the plain vernacular of the novel, early on we encounter this authorial sentence,

> 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 handcart 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. (10)

This prose is a well-crafted Mailer sentence. Didion calls it, "a signal that the author is telling us a story of some historical dimension" (79). Indeed he is. The author is concealed in much of the book, but there is no mistaking his presence in this sentence. In the metonymy of this sen-

tence, we find the focus of the novel—and Mailer's life work. What is that focus?

I believe that Mailer is suggesting that Gilmore's Mormon ancestors are representative of countless settlers, pilgrims, and free-thinkers—people of every sort and condition—who journeyed through similar deserts. Sometimes, the deserts were physical—deserted, abandoned places, often hot and dry.[40] Sometimes, the deserts were metaphorical—wilderness in the biblical sense, sites of epiphanies or the haunt of demons. Why make the journey? Even amid cultural conflict, we agree on the answer. They made the journey to find freedom, to make a new life, to explore a new place—creating an idea called America. It is a quest for an oasis amid the desert, a New Eden in the wilderness. Even a murderer like Gary Gilmore, Mailer is saying, cannot destroy that Dream—not even in the Bicentennial year of America's birth.

> Yet America is an enigma. The nation is a glorious idea of liberty: yet we imprison and execute far more citizens than comparable countries. The United States symbolizes modernity: yet remains in thrall to fundamentalism. America is a beacon of freedom: yet has an oppressive and unforgiving side. Maybe we learn that America is a uniquely violent and unforgiving place, a perpetual West where the landscape—an existential nothingness bordered by glorious unattainable mountains—both mocks the individual and inspires him towards desperate acts. Maybe we learn that Gary Gilmore was fully human, but not fully equipped to live among us . . . (Eggers xiii).

These contradictions are found in *ES*. Set in the West, in the Utah desert, through metonymy there is the suggestion that we see also a desert of the heart. Finally, while his focus is America, Mailer never avoided larger human questions. In his final novel, *The Castle in the Forest*, he dealt with the toughest case of all—Adolf Hitler. George Steiner has written,

> Very few writers have had the nerve or insight to look at the new manner of man. They have acted as if all the ravenings and unknowns shadowing our time were exterior . . . that the soul has passed no time in Dachau or under the sheen of the bomb. . . .

> Norman Mailer is among the honest men. He strives to know, at the peril of moral chaos, what it is that has been loosed upon the world and whether art can cope with it. (49–50)

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a journey up a river. It is also a journey into the human heart. Set in the American wilderness, *ES* is a postmodern version of *Heart of Darkness*. But the heart has become darker: in Mailer's words, "The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it" ("The White Negro," 42). On the eve of that war, in 1939, Auden had written, "In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise" (*Selected Poems*, 83).

Are we fugitives, wandering in the wilderness like a Cain—or in the American desert like Gary Gilmore? Perhaps we are.[41] Norman Mailer's *ES* retains its power to challenge us, to interrogate us, and to inspire us in our own quest for America. And, somewhere between the desert and Eden, we may find her.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Eleventh International Norman Mailer Conference, in Sarasota, Florida, from October 23–26, 2013. I appreciate the helpful suggestions that I received, especially from J. Michael Lennon.
2. "The Great Basin Desert, the largest U. S. desert, covers an arid expanse of about 190,000 square miles and is bordered by the Sierra Nevada Range on the west and the Rocky Mountains on the east, the Columbia Plateau to the north and the Mojave and Sonoran deserts to the south" ("Great Basin Desert").
3. Provo is the third largest city in Utah, the home of Brigham Young University. 2010 population was over 112,000, while Orem was over 88,000 (U. S. Dept. of Commerce). The 1980 population for both cities was perhaps 60% of current levels. Both cities are situated over 4,000 feet above sea level.
4. Cowart reminds us, "Provo and Orem and Salt Lake City are desert communities, and the desert comes to seem symbolic" (164).
5. "The poem was W. H. Auden's 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats,' and this is the story of its astonishing afterlife—how three separate elegies in three different countries were modeled on it; how Auden's words were quite literally, in Auden's line from the poem, 'modified in the guts of the living' . . . " (Martyris).

6. Johnny Nicol, Brenda's husband, said, "Gary wasn't coming into an average community. He would be entering a Mormon stronghold. Things were tough enough for a man just out of prison without having to deal with people who thought drinking coffee and tea was sinful" (9).
7. On October 6th, Gilmore wrote to Nicole, "I had told you that I didn't expect much from Snyder and Esplin but I was not prepared for the fact that they intended to put up absolutely no defense at all. . . . They didn't even try" (442).
8. The two-stage procedure in Gilmore's trial arose from the *Gregg* decision. "These guided discretion statutes were approved in 1976 by the Supreme Court in *Gregg v. Georgia* (428 U.S. 153) . . . In addition to sentencing guidelines, three other procedural reforms were approved by the Court in Gregg. The first was bifurcated trials, in which there are separate deliberations for the guilt and penalty phases of the trial" (*Death Penalty Information Center*).
9. In his Afterword, Mailer details the research that lies behind the book, most done earlier by Larry Schiller but supplemented by Mailer's own interviews conducted after Gilmore's execution. He writes that "the collected transcript of every last recorded bit of talk would approach fifteen thousand pages" (*Song* 1087).
10. Gail Godwin's book is on the heart and its "myths and meanings." Psychologist James Hillman's book, *The Force of Character*, in on character and aging, and deals with the heart in Chapter 15, "Heart Failure."
11. "Most of us, whether we admit it or not, still live our lives under the influence of the great split between heart and head that fractured seventeenth-century thought. This rift . . . utterly changed the landscape of human relations, splitting us into divided kingdoms of intellect versus feeling, provables versus intangibles, and a host of other 'either/or' dualities" (Godwin 112).
12. Elizabeth Wolgast writes of Gary, "The long years of abuse engendered in the boy a hard bitterness which left him numb, crippled with inexpressible anger. . . . Our perception of him has changed. Though Gilmore's murders are still awful and he still merits punishment, he is not evil, but has become human to us and a figure of inchoate suffering" (150).
13. Lawrence's letter was written on June 5, 1914 to Edward Garnett. Kinkead-Weekes says it is "probably the most widely quoted of all the letters in which he discussed his art" (123).
14. Sandra Gilbert writes, "despite (or perhaps because of) his famous distaste for rational science, what Lawrence saw as he looked into what he sardonically called 'the dark unscientific' may have predicted what some of our scientists are only just beginning to discern. . . . Though Lawrence could not have known about this newly identified 'dark matter', dark matters had always been in some sense his business . . ." (249–250).
15. The universe revealed in modern physics seems stranger than even the fictional world. The "old stable ego of character" has disappeared. Fraser Mann writes "that complexity is inherent in all that we are and all that we do" (328). Indeed it is.
16. "Thereby, Twain liberated the American language . . . Both the literary elite and the common man cheered. Thus happened the canonization of one American book: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1844). . . . Hemingway especially saluted, and so did Mailer, who, on the novel's cen-

tury anniversary, issued an essay, entitled 'Huckleberry Finn: Alive at 100' in a deluxe booklet (1985) . . . personally inscribed: 'This is one of my favorite pieces.' And so it was, full of literary significance and authorial homage" (Kaufmann 50).

17. That note of indeterminacy and epistemological openness is heard first in *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and carried throughout to his final novel. As narrator DT confesses, devils understand that "there are no answers—there are only questions" (*The Castle in the Forest* 467).
18. "Part of Mailer's fascination with Gilmore surely owed to his resemblance to the figure of the psychopath described in "The White Negro" twenty years before." (Edmundson 436).
19. Elizabeth Wolgast draws parallels between Conrad's nuanced portrait of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and our "changed understanding" of Gary that Mikal's memoir provides (150).
20. Real life plots are less ordered than fictive plots. Mailer wrote, "One could make the case that our love of plot—until it gets very cheap indeed—comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence" (*The Spooky Art*, 89).
21. "In *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), it is the accused assassin's inveterate eccentricity that matters most. Norman Mailer seeks to grant Oswald a tragic status large enough, the thinking goes, to make the loss of Kennedy tolerable. A killer whose act was not random but deliberate, not cowardly but bravely existential, returns proportion to an outrage that had seemingly tipped the nation's psychic scales into the abyss" (Hamilton 653).
22. "No one can describe to anyone else's satisfaction why Gilmore committed the murders . . . because Gilmore doesn't provide enough fixity. . . . Maybe Gilmore's life doesn't lend itself to a 'form'. . . . Gilmore's only 'motive' is a hunger for passionate disruption, an urge to fracture any set of social forms . . . " (Edmundson 445).
23. "I am suggesting that a great deal of Gilmore's behavior might be best understood as parodic, as when, in prison, he begins impersonating a celebrity: signing autographs, sending T-shirts to his fans, spending hours over his mail and his clippings, using his status to try to consort on equal terms with a few others among the rich and famous" (Edmundson 445).
24. "To the list of great copy writers in advertising, add an unlikely name: Gary Gilmore. Mr. Gilmore, the notorious spree-killer, uttered the words 'Let's do it' just before a firing squad executed him in Utah in 1977. Years later, the phrase became the inspiration for Nike's 'Just Do It' campaign" (Peters B3).
25. "Dan Wieden was worried that his advertising agency's proposed slogan . . . was too unfocused. Recalling convicted killer Gary Gilmore's famous last words before being executed in 1977 in Utah—'Let's do it!' Gilmore said—Wieden tweaked the declaration 11 years later and came up with an idea that would soon become iconic: **'**Just Do It**.'** That was 1988. Nike—and the Wieden+Kennedy agency—would never be the same" (Martin 3c).
26. Christopher Ricks has said of *The Executioner's Song*, "It does not despair of knowing why, but it knows that it doesn't know (487). . . . But then it is not any lack of reasons that 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" (489).

27. "Etymology: < Old French *desert* (12th cent. in Littré), < ecclesiastical Latin *dēsertum* (Vulgate, etc.), absol. use of neuter of *d sertus* adjective, abandoned, deserted, left waste: see desert adj. 1. An uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness: a. now conceived as a desolate, barren region, waterless and treeless, and with but scanty growth of herbage;—for example, *The Desert of Sahara, Desert of the Wanderings,* etc." (*desert*, n.2. *OED*).
28. In the nineteenth century, much of America from the 100th meridian to the Rockies was called the Great American Desert. This area was described by Frank Blackmar in his 1906 article. But it was seen more as a *deserted* place than as a dry desert. Biblical ideas of the wilderness shaped early American concepts of desert—particularly among Puritans and Mormons.
29. "While U.S. murder rates increased from 1965 to 1975, rates leveled off between 1976 and 1980, and from 1981 to 2000, murder rates generally decreased" (Cerulo 354).
30. "The quiet streets of the western city suggest that Provo is a paragon of sanity, cleanliness, and order" (O'Donnell 184).
31. "Terrorists do not occupy territory. They de-territorialize violence, making it possible for it to strike anywhere. The randomness and unpredictability of terror . . . produce a different kind of battlefield . . ." (Mitchell 64).
32. "In *The Executioner's Song*, a novel written in the aftermath of Vietnam, everyone—from Gilmore to the priest to whom he utters his last words—thinks that Gilmore must mean something, that he must be a sign of the design of a totalized cultural order. In Provo, it seems, there is really no random violence" (O'Donnell 188).
33. "The Exodus is the Israelite departure from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and the subsequent eventful journey through the Sinai wilderness. This Exodus is a defining, pivotal episode in the Bib." (Redmount 58).
34. Jesus went into the wilderness "probably not because the solitude would be conducive to meditation and prayer, but rather because the wilderness was specially associated with demons. . . . Whereas other men must avoid temptation in so far as they can (cf. Mt. 4:13), this man must voluntarily seek it out and take the offensive" (Cranfield 56–57).
35. In a similar way, America's political tensions today are related to divides between rural/urban, conservative/progressive, and fundamentalist/liberal. Although not coterminous, there seems considerable overlap between these three pairs of characteristics.
36. "[T]he desert thus serves heuristically in the examination of these biographies. Deserts are remarkable places . . . . Their heat and aridity force an inhabitant to concentrate on bodily presence, yet their minimalism produces visual abstractions their conceptual abstractions, their stripped-down meaning suggested in the absence or abandonment of the *deserta* which constitutes their etymological root" (Banco 495).
37. I am grateful to J. Michael Lennon for pointing me to DeLillo's novel, *Point Omega.*
38. This was the belief of Puritans, Mormons, and other religious communities. That America was the New Eden or the New Jerusalem was also important to their belief. Deists, Free-thinkers, and others had their own concepts of America—and of the American Dream.

39. "Mailer's most ambitious attempt to 'explain' America, a fundamental purpose in all his books but especially the works of nonfiction that he published in the 1970s" (Merrill 130).
40. Regarding America as an *abandoned* wilderness is a European point of view. We know now that prior to 1492 the continent was home to many Native American peoples.
41. So, wherein lies the "exceptional" nature of America? In the wandering. In the journey.

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