

ROMANTIC SELF-CREATIONS:
MAILER AND GILMORE IN
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

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ROMANTIC WRITERS ARE, FOR BETTER AND WORSE, OBSESSED with originality. In practice this means that each one who aspires to matter has to initiate his life as an artist with a story about what originality is, and that story must itself strike readers as being a new one. To compound the difficulty, the romantic writer is compelled, even as he recounts his version of originality, to be exemplifying it. Emerson sets out to do this much in his most celebrated essay, "Self-Reliance." The formula for originality he puts forward there is a simple one: you become original by listening to yourself. Genius derives from trusting the inner voice, abiding by one's "spontaneous impression . . . then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side" (259). Originality is not, as Wordsworth believed it to be, the product of a favored childhood, where one is "Fostered alike by beauty and by fear" (1850 *Prelude*, bk. 1, line 302). Nor is it mysteriously inborn, a celestial gift, as the German romantics tended to think. Moses and Plato and Milton became what they did—in Emerson's view—by observing the "gleam of light which flashes across [the] mind from within" and speaking "not what men but what they thought" (259).

Yet the Emersonian philosophy of self-invention is also a philosophy of self-ruin. In time, every rhetorical pearl evolves back to sand; every hard-won identity tends to “solidify and hem in the life.” Romantic “self-invention” frequently begins in a sort of potlatch, a ritual in which the subject is compelled to destroy his full accumulation and return to poverty, and to ignorance, that state on which, according to Thoreau, all growth depends. The American romantic faith is a faith in crisis: without ruin, no renovation. And no renovation, it’s assumed, is final: always, as Emerson says, there must be abandonment.

Of all the major American writers at work now, Norman Mailer probably has come the closest to committing himself to Emerson’s literary ethos of self-destroying self-invention. From early on in his career it has been Mailer’s aim to baffle expectations about who he is and what he might be capable of doing. His ambition has been thoroughly Emersonian—“to dive and reappear in new places.”

Mailer’s style of diving and reappearing has earned him a certain notoriety, some applause, and also a good deal of vitriolic criticism, particularly about the a- or immorality of productions like “The White Negro,” *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and the two books on Marilyn Monroe. The charges against Mailer tend to be akin to those leveled against romantic writers as far back at least as Byron: he’s violent, self-obsessed, an opportunist, a destructive opponent of what’s most nourishing in humanistic culture.¹ Mailer’s excesses are all the worse, to this way of thinking, in that they’re amplified through the whole vulgar network of the mass media, reaching beyond the intellectuals who know how to put his clownings in context and giving the institution of Literature a bad name.

The reaction to Mailer’s major book of the seventies, *The Executioner’s Song*, has to be seen against the background of this kind of moralizing response to his work. For it appeared, at least from the initial reviews of the book, that Mailer had undergone a conversion. Critics noticed immediately, and usually with relief, that Mailer’s commitment to a high romantic style had disappeared.² “Style,” says Robert Frost, “is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying” (165–66). How does the writer take himself in *The Executioner’s Song*? Not at all, said most of the book’s reviewers: Mailer had succeeded in refining his prodigious ego out of the book. He had achieved something like an Eliotic annulment of self, an “extinction of personality,” in which he suppressed his own voice to become the medium

for a variety of others. And the reason for this surrender had to do, naturally, with the failure, or at least with the obsolescence, of his former romantic project. Mailer had given up his Emersonian illusions about originality and self-reinvention. He'd replaced attempts at auto-American-biography - the creation of works in which the words "I" and "America" can at some moments (and those not always the most attractive or admirable ones) be interchanged—with social documentary. Finally Mailer was one of us. Or such was the judgment of many of those critics of Mailer who tend to think of his "talent" as a natural resource and of themselves as its board of directors. Such a judgment, given Mailer's past record, is probably worth questioning.

The Executioner's Song deals with Gary Gilmore, a figure now famous enough to have his likeness on display in Madame Tussaud's. There one may see his wax effigy executed by an invisible firing squad every three minutes or so and read the story of how Gilmore was condemned to death by the state of Utah for the murder of two young men in the summer of 1976. Gilmore refused to seek a stay of execution and demanded that the state follow through on its promise and kill him, which it eventually did. Mailer tells Gilmore's story by way of indirect discourse, from the points of view of over a hundred of the persons involved. Almost everyone, including Gilmore, submitted to extensive interviewing. Thus the book came out of careful study and reworking of tapes and transcripts.

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. "The White Negro," Mailer's first text with romantic aspirations, is an attempt to incarnate an authentically American voice and temper to resist the prevailing atmosphere of "conformity and depression" in which a "stench of fear . . . come[s] out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve" (300). Mailer's dilemma is Emersonian, akin to the one in which "Self-Reliance" begins. Yet his response, a mythical self-projection into a figure of rebellion whom he calls, alternately, the hipster, the White Negro, and the psychopath, owes more, I suspect, to Blake and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In his first major prophetic book, Blake transforms himself (with no little self-directed irony) into a satanic poet in order to assault the false pieties that the "Angels" who dominate the religious, political, and artistic life of late-eighteenth-century England enforce. Mailer is probably not being any more sensationalistic than Blake was when he identifies himself with the figure his orthodox contemporaries fear most. One of

the many fine intuitions in “The White Negro” is that the psychopath had taken the place of Satan in contemporary morality. Mailer sees the ethic of psychoanalysis, with its endorsement of irony, stoicism, and detachment, as the repressive Anglicanism of his day, a state and corporate religion designed to quell nonconformity. The psychopath’s hunger for immediacy in all things can’t help but threaten a culture committed to deferred and displaced satisfactions.

Mailer’s alternative is a romantic return to childhood, but a return far less tranquil and tranquilizing than the one envisioned by Wordsworth and Coleridge, or, needless to say, by the psychoanalyst. Mailer’s psychopath replays the past event in the present so that he can gain back what was lost, score victories where he was, in childhood, forced to make concessions. The conception couldn’t be more in the native romantic vein. When Mailer, in another context, declares that going “from gap to gain is very American” (*Armies* 44), he both evokes this design and provides a good throwaway epigraph for Emerson’s collected works. Where Freud believed that the best that one could hope for would be to transform compulsive repetition into an accepting memory of the traumatic event, Mailer demands a full redemption. If the hipster “has the courage to meet the parallel situation at the moment when he is ready,” Mailer writes, “then he has a chance to act as he has never acted before. . . . In thus giving expression to the buried infant in himself, he can lessen the tension of those infantile desires and so free himself to remake a bit of his nervous system” (308). Mailer’s Gilmore comes close to exemplifying the type for whom “the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day” (301).

Gilmore doesn’t make a cogent decision to act in this way, as Mailer’s hipster does - Gilmore, at least up to a certain critical point in the book, seems incapable of making any cogent decisions. The amount of confusion he can create in a few hours’ space is frequently astonishing. On one night we find him running stolen guns; fighting it out, physically, on the highway with his girlfriend, Nicole; trying (and failing) to steal a tape deck from the local shopping mall; banging into the car parked behind his when he tries to es-

cape; eluding (cannily) a pursuing squad car; and arriving at last, in the middle of the night, at his cousin Brenda's house, where he wakes up everyone to demand fifty dollars so that he can run away to Canada.

But at other times Gilmore is more sympathetic. On the night that he gets his first paycheck, for example, he goes off to see a movie with Brenda and Johnny, her husband. The picture is Gilmore's choice, and he picks, as one might almost have predicted, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It turns out that Gilmore served time in the penitentiary next to the mental hospital where *Cuckoo's Nest* was filmed and that in fact he'd been treated in the hospital itself. Gilmore is chaos throughout the film, cheering, shouting commentary, bashing on the chairs in front of him. Almost everyone gets up and moves away from him eventually, and by the end of the evening Brenda, who usually shows an exemplary patience with Gary, is completely exasperated. But Gilmore had a point to make at the film, though he made it crudely enough. He felt, one can surmise, that he had more in common with R. P. McMurphy, Kesey's pulp equivalent of Mailer's White Negro, than Jack Nicholson, who played the role, or anyone else present in the theater for that matter. So why shouldn't he be the object of attention? Exacerbating Gilmore's mood would be the fact that the crowd paying to worship McMurphy's nonconformity had rewarded Gilmore for his by keeping him in jail for nineteen out of his thirty-five years. One understands Gilmore's confusion. Mailer certainly understands it well, but he's unwilling to turn the book into an overt celebration of a latter-day hipster. There's no tendency to extend the tonal grandeur of "The White Negro" to Gary Gilmore.

But there is a point in the story where Gilmore's status changes. Up until this moment, Gilmore has been almost wholly destructive, acting on every whim as though it were divine inspiration. "He was grabbing at everything. It was as if the world was just out of reach of his fingers" (30), says a young woman of Gilmore. He wants full possession of everything glowing that comes in range.

But from the point when Gilmore decides that he is willing to die, he takes on a certain dignity. There have been no capital punishments for some time in the state of Utah, and everyone expects that Gilmore will do what every other convicted killer has done and fight for a life in jail, but he will not. The climax of the book, at least in my judgment, comes when Gilmore, having been condemned and imprisoned for the two murders, chooses to force the

state of Utah to carry out his sentence and execute him. Here is Gilmore addressing the Board of Pardons to demand his own death:

I simply accepted the sentence that was given to me. I have accepted sentences all my life. I didn't know I had a choice in the matter.

When I did accept it, everybody jumped in and wanted to argue with me. It seems that the people, especially the people of Utah, want the death penalty but they don't want executions and when it became a reality they might have to carry one out, well, they started backing off on it.

Well, I took them literal and serious when they sentenced me to death just as if they had sentenced me to ten years or thirty days in the county jail or something. I thought you were supposed to take them serious. I didn't know it was a joke. (675)

One may detest Gilmore for living in the world as though it were an open question whether the other people there are as real as he is, and still acknowledge his triumph of wit here. Consider the context. Gilmore has spent the balance of his life under the control of institutions. He has been told when to get up in the morning, when to sleep, when to exercise, when to eat. Society has applied enormous resources to the task of normalizing him, rendering him into a coherent, stable citizen. And if the price of subduing his antisocial instincts involves doing away with whatever imaginative potential he might possess, so be it.

Gilmore's deep joke consists in capitulating and becoming just the kind of well-disciplined subject everyone always wanted him to be, but at the wrong moment. The most imaginative act of Gilmore's life, and the costliest to himself, is to pretend to possess no imagination whatever. The result is a sudden reversal. Gilmore, in an instant, stands in relation to the institutional powers of justice as they have, for nineteen years, stood to him. He's demanding that they follow procedure, get in line, stop being so inconsiderate and whimsical. The satisfaction Gilmore derived from the deadpan "I didn't know it was a joke" had to have been great. In any event, it was dearly gotten.

It's hard not to spare a little affection for someone who was motivated, at least in part, to die for the sake of a shrewd joke. Freud, no lover of criminals, uses as his first example in the paper on humor that of the condemned man who approaches the scaffold on a Monday morning saying, "Well, the

week's beginning nicely" (161). Wit entails looking down upon oneself from the position of the collective, or cultural, superego, says Freud, and seeing from that perspective how insignificant one's own life is. Gilmore's stroke modifies Freud a little: wit of his sort entails taking up the position of a superego above the cultural standard of the law, making of it a helpless child, temporarily.

Gilmore, it would seem, became capable of this sort of victory when he went to jail. As he says to his cellmate Gibbs (who turns out to be a police informer) shortly after arriving in confinement, "I am in my element now." In jail, Gilmore is a different kind of person. He draws and paints, writes some fine letters in a neo-Whitmanian mode, and develops a singular sense of humor, of which a couple of the better instances can serve as samples. Moody, one of Gilmore's lawyers, is interviewing him: "If on your passage you meet a new soul coming to take your place, what advice would you have for him?" Gilmore: "Nothing. I don't expect someone to take my place. Hi, I'm your replacement . . . where's the key to the locker . . . where do you keep the towels?" (888). Then there's Gilmore's proposal for a new way to make money off his death: "Oh, hey, man, I got something that'll make a mint. Get aholda John Cameron Swazey right now, and get a Timex wristwatch here. And have John Cameron Swazey out there after I fall over, he can be wearing a stethoscope, he can put it on my heart and say, 'Well, that stopped,' and then he can put the stethoscope on the Timex and say, 'She's still running, folks'" (831).

What accounts for the change in Gilmore, from Mailer's point of view presumably, is that Gilmore has developed something of a romantic faith. Gilmore's effort, from about the time that he enters prison, is to conduct himself so that he can die what he would himself credit as a "good death." And that means living the time he has left with some charity, and above all with equanimity, without signs of desperation. Gilmore's weakness lies, perhaps, in his requiring a fixed date to direct himself. But his willingness to engage death is what sets him apart from most of the other people in the book. In saying this much, I am finding a strong bias in Mailer's supposedly neutral account. But if we look at the form of *The Executioner's Song* -with form being understood in Kenneth Burke's sense as the setting up of expectations in the reader -we will see that it is far less neutral a text than most of its reviewers wished it to be.

The basic unit of *The Executioner's Song* is the short paragraph written

from the perspective of one or another participant in the story. The passages work as self-contained dramatic units, a fact Mailer emphasizes by surrounding each one with a generous aura of blank space. He composes the paragraphs in the third person but injects each of them with enough of the person's idiom to convey a sense of his character. Here, for example, is Gilmore's parole officer Mont Court reflecting (with mediation by Mailer) on whether to have Gary picked up for a parole violation or let him turn himself in. "Gilmore, coming back on his own, would be fortifying the positive side of himself. He would know Court had been right to trust him. That would give a base on which to work. The idea was to get a man into some kind of positive relationship with authority. Then he might begin to change" (53). Mailer's conception of Mont Court is there to be heard in the style of these lines, and particularly in the phrase "positive relationship with authority." Here and throughout the book, Mailer works somewhat in the manner of the portrait painter who follows her subject around for a while before she begins to paint. She's waiting for him to strike a physical pose that reveals some crucial aspect of his character. Mailer combed through the relevant tapes and transcripts in search of similarly revealing moments of speech. One test of the book's integrity would be whether those represented would be willing to sign their names to their sections of the text. Most, I think, would, and in that sense the book is very much theirs.

But Mailer is alive in *The Executioner's Song* too, and not least in the rhythmical shapings that he gives to the paragraphs. The book starts, for example, with Brenda's memory of Gary catching her as she falls from the breaking branch of a forbidden apple tree. Gary then helps her drag away the branch so they won't be caught and punished. So from the beginning we're led to associate Gary with a fall, with transgression, and with -the parallels are too numerous to be discounted -the Fall. A sense that the incident might anticipate the future comes through in the passage's final line: "That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary" (5). The mythical echoes and the soft but perceptible drop of the last line convey a certain inevitability. Gilmore is fated, despite finer impulses, to fail. His destiny is tragic, a fact brought home to the reader by the comparable shaping of many of the passages that focus on him. Here is the end of a paragraph in which Gilmore says goodbye to his brother Mikal: "He leaned over and kissed Mikal on the mouth. 'See you in the darkness,' he said" (866). Here a priest, Father Meersman, talks to Gary about wearing a hood during the execution: "If Gary wanted

to die with dignity, then he had to respect that very, very simple thing about the hood. It was there for practicality to allow the thing to run very dignified, and no movement. Gary listened in silence" (871). In this passage, Gilmore receives communion from Meersman: "Gary took the wafer on his tongue in the old style, mouth open, way back, in the way, observed Father Meersman, he had received as a child, and then he drank from the chalice. Father Meersman stood beside him while Gary consumed the bottom of the cup" (884). The kind of foreshadowing that occurs, with varying degrees of subtlety, in these passages pervades the book. One section after another about Gilmore ends with a tonal allusion to his death. The effect, over the course of a thousand or so pages, is to confer on Gary a considerable stature. Fate seems to have singled him out for sacrifice. From Mailer's point of view, it is fair to surmise, Gary earns his tragic status by saying yes to his own death.

Gilmore is not the only person in *The Executioner's Song* who is so treated. The passages devoted to his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, a figure easily as complex as Gary, finish with a dying fall at least as often as Gilmore's passages do, and perhaps more. And it is Nicole's disdain for life, evidenced by, among other things, a determined suicide attempt, *combined with* her vitality and resilience, that makes Mailer confer a tragic dignity on her as well. In fact, all of those figures in the book who live strongly in the knowledge of death receive some share of Mailer's elegiac tones. Mailer is moved by people like Brenda, her father Vern Damico, and Bessie Gilmore, Gary's mother, and offers them the one form of authorial tribute that the book's constraints allow.

Larry Schiller, who interviewed Gilmore extensively and who eventually collaborated with Mailer on the book, is largely denied this treatment, as is Barry Farrell, a journalist who seems to share some of Mailer's private apprehensions about the workings of the world. But this is something one might have predicted: Mailer has always claimed to care more for working-class Americans than for literati and Eastern sophisticates. What is surprising, particularly in light of the reviews the book received, is the kind of shaping that Mailer gives to the paragraphs focused on Gilmore's victims and their wives. In his review of *The Executioner's Song*, Walter Karp, a tough-minded and acute political writer, praised Mailer for giving up his long-time disdain for the American squares and treating Max and Colleen Jensen and Debbie and Ben Bushnell with compassion (25-26). Here are the first two passages on the Bushnells:

Debbie was feeling a little off one day and Ben kept wanting to take her to the doctor. She was pregnant, after all. But there were eleven kids over from the Busy Bee Day-Care Center, and Debbie didn't have the time. Ben finally raised his voice a little. At which point she told him he bugged her. That was the worst fight they ever had.

They were proud that was the worst fight. They saw marriage as a constant goal of making each other happy. It was the opposite of that song "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden." They kind of promised each other. They weren't going to be like other marriages. (239)

Debbie Bushnell might own to having said everything included in these passages. But to shape the material as Mailer has, to end the passages with trite lines like "That was the worst fight they ever had" and "They weren't going to be like other marriages" makes the Bushnells seem small. They don't rate the tragic tones that Gary and Nicole get. On the next page, Mailer ends a passage of only three sentences on Debbie with the line, "She was terrific with kids and would rather mop her kitchen floor than read." This may have been true of Mrs. Bushnell, but given what passage endings mean in this book, and given that the recipient of this information is at the moment a reader, holding a thousand-page volume, it's clear that the presentation is potentially biased. I have picked out some of the more extreme examples of Mailer's treatment of the victims. He's kinder to the Jensens, for example, but not very much. Mrs. Jensen's last thought of her husband leaving for work on the day he is to be killed is ominous but also, at the last moment, reduced. "He would be moving along the Interstate at just such a speed [55 m.p.h.] until he went around a slow graded turn and disappeared from sight and left her mind free to think of one and then another of the small things she must do that day" (216).

The passages on the lives that the Jensens and Bushnells led before the murders tend to begin in hope of some kind and end, also, on an upswing, an upswing that sounds hollow and naive in light of events. The couples are middle-class Americans, expectant, ambitious, unworldly, and perhaps a little smug. They live without a sense of the tragic possibilities in life, the sense that Nicole Baker seems to have from childhood and that Gilmore supposedly develops over time. *The Executioner's Song*, I would argue, is a violent

polemic on behalf of the position that Gilmore (as Mailer represents him) eventually achieves. For Mailer, if I understand him correctly, attempts to write his book from a state akin to the one he attributes to Gilmore, one that acknowledges the awareness of death as the necessary condition for every just perception.

Recall that Mailer's Gilmore began to develop his sense of death as a principle of authority when he was immersed in the partial death that jail represents. Now Mailer himself has, from early in his career, been preoccupied with the experience of imprisonment. Entering prison has, in the past, meant cutting off romantic possibilities. If self-creation involves assertion and risk, then prison is the state of death-in-life because there you have to diminish yourself, draw in in order to survive. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer speaks of jail as a place where "a man who wished to keep his sanity must never anticipate, never expect, never hope with such high focus of hope that disappointment would be painful" (187). (The lines could serve as a compressed renunciation of Wordsworth's romantic paean to hope in book 6 of *The Prelude*.) In "The White Negro," prison is the image that comes forth most readily to figure limitation or the failure of self-reliance. "The wrong kinds of defeats," Mailer says there, "attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits" (300). Prison has been to Mailer what acedia was to Coleridge, what "habitual self" was to Keats, and what poverty was to Emerson, the most emphatic possible conception of imaginative death.

Correspondingly, Mailer's high romantic style, the style of *Armies* and "The White Negro," might be said to represent the mental antithesis of imprisonment. The exhilaration those texts can produce in a reader derives in part from his sense that the writing possesses boundless resources and possibilities. One feels that Mailer will never run out of metaphors. His invention will never flag, his powers of observation and analysis will persist forever. The energizing illusion is akin to the one felt in the presence of a great athlete, who seems unlimited in her ability to extemporize fresh ways of standing out in a game.

One way to think of *The Executioner's Song* is as a book in which Mailer, willingly or under some compulsion, enters the prison of a restricted style. He surrenders the freedom of Emersonian abandonment and encloses himself in the rectangular walls of the book's isolated paragraphs. He adopts a voice that is cold, flat, and spectral and makes the acquiescence to death his

central principle of value. The style is terminal. Mailer's early romantic style signified an energetic denial of death. The words were supposed to seem unstoppable, a stream of invention that would never find its placid level. The culture to which Mailer addressed himself then had imposed what he saw as living death by conformity on its citizens, and the task at hand was to revitalize them. But when a culture becomes falsely vitalistic, making the denial of death the principle on which its mystifications rest, it is time to try to undermine it by the Emersonian gesture of diving to reappear in a new place.

Part of what reinforces the interpretation I've been offering thus far—in which Gilmore is understood as developing into the kind of existentialist who's in accord more or less with Mailer's literary self-image—is the degree to which the book's first readers resisted seeing these designs. A reading always appears to be more authentic when it's been wrested at the expense of some other approach that can simultaneously be revealed as self-interested, anxious, or guilty. I wouldn't be surprised if Mailer, who's played off his critics as skillfully as anyone writing today, could have predicted the eventual surfacing of the kind of "subversive" interpretation that I've offered so far. In fact, he might find this reading satisfying to a troubling degree.

I mean that we ought to be suspicious at how readily *The Executioner's Song* yields to an analysis that calls forward so many of Mailer's key preoccupations and "finds" a shape in Gilmore's career that the author of "The White Negro" might have desired for his own. So it seems worth asking how we might have seen Gilmore without Mailer's subtle shapings of his story.

What's striking throughout the text -and Mailer plays on this -is the inability of all the institutional agencies and their functionaries, prison psychiatrists, social workers, wardens, and the rest, to come up with a description of Gilmore that isn't jargon-ridden and flat-minded. No one can describe to anyone else's satisfaction why Gilmore committed the murders. And this may be true not because they haven't got access to the resources of the Novelist, but because Gilmore doesn't provide enough fixity. Perhaps one can't fairly represent his character, as Mailer habitually represents his own, in terms of some internal dynamic or dialectic. Maybe Gilmore's life doesn't lend itself to a "form"; and maybe he doesn't attempt to fashion his experience in a manner analogous to the fashioning of a literary career. From this point of view, Gilmore's only "motive" is a hunger for passionate disruption,

an urge to fracture any set of social forms in which he finds himself. His profession that he wants to die made in front of the Board of Pardons may be the inception of an existential project. It may also be an act of simple, spontaneous anarchism, aiming a joke at a venerable institution, then living out the joke for the possibilities of future disruption that arise from it.

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. His interviews with Schiller, and with his lawyers Moody and Stanger, when read from a certain angle, offer amusing send-ups of journalistic encounters with politicians and other professional evaders. Gilmore's gross manipulations—especially of Nicole, whom he induces to attempt suicide—are the gestures of a crazed real-life film director, experimenting with a sudden unexpected power on other people's lives. Perhaps Gilmore is devoted to nothing more than a certain brutal form of "play," manifest in bitter jokes and stratagems, parody, and the creation of temporary roles, a form of play that recognizes no purpose and no standard of value other than the venting of his energies in disruptive action and passionate speech.

I'm offering the possibility, then, that the subtleties of form in *The Executioner's Song* may be employed to contain an energy inimical to cultural forms, including literary forms, even of the radical Emersonian variety. Why should Mailer exert himself in the interest of this sort of confinement? Gilmore's minority or oppositional energies are the ones that Mailer wants to identify with his own, and yet these "minority" powers, if they're going to have any real value, have to possess the potential and the inclination to enter into conflict with the triad of opposing forces that Mailer sees as threatening: chaos, evil, and waste. Gilmore's brutal "play," without end or allegiance, undermines the dialectical conception of life, life conceived of as a series of significant encounters in which one can be potentially transformed for the better, which represents Mailer's main hope for salutary development.

The vision of Gilmore against which Mailer is defending himself (and his readers) is perhaps one in tune with a contemporary tendency to give up on coherent narratives; on truth, even of the pragmatic variety; on transcendence in any form; on any unironic investment in persons, objects, or interpretations. This tendency, some have argued, is encouraged by the

“postmodern” experience of life as a simulacrum, as an unguided peregrination through images and codes that bear -and admit implicitly and rather cheerfully that they bear -no relations to any possible referent. Gilmore may be a creature of this world at its worst, a product and promulgator of its values. If this is in fact the case, then Gilmore has earned the not inconsiderable distinction of being the figure who compelled America’s foremost literary radical to fight culture’s conserving battles for it.

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NOTES

1. For a representative response to Mailer along these lines, see Philip Rahv’s review.
2. See the reviews of *The Executioner’s Song* by John Garvey, Walter Karp, and Tim O’Brien.
3. On Mailer’s self-conscious shaping of his career and his drive for interpretive priority over his own work, see Richard Poirier. My reading of Mailer is indebted to Poirier’s book, as well as to Alvin Kernan’s reflection on *Of a Fire on the Moon* (130–61) and to Gore Vidal’s excellent review essay.

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