

FROM SOLITARY TO THE CITY:
NORMAN MAILER'S BET ON
JACK HENRY ABBOTT

J E R O M E L O V I N G

WHILE WRITING *THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG*, published in 1979, Norman Mailer began what he described as an astonishing correspondence with Jack Henry Abbott. Jack Abbott was a federal prisoner who provided insights about long-term prison and its violence, information that enhanced Mailer's "true life novel" about condemned killer Gary Gilmore. The convicted double murderer had been executed by a Utah firing squad on January 17, 1977, in the first execution in the United States since 1973. The Supreme Court had ruled the death penalty as it was then practiced unconstitutional—cruel and unusual punishment, in part due to a lack of uniform criteria. When Gilmore insisted that his sentence be carried out on schedule, bypassing the normal appeal process, he became a household name, his "death wish" of "Let's do it" sounded around the world, his picture splashed on the cover of *Newsweek* and most tabloids.

Hardly a year later Gary Gilmore's "double" wrote to Mailer. Like Gilmore, Abbott had been practically "born" into prison, grown into adulthood as a "state-raised convict." His earliest memories, he said, were that of a string of foster homes he had run away from. Gilmore, on the other hand, had come from an intact, but also wildly dysfunctional family. After repeated run-ins with the law and several stretches in reform school, he had entered the adult prison system as an habitual criminal, at about the same age that Abbott graduated from six years of reform school and, after only seven months of freedom, entered adult prison. Abbott claimed that he had known Gilmore at Utah State Prison—had even cared for the same girl. He considered him

a “good convict,” a man of honor who was respected in prison because he was feared in prison. Abbott had been in prison long enough to know its evils firsthand. “Only after fifteen years in prison,” he told Mailer, “does one begin to see what is happening to us” (Letter).

In the acknowledgments to *The Executioner’s Song*, Mailer thanked Abbott for “a series of exceptional letters, well worthy of being published, that delineate the code, the morals, the anguish, the philosophy, the pitfalls, the pride, and the search for inviolability of hard-line convicts in language whose equal I have not encountered in prison literature in recent years” (1055). He compared Abbott’s prison letters to those of Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (1968). As he would with Abbott, Mailer had corresponded with Cleaver in prison and supported the future Black Panther’s release in 1966. Abbott was released from prison in the spring of 1981, first to a halfway house in the East Village, or the Lower East Side, of New York City. By that time, Random House was set to publish his first book, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*, and he was already being hailed, because of excerpts published in the *New York Review of Books*, as the latest literary light. Yet on the day before a glowing review of *In the Belly of the Beast* appeared in *The New York Times*, on July 19, 1981, Abbott, angry and embarrassed because he was refused the use of an employees’ restroom in a restaurant, stabbed to death a waiter and fled to Mexico.

The victim, Richard Adan, only twenty-two years old and recently married, was also a writer. At the time of his death, this émigré of Cuba and an aspiring playwright was managing his father-in-law’s restaurant on the corner of 5th Street and 2nd Avenue on the Lower East Side. Small in stature, Adan was no match for the quick-tempered Abbott, who had killed in prison and had included a description of “prison combat” in his book. The deadliest target, he wrote, was that place between the second and third button on the intended victim’s shirt—the heart. Adan’s heart was cut in half, and he bled to death before medical personnel could reach him.

Abbott was captured about six weeks after the stabbing, which he claimed had been in “self-defense,” and after a short trial was convicted of first-degree manslaughter and returned to prison, where he died in 2002, allegedly by his own hand. Mailer continued to correspond with Abbott in the 1980s, but ultimately considered the act of liberating Abbott one of the great errata of his life, second only to the stabbing of his second wife in 1960. Oddly, the man who freed the man who had stabbed two people to death had nearly

gone to prison himself for the same crime. In a drunken argument with Adele Morales, he stabbed her twice with a pocketknife, nearly piercing her heart. Mailer subsequently pled guilty to third-degree assault and received a suspended sentence and three years probation.

Jack and Norman: A State-Raised Convict and the Legacy of Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song, which is set for publication at St. Martin's Press under the imprint of Thomas Dunne Books in early 2017, is the story of an author and his apprentice, the tale of literary triumph undercut by prison paranoia. Jack Henry Abbott, who described himself as a state-raised convict, was the "by-blow," as Herman Melville says of another of society's orphans in *Billy-Budd*, a novel that comes into play in my book, of the son of an army drunkard and an Euroasian prostitute. It is also the story of a writer who set out all his life—certainly ever since the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948—to write the Great American Novel and stumbled onto greatness as a gifted essayist and journalist whose "news" in *The Executioner's Song* transcended the quotidian world of facts. Finally, it is the story of incarceration in America.

I first taught *In the Belly of the Beast* in 1991. It was in a humanities class at Fresno State University, where I was accompanying my wife as a visiting professor on her first college job after getting her Ph.D. My class of eighteen included a young man of frail build and quiet demeanor, who sat in the back of the class all semester, knitting what I ultimately learned were toilet seat covers. During the oral delivery of his report on Abbott's book, he revealed to the class that he had spent five years in the same California prison that housed Charles Manson. He refused to say what his crime had been, only that he was happily married and a senior about to graduate. We all, myself included, dearly wanted to know what he had done to get himself put away. And the student was just as adamant in wanting to keep it secret.

Earlier, in the summer of 1981, I had been in New York City on the very weekend that the news broke in *The New York Times* that Abbott was wanted for questioning in connection with the death of a waiter. Juxtaposed with this report in the same newspaper a day earlier was the ecstatic review of *In the Belly*. Abbott's horrifying description of American prisons in the twentieth century had called forth from its reviewer, Terence DePres, a condemnation that could have served for the German death camps Des Pres he had written about so vividly as an historian at Colgate University. Even today *In the Belly* strikes a sharp blow at prison conditions in America.

I was sitting in the offices of Doubleday talking with its editor-in-chief, who felt nothing but disgust for Abbott, in spite of his literary skills. His outright dismissal of Abbott in the wake of his latest crime reflected the public attitude towards the literary and artistic people who had supported Abbott's release from prison. Along with Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books*, Erroll McDonald, Abbott's editor at Random House, and his boss Jason Epstein, Norman Mailer had written to Abbott's parole board, arguing that his literary talent had earned him another chance at freedom, especially considering his past as a life-long convict. After Abbott stabbed Adan on that early morning of July 18, all three, but especially Mailer because of his greater prominence, were accused of radical chic, a term coined by the writer Tom Wolfe to mock the rich's new found interest in the underdog. Its catalyst had been the Park Avenue Penthouse party for the Black Panthers, hosted by Felicia and Leonard Bernstein.

Right after the Adan stabbing and before Abbott's trial, the September 9, 1981, cover illustration of the *New Republic* depicted Mailer and Abbott sitting in the East Village restaurant at a table displaying a blood-smeared knife and an open handcuff. Above Mailer's image is a thought bubble with pictures of Jean Paul Sartre and Jean Genet, the petty criminal who became a writer with the philosopher's support. The same issue carried a full-bore denunciation of Abbott's book as "a hectic screed full of shrill political jargon," arguing as well that Mailer had no business suggesting Abbott could have made a living on the outside as a writer (Atlas 21).

It is hard to say whether Abbott, after spending most of his life inside, could have ever written so vividly about anything other than prison. He wrote one other book after being re-incarcerated, *My Return* in 1987, but its focus was a defense of his so-called "accidental" stabbing of the waiter in New York City. The larger question is whether talent trumps personal conduct. When Abbott was interviewed on *60 Minutes* following his conviction in the spring of 1982, the victim's father-in-law, Henry Howard, complained, "Who agreed to let him out on the street from solitary confinement, a man who was in prison all his life, who had murdered [two] men?" (interview).

Mailer argued during Abbott's trial that the artist was entitled to "a special dispensation." The artist who for centuries up until the Romantic period, or the nineteenth century, had been regarded as merely a "servant" to the Church or aristocratic courts, had with the advent of Romanticism become a god, or somebody with a direct line to the Almighty, or "Nature" (Morrow

82). With the theory of nature as the emblem of God and the idea that the artist alone can render its divine message, the writer became a demigod of sorts, one who, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's words in "The Poet," could not only *see* God in nature but also report back that conversation to lesser folk in the form of a poem, painting, or other artistic endeavor. As a result, he was somehow above the law. Oscar Wilde, the aesthete who took Romanticism beyond its worship of nature as an emblem of God to celebrate "art for art's sake," once wrote, "The fact of a man's being a poisoner is nothing against his prose" (qtd. in Brown 44). The Mailer doctrine, as reflected in "The White Negro" of 1959, suggested that somehow the law should set up separate standards for artists—perhaps, as Lance Morrow, a longtime critic and nemesis of Mailer's wrote in *Time* in 1982, following Abbott's conviction, a "panel of literary judges to meet the first Monday at Elaine's in Manhattan" to hear the artist's case, instead of a grand jury (82).

There is also the matter of long-term incarceration and the use of solitary confinement. Abbott, in spite of his intelligence and literary talent, had long been imprinted with the belief that violence was the ultimate arbiter. For nearly a quarter of a century, he had lived in dangerous prison conditions, once killing an inmate in what he unsuccessfully claimed was self-defense. In fact, it was "self-defense" only in the sense that the victim had threatened Abbott's prison existence by snitching. He was convicted of manslaughter and simply given more years in prison. Not long before his release in 1981, first from Marion Federal Prison and then from the Utah state prison in Draper, where he had been initially sentenced, he had been held—because of his extensive record of prison infractions both in federal and state prisons—in solitary confinement. Its excessive use has recently come before the public eye, not only by Barack Obama during the first U.S. president's visit to a federal penitentiary, but through revelations about the treatment of teenage prisoners at Rikers in New York City. "Do we really think it makes sense to lock so many people in tiny cells for 23 hours a day, sometimes for months or even years at a time?" Obama asked a convention of the NAACP in Philadelphia (qtd. in "Mr. Obama"). Studies have suggested that the use of "segregation"—interestingly the prison term for "solitary confinement" in institutions in which the majority of the inmates are black—not only endangers psychiatric patients but also mentally stable people. There is the recent case of Kalief Browder, a sixteen-year-old black who was held at Rikers without a trial for three years before the charges against him were dropped.

He took his own life less than a year after he had been released, unable afterward to interact socially and pacing his bedroom as he had his “tiny” cell (Gonnerman; Schwirtz and Winerip).

Essentially, Jack Henry Abbott had come from solitary to the city on the basis of Norman Mailer’s faith in the redemptive nature of the artist. Suffering from prison paranoia, however, he was soon overwhelmed. Once Abbott was back in prison in 1982 following his conviction for first-degree manslaughter in the Adan case, an interviewer suggested to him that he had had everything going for him. Free after so many years in prison, he had just published a book that *The New York Times* would call “brilliant.” Norman Mailer, one of America’s most famous authors, was acting as his sponsor. “Dante writes about the *Vita Nuova*,” the interviewer told Abbott, who went through two packs of cigarettes during their three-hour interview through a prison screen in the noisy prison visiting room, “the new life—a form of deliverance. You had everything laid out in front of you. Why did you fuck it up?” Abbott answered: “Because I didn’t get delivered to no *paradiso*—they didn’t put me in the right place. They delivered me right back to prison” (Manso 98). In one sense, the authorities *had* set up Abbott for failure by placing him in a crime-ridden part of the city; yet his actual re-offending—the stabbing of Adan—probably had little to do with the neighborhood, except perhaps to stir up his sense of prison paranoia.

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