

THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG: A LIFE BENEATH OUR CONSCIENCE

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CRITICS IN THE 1970S SAID MAILER'S STAR was dimming. He was slipping; he kept writing in the same key. When *The Executioner's Song* appeared in 1979, they reconsidered. It became a bestseller, won a Pulitzer, and attracted a young readership, which Mailer had not enjoyed since 1967 with *The Armies of the Night*. His new book surprised expectations in two ways now regarded as truisms: it is written in a plain direct style, and the Mailer persona is absent.

Is it? We need not take too close a look at photographer-journalist Larry Schiller to suspect he is standing in for Mailer. Schiller meets Gary Gilmore in prison, wins his trust, and after much struggle gets book and movie rights to his story. Schiller is wily and bold, a hustler possessed of an outsized ambition for success in the media marketplace. Whenever we see him, Mailer abandons his plain style and employs his usual rhetorical brio. Ultimately, though, Mailer is too thoroughly the detached artist in this book truly to subsume Schiller under his own image. It is fairer to say we see Mailer's character in, not as, Schiller.

And what of Mailer's now celebrated plain style? Does it really recall *The Naked and the Dead* and cause us to reconfirm its honesty? Both novels treat harsh realities directly. But in trying so single-mindedly to avoid sentimentality in his war novel Mailer has gone too far to the other side and presented us with undue negativity and rawness, the inevitable pitfalls of naturalism. His characters, despite race and class differences, belong to the same hopeless family whether as soldiers or in the biographical flashbacks called "Time Machines." They are all alienated and either power hungry or made small by oppressive circumstances. Virtue is thinly presented and wholesomeness not

at all. Not so in the Gilmore novel in which his Uncle Vern, Cousin Brenda, and others are upright, decent characters who add to a wide mix of people we know from life. We have a truer world here than that of *The Naked and the Dead*, which has a lesser claim to honesty.

Indeed, what Mailer attempts in *The Executioner's Song* is a modernist project that puts him in high company. Like Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Beckett, and Nabokov he draws from material the reader regards as off-putting, even repugnant—certainly not the province of literature—then he reveals the import of that material through the power of imagination and altogether changes the reader's mind. For all his depravity Gary Gilmore, Mailer shows us, had spiritual valor. Believing the soul can die before the body, he successfully overturned a ten-year national ban on the death penalty and effected the obliteration of his body so his soul could further its ends.

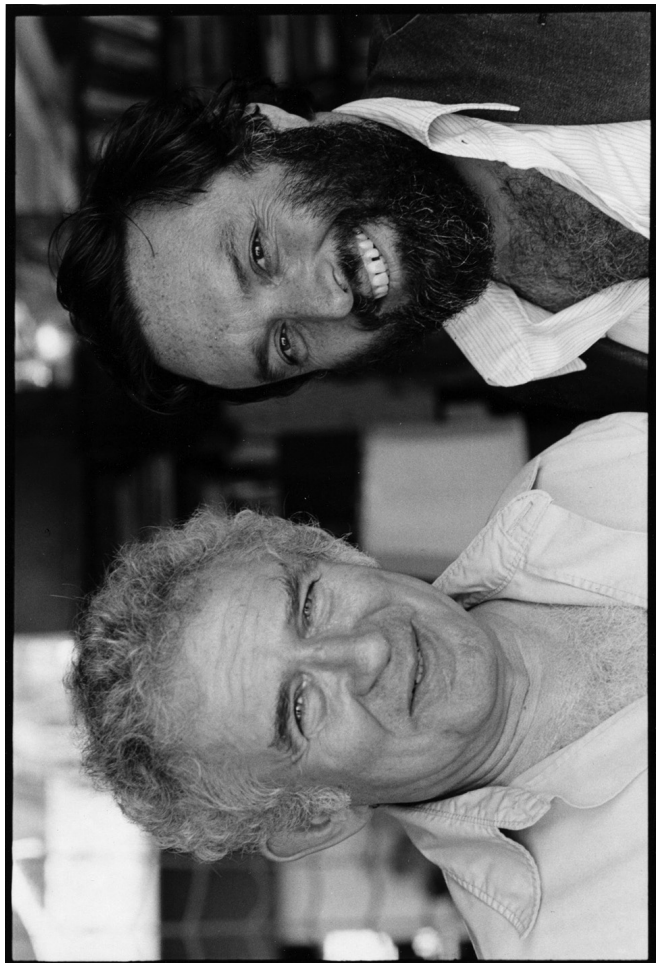
Americans absolutize life and have trouble recognizing spirituality when they see it. However much we may think of Gary Gilmore as a native son, his deathly motivation was profoundly un-American. During the infamous standoff at Waco fourteen years ago, the FBI consulted with "expert" psychiatrists and composed a personality profile on David Koresh. They concluded he was at bottom a con man; he wanted to make a book deal. But he was the real Old Testament thing. A criminal, yes, but like Daniel, like Elijah. Gilmore, though no Old Testament-like figure, was up against the same kind of American blindness.

Is Mailer's book too long? The labyrinthine wranglings in the Gilmore case tire us, but they are of a piece with the catharsis Gilmore's plight works on us. We are dismayed by his stupidities, moved by his intelligently impassioned struggle for death, drained by his miseries and depravities. One thousand fifty pages of one man's hate, defeat, love, despair, and bravery deplete us.

No Mailer book brings us as close to events and character as *The Executioner's Song*. Its unperformative, transparent style allows our consciousness to flow into its movement so that we find ourselves intimately inhabiting a world. Removing himself, Mailer has put us in his place. This is an adhesive novel like *Crime and Punishment*. When death finally comes to Gilmore we know, in some small measure, what it means because of the release it gives us.

Gary Gilmore is not the romanticized psychopath of bourgeois imagining we see in "The White Negro." He is the genuine article, yet what do we

do with the word “psychopath” when we recognize that Gilmore’s life interests us *personally*? To read this book is to feel with unaccustomed intensity desires and fears beneath the tired consistencies of that socially constructed thing we call our conscience. Our chilling fascination with Gary Gilmore is not with the Other, but with ourselves.



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Mailer with Lawrence Schiller. Photo by Jill Krementz. All rights reserved.