

Matters of grave importance: style in Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*

...to send my style through a circus of variations and postures, a fireworks of virtuosity... a quick-change artist, as if I can trap the Prince of Truth in the act of switching style.

Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*¹

At 8:07a.m on January 17th 1977, Gary Mark Gilmore was executed just outside the grounds of Utah State Prison. Less than six months earlier, on the morning of July 21st 1976, Gilmore had been arrested on the outskirts of Provo in Utah on suspicion of armed robbery and double homicide. Gilmore's victims were Max Jensen, a gas station attendant in Orem and Ben Bushnell, a motel manager in Provo. In both incidents, Gilmore instructed his compliant victim to lie face down on the floor before shooting them in the head. The subsequent trial commenced on October 5th and was concluded in two days. Gilmore was convicted and sentenced to death. Given the opportunity to choose the mode of his execution, the condemned man elected to be shot by a firing squad. The date of the execution was set for 15th November 1976, but when Gilmore waived his right to appeal the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People attempted to intervene. There had been a de facto moratorium on the death penalty in the U.S for around a decade and opponents of capital punishment were deeply concerned that this might be overturned by the precedent of the Gilmore case. A number of judicial stays were issued right up to the eve of the execution when the legitimacy of Gilmore's punishment was authoritatively determined by a Supreme Court ruling based on a majority of five to four. Five local police officers were recruited as executioners. With no recent experience of carrying out capital punishment, prison officials converted a space in a nearby disused cannery into a bespoke execution facility. The marksmen were positioned behind a makeshift curtain with small holes cut out through which to shoot. Their target was hooded and strapped to an office chair positioned in front of a dirty mattress and some sandbags. Asked for any last words, Gilmore responded bluntly: 'Let's do it'. Allegedly, this infamous phrase inspired the Nike slogan: 'Just do it'. This may be the most conspicuous legacy of the Gilmore execution, but it is not the most momentous. As opponents of the death penalty

¹ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) pp.17-18.

feared, by insisting on his inalienable right to die, Gilmore re-opened the door to the death chamber in the U.S. Inadvertently, 'let's do it' issued an imperative to the killing state which since 1977 has carried out over 1,400 legal homicides.

The story of Gary Gilmore's crime, trial and execution captivated America in the mid-seventies. Intense media interest turned Gilmore into a national celebrity although the condemned man's time in the limelight was short-lived. Whilst the media circus swiftly moved on, this crucial chapter in the history of punishment in the U.S. was memorialized by Norman Mailer in *The Executioner's Song* (1979). Although it covers a relatively brief span of just nine months from shortly before the murders until just after the execution, this is a hefty slab of a text that stretches over one thousand pages. *The Executioner's Song* took fifteen months to write and required a mammoth research effort. Mailer made field trips to Utah and Oregon and conducted over one hundred face-to-face and telephone interviews with family, friends, lawyers, lobbyists and journalists. In addition, he consulted transcripts of interviews at which he was not present, legal testimony, newspaper and police reports, psychological profiles and Gilmore's voluminous correspondence with his girlfriend, Nicole Baker. In an afterword, over several pages, Mailer acknowledges his debt to a vast gallery of participants and assistants in compiling a prodigious archive. *The Executioner's Song* represented a significant departure for Mailer in terms of his customary mode of composition and it also involved a major transformation in his signature style. Mailer's fiction and essays from the 50s and 60s often engaged and at times indulged in surrealist experimentation, pugilistic polemic and purple prose. The central figure, typically, was 'Norman Mailer'. In a *New York Times* review of *The Executioner's Song* entitled 'The Ballad of Gary G', fellow author Tim O'Brien responded favourably to the new style: 'No gimmicks, no tricks, no *Advertisements for Myself*. The prose is spare and dry and clean. Most important, Mailer does not inject his own personality or judgement into the narrative, doesn't sermonize or philosophize, and doesn't attempt to force his material into any preconceived moulds'.² Intriguingly, for a text of such epic scope and detail, O'Brien's review focuses almost exclusively on what is absent. My own analysis of *The Executioner's Song* below will similarly attempt to adumbrate its critical lacunae, but will challenge other aspects of O'Brien's assessment.

² Tim O'Brien, 'The Ballad of Gary G.', *New York Times*, 15th October 1979, p.67.

The apparent simplicity and neutrality of *The Executioner's Song* is deceptive. This begins at the beginning with the title. The title may not be a trick, but it is not as 'spare and dry and clean' as, say, *The Execution of Gary Gilmore*, or perhaps *Gilmore's Tale*. Readers waiting for a scene in which an executioner literally sings will be disappointed and so we know that Mailer intends us to read metaphorically. However, once the trope is recognized we are confronted and possibly confounded by a supplementary puzzle. *Who, exactly, is the intoning 'Executioner'?* The firing squad can be dismissed as they are plural and hardly seen behind the curtain and so perhaps the 'Executioner' is a synecdoche for the killing state as it chants its death song. An alternative possibility is that the eponymous executioner and the condemned man are one and the same. Gary Gilmore murders his victims 'execution style'. He persuades his partner to commit suicide. He insists, vehemently, on his own execution and this subsequently results in the reconstitution of capital punishment in the U.S. Unwittingly, Gilmore becomes the 'executioner' of other Death Row inmates right up to the present day. Alongside this speculation, we should note more decisively, that Mailer had already used 'The Executioner's Song' as the title of a poem in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966) and as a chapter heading in *The Fight* (1975). Lyricism, suggestive ambiguity and auto-plagiarism follow the reader as we move from title to epigraph:

*Deep in my dungeon
I welcome you here
Deep in my dungeon
I worship your fear
Deep in my dungeon
I dwell.
I do not know
If I wish you well.*³

This 'old prison rhyme' reappears with a second stanza at the end of the text. However, in the 'Afterword' which follows, Mailer makes the following confession: '[t]he *old prison rhyme* at the beginning and the end of this book is not, alas, an ancient ditty but a new one, and was written by this author ten years ago for his movie *Maidstone*' (p.1052). This is not quite as perplexing as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) (which starts with a disclaimer stating that all the characters in the book are imaginary, but then follows with a dedication to

³ Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (London: Vintage, 1991). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis immediately after the cited text.

the characters which makes them seem real), but the title and epigraph to *The Executioner's Song* should alert the attentive reader to messy complicating factors beneath the apparently 'spare and dry and clean' surface of the text.

It may have been noticed that so far *The Executioner's Song* has exclusively been referred to as a 'text'. This, in part, is a defensive gesture resorted to because other genre labels are problematic. In 1979, Mailer's text won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and in 1980 it was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award for *nonfiction*.⁴ Mailer's own classifications fail to resolve the issue. In the 'Afterword', he informs us that this book 'does its best to be a factual account', but also admits to certain editorial omissions and revisions. He suggests 'there would not have been a way to do this factual account – this, dare I say it, *true life story*, with its real names and real lives – as if it were a novel' (p.1053). At the same time, Mailer actively encouraged his publishers to market the book with the vaguely oxymoronic epithet of 'true-life novel'. In 'The True Story of an American Writer', Jean Radford proposes that across his career Mailer 'developed into a stylistic chameleon (realist, allegorist, journalist), crossing generic border-lines... raiding a number of ideological positions (Marxist, existentialist, left conservative, Zen).⁵ In the reading below, I aim to demonstrate that an eclectic and at times unstable compound of styles, genres and ideological formations are evident not only across the Mailer oeuvre, but specifically within *The Executioner's Song*. The core of the text is broadly realist, but in a reflexive fashion that incorporates metafictional and meta-nonfictional impulses which challenge a naively empirical model of 'reality'. Grafted onto the realist spine there are strands of romance, gothic, western and prison narrative genres. *The Executioner's Song* looks back to the Puritan execution sermon and early American crime writing, resonates with the emergent dirty realist aesthetic and looks forward to the tone and thematics of blank fiction from the 80s and 90s. Alongside the variations in genre, Mailer ventriloquizes vernacular diction (East Coast, Western and prison argot) and incorporates as well as critiquing the stylistics of different institutions: the state, the judiciary, the media and church. Radford goes so far as to propose that Mailer's novel addresses the 'state of the nation's language'.⁶ Gary Gilmore was executed in the Bicentennial year of 1976. At a distinct historical juncture between the end of

⁴ On the back cover of the 1991 Vintage classics edition, the text is classified as 'TRUE CRIME/ BIOGRAPHY'.

⁵ Jean Radford, 'Norman Mailer: The True Story of an American Writer', in Richard Gray (ed.), *American Fiction: New Readings* (London; Vision Press, 1983), p.222.

⁶ Radford, 'True Story', p.224.

the Vietnam era and the rise of the New Right, *The Executioner's Song* interrogates the impact that execution has on individuals, institutions and society at large. In this task, the intricate imbrication of ethical and political modalities with aesthetic practices is underscored. Like Oscar Wilde, the ex-inmate of Reading Gaol, Mailer understands the grave importance of style.

Breaking the Law of Genre

GENRES ARE NOT to be mixed...

'Do', 'Do not' says 'genre', the word 'genre', the figure, the voice, or the law of genre...

The clause or floodgate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed. It tolls the knell of genealogy or genericity, which it however also brings forth to the light of day. Putting to death the very thing that it engenders, it cuts a strange figure.

Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre'⁷

For Derrida, genre is bound up with law in an unstable dialectic. Each attempt to define, demarcate and lay down the rules governing a particular genre is shadowed by that which it seeks to exclude. This process resonates beyond the realm of critical theory. The state and various institutions aim to label subjects and place limits, but the law which intends to police a boundary produces and thus contains its Other. It is not a matter of a law being broken, but of an edict which establishes the conditions in which it is always already transgressed. We might feel it is safe to assume that *The Executioner's Song* belongs to the genre of the law: this is, after all, a narrative of crime and punishment, death row and courtroom drama. However, Mailer's 'act of switching style' foregrounds the instability of the genre of genre itself. In the early stages of *The Executioner's Song*, style is relatively stable, but once the murders take place the genre code begins to multiply and mix and cuts an increasingly 'strange figure'. The breaking of the law seems to release disruptive energies within the text: an explosive proliferation of supergenres, sub-genres and hybrids emerge at both the general and local level. There are over ninety extracts from personal correspondence (letters and telegrams), more than sixty citations from official documentation (including transcripts from interviews with Gilmore, his family and friends, agents and lawyers, police and prison staff alongside a number of legal texts and psychiatric records) and in excess of fifty quotations from newspaper reports and articles. Inevitably, the overall tone of the text gravitates towards

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.7, No.1, (Autumn, 1980) p.55, p.67.

tragedy, but these are interspersed with numerous instances of comedy. Gallows humour seeps in with allusions to newspaper comic strips and cartoons about Gilmore's execution. At one point the self-condemned man participates in the comedy by offering his cell mate, Gibbs, a fake invitation card:

Mrs. Bessie Gilmore of Milwaukie, Ore cordially invites you to the execution of her son: Gary Mark Gilmore, 36

Place: Utah State Prison, Draper, Utah

Time: Sunrise

EARPLUGS AND BULLETS WILL BE FURNISHED. (p.663)

Many of the genre labels which might be affixed to *The Executioner's Song* require supplementation. Given the extent of the citations from correspondence, Mailer's text can be addressed as an epistolary narrative whilst specific letters display additional generic affiliations. On death row, Gilmore's voluminous correspondence effectively becomes an extended auto-obituary. *Dead Man Writing*. His most intimate correspondence with Nicole interweaves strands of poetry, humour, romance, pornography, self-mythologizing fantasy, surrealism and gothic colourings.

I told you that I haven't slept lately – the ghosts descended and set upon me with a force I didn't believe they possessed. I smack 'em down and they sneak back and climb in my ear... foul demon motherfuckers with dirty furry bodies whispering vile things in the nite... Dirty inhuman beasts jackals hyena rumour monger plague ridden unhappy lost ghostly foul ungodly things unacceptable creeping crawling red eyed bat eared soulless beasts...

The demon ghosts

Trick tease tantalize

Bite and claw scratch and screech

Weave a web of oldness. (p.362)

Gothic shading in *The Executioner's Song* is not restricted to the couple's death row correspondence. Family legends surrounding Gary are steeped in the supernatural. Bessie Gilmore believes that her son is possessed: 'the haunted house on Salt Lake... whatever it was that lived in that house... must in those years have begun to live in Gary' (p.1049). This superstition is oddly echoed by psychiatric reports which refer to the 'ghost ridden' psychotic (p.397) hinting at the generic contamination of a professional discourse. After his execution, Nicole's sister, April, is haunted by nightmares of a spectral Gary returning from the grave.

Gary is also asked if he is the devil and described as 'like the demon that got into Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*' (p.613). After an angry meeting with his client, the attorney Ron Stanger says 'it was like a horror film. I could almost see his teeth getting longer' (p.746). The autopsy procedure which follows Gary's execution dramatizes the sadism of state slaughter by shifting from a mode of gothic suggestion to a scene of spectacular body horror (a generic requirement which appeared to become practically compulsory in police procedurals and serial killer narratives during the 80s and 90s).

Then they removed the pituitary, put it aside, and sliced the brain like meat loaf... and they took all the organs they did not need for dissection and put them back into the body and head cavities, and drew his face up, pulled it right back taut over the bones and muscles, like putting on the mask again, fit the sawed-off bone-cap back on the skull, and sewed the scalp, and body cavity. When they were all finished, it looked like Gary Gilmore again. (p.1001)

In their death row letters, Gary and Nicole repeatedly assure each other that death is not the end. The lovers subscribe to a New Age mystical faith in reincarnation and the doctrine of karmic debts. Gary, in fact, believes that he has already been executed in England in the eighteenth century and still has to atone for some crime from the past.

I owe a debt, from a long time ago... There have been years when I haven't even thought much of it at all and then something (a picture of a guillotine, a headmans block, or a broad ax, or even a rope) will bring it all back and for days it will seem I'm on the verge of knowing something very personal, something about myself.' (p.305)

Elsewhere in their correspondence, Gary and Nicole secretly plan suicide and promise to meet each other in 'the darkness'. The film-maker Larry Schiller recognizes that '[t]hese letters still offered the love story. He not only had the man's reason for dying but Romeo and Juliet, and life after death' (p.709). Romance is one of the most significant narrative strains within *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer appears keen to uncover a partially redemptive quality in the intensity of Gary and Nicole's relationship. There are different 'chapters' to the love story. At times, their relationship seems like the sort of tempestuous affair narrated in a country-and-western ballad: a 35-year old ex-con meets a 19-year old widowed divorcee and mother of two and they spin into a whirlwind cycle of alcohol, abuse, break-up and reunion. In their letters, Gilmore appears sensitive and solicitous and his fear of death is dwarfed by

the fear of losing Nicole. Some of their correspondence is highly explicit: *'fucked your belly button pushed my tongue in your mouth in your cunt in your ass'* (p.404). The couple's erotic intimacy is undergirded by a vivid and self-mythologizing fantasy life. Gilmore reinvents Nicole as his *'little elf sweet'* (p.545) and offers to transport her to *'places i loved as a child, a dark little glen in the forest of pines... Listen to my enchanted forest talking softly in its thousand tongues'* (p.808). Nicole pleases with her lover to *'Touch my soul with your truth'* (p.699).

Writing to Nicole from his cell, Gary declares with equal fervour: *'I love you more than God.'* (p.486). Religion typically plays a pivotal role in American narratives of punishment and is evident throughout *The Executioner's Song*. In the beginning, Brenda shares her *'earliest recollection of Gary'* (p.5) in which Christian imagery is prominent. At the age of six, Brenda had fallen from an apple tree she was not supposed to climb and Gary caught her: a Fall, forbidden fruit and a Saviour. The opening chapter is entitled *'The First Day'* and is followed by others with more explicitly religious signposting. Chapter 32, for example, announces *'The Angels and the Demons Meet the Devils and the Saints'*. If the possibility of Gary as a saviour is muted in the opening anecdote, it becomes louder as his Day of Judgement approaches. One of his lawyers, Dennis Boas, confesses that he *'feel[s] like Judas helping get you executed'* (p.527). At the execution, Gary's final words to Father Meersman are *'Dominus vobiscum'* (p.984). After he is shot, Gary's hand is seen *'rising and falling'* (p.1005) perhaps in *signum crucis*. In a continuation of this motif, the post-autopsy donation of parts of Gary's body might be read as a surgical sacrament. Whilst the messianic imagery around Gilmore could be ironic, the insistence on execution for his sins appears sincere and linked to doctrine in the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. Both of Gilmore's victims were Mormons and his own father had been raised within the LDS. In this context, Gary's determination to die might be seen as a confirmation of the efficacy of the Mormon credo of *'blood atonement... "Those who shed blood must pay in blood"'* (p.776).

The principle of punishment as retribution increased in currency during the late 1970s. The post-Vietnam period between Gilmore's execution and the publication of Mailer's novel saw a sea-change from the progressive impulses of the 60s which utilized psychological and sociological models to understand social deviance to the rise of the New Right and a fundamentalist insistence on theological approaches to crime as *'sin'* and an expression of *'evil'*. The genealogy of the Mormon tenet of blood atonement can be traced

back to a Puritan penology based on Old Testament teachings. Daniel A. Cohen has argued persuasively that the Puritan execution sermon can be read as ‘the first dominant American crime genre’.⁸ From the mid-17th to the early 18th-century the gallows sermon was an integral part of the dramatized spectacle of public execution. The homily issued dire warnings on the social and spiritual perils of wrong-doing and underlined the extent to which the acts of one rogue backslider could jeopardize the salvation of the entire community. The condemned subject played a crucial role in this performance as a willing scapegoat. A full confession and repentance were compulsory for redemption. In this manner, the act of execution was not an expulsion, but an ecstatic embrace of the outcast back into the moral folds of the community. At a time when the authority of Puritan theocracy was largely sacrosanct, lengthy execution sermons were delivered to crowds in their thousands and underscored a religious master narrative on the meaning of punishment. Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, as the authority of the Puritan Church waned, the meaning of execution became increasingly plural and contested as new genres of crime and punishment writing began to emerge. As legal authority took over from clerical, extensive trial reports sought to record meticulously the details of crimes as well as statements made by criminals, witnesses, lawyers, judges and jurors. Another challenge to the theological narrative came from a burgeoning newspaper industry. With the development of the penny press from the 1830s, print media sought to increase its circulation with broadsides and lurid accounts of crimes and trials and punishments. Cohen demonstrates how both lawyers and journalists routinely resorted to literary conventions in their presentations. In certain cases, for example, crimes of passion, tropes were routinely deployed from the gothic and romance genres and from melodrama and sensation fiction which represented a radical departure from the pious restraint of the Puritan sermon. This was supplemented by a number of popular literary contributions which gave a voice to the criminal: the criminal biography and autobiography, the crime ballad and the ‘last words’ of the condemned sometimes appeared in verse form. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as it became more commercially successful, the literature of crime and punishment increased in scope with the addition of supplementary texts. This genre was characterized by contrary impulses towards materialism and the mythological. On the one hand there was an increasingly willingness to consider the cogency of medical and environmental factors, but on the other this genre began to exercise a literary

⁸ Daniel A. Cohen, ‘Blood Will Out: Sensationalism, Horror, and the Roots of American Crime Literature’ in Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg (eds.), *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p.51.

license that blurred the distinctions between fact and fiction and either demonized the criminal in gothic mode or romanticized them as a free-spirited outlaw. The cultural history here is worth sketching briefly since key aspects of the tradition in the representation of capital punishment are evident in *The Executioner's Song*. The Puritan idea of peril for the community as well as the condemned is echoed since the execution of the one is implicitly offered by Mailer as symptomatic of a profound social and spiritual crisis for the many. As in the colonial era, the condemned man embraces his execution which is then publicized widely to an eager audience. The details of the crime, trial and punishment are meticulously documented by legal, medical and journalistic bodies. At times these sources also sensationalize and deploy literary tropes as part of a messy miscegenation of genres which blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Cohen illustrates how the 'certain, unitary, and rigidly patterned' truth of the Puritan sermon gave way to 'complex, elusive and fragmented' meanings in eighteenth and nineteenth century representations of execution.⁹ Mailer replaces the theocratic monologue and clear moral imperative with a chorus of voices and conflicting perspectives which seek to explain, or romanticize, or demonize Gary Gilmore.

According to Cohen's account, discursive constructions of capital punishment were wrested from ecclesiastical authority and taken into the marketplace. The commodification of execution comes to the fore in the second half of *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer's book and by implication the nation itself is divided in two. 'Western Voices' (pp.3-503) and 'Eastern Voices' (pp.507-1050) are polarized in key respects. In Book Two, the reader witnesses power plays by representatives of the state, the judiciary and commercial agents within the media industry. Most of the key figures in this respect are male and middle class. In contrast, the focal point in Book One is blue-collar lives and women such as Nicole Baker and Bessie Gilmore play significant roles. The 'Western Voices' are often female, poor and rendered in a colloquial drawl. By contrast, the 'Eastern Voices' which drown out their Western counterparts in Book Two are typically faster and more formal. An implicit move from slow country cadences to snappy urban professional discourse is accompanied by a geographical migration: an emphasis on the outdoors in 'Western Voices' is replaced by claustrophobic confinement in prison cells and motel rooms. From the opening scene in the apple orchard, 'Western Voices' declares its generic identity as a western: 'Right outside was a lot of open

⁹ Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt: Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1647-1860* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), p.248, p.251.

space. Beyond the backyards were orchards and fields and then the mountains. A dirt road went past the house and up the slope of the valley into the canyon' (p.5). Even when the action moves into cities such as Provo 'the desert [is] at the end of every street, except to the east' (p.28) and '[o]verhead was the immense blue of the strong sky of the American West. That had not changed' (p.19). The trailer-bound Bessie forms a bond with 'the beautiful peak she called Y Mountain because the first settlers had put down flat white stones on its flank to make a great big white "Y"... That mountain belongs to me' (p.319). The focus on landscape and sky, guns, violent crime and criminal justice are all markers of the classic western. Gary sounds 'like a cowboy' (p.1047) and when asked which actor he would cast as himself in a movie he chooses an iconic figure from classic westerns: 'Gary Cooper... I was named after him' (p.659). Although Gary's story ends in familiar fashion with the cowboy achieving a stoic dignity as he is gunned down, *The Executioner's Song* is less a classic western than a contribution to the post-Western revisionism of the 60s and 70s.¹⁰ The absence of a clear moral schema (an omission we will address below) means that, to invoke Slotkin's seminal phrase, there is no regeneration through violence.¹¹

The real story of the real story

Schiller said to himself, there is a story and it's real. Since it's real, it has, in this case, to be fantastic.

Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (p.598)

Our whistle-stop tour of genre and style in *The Executioner's Song* has covered a lot of ground – from the 17th-century Puritan execution sermon to the contemporary post-western – but there has been a significant omission. The aesthetic background to all of Mailer's stylistic switching is realism: the style which aspires to be without style. Very few death row stories venture beyond realism as though the seriousness of the subject demanded this aesthetic choice. 'Real' and 'reality' are keywords in *The Executioner's Song* which appear around two hundred times and are often connected to Gary, the murders and the execution. In terms of its genre and genealogy, *The Executioner's Song* is routinely linked to *In Cold Blood*

¹⁰ For example, we might see Gilmore's tale as a re-run of *Badlands* (1973) which follows the love affair between an older outlaw figure and his teenage girlfriend as they commit a series of apparently motiveless murders. Malik's film was inspired by the spree killings of Charles Starkweather and his fourteen-year-old girlfriend Caril Ann Fugate. Starkweather's first murder was of a gas station attendant who refused to sell him a toy dog on credit. He was executed in 1957.

¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973).

(1966) with its account of the murder of the Clutter family and the subsequent hanging of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Mailer, however, insisted that the style of *In Cold Blood* was incongruous with its subject: 'Edith Wharton [has] reappeared as Truman Capote, even more of a jewel'.¹² The obvious implication here is that, stylistically at least, *In Cold Blood* is rather genteel, ornamental and aesthetically feminine. Mailer's alternative literary role model for realism in *The Executioner's Song* is 'Papa' Hemingway. In general terms, Mailer's prose style aims for simplicity and an economy of expression. Sentences are typically short, uncluttered by florid embellishment, complex grammar and syntax and focus instead on functional nouns and verbs rendered in everyday cadences: 'The morning went like that. It was a good morning' (p.36). As in Hemingway's fiction, a lot of the story is carried by conversation. Much of 'Eastern Voices' and 'Western Voices' is devoted to dialogue where verisimilitude is attained by the careful rendition of regional dialect, vernacular contractions, 70s slang and assorted professional vocabularies. Mailer works hard to make these voices sound like motel managers from Provo and New York journalists and Los Angeles filmmakers. He reproduces grammatical errors in speech and typos are also common in the correspondence alongside underlining, capitalization and changes in font size. Since the reader knows that the letters are historical documents and can see how accurately extracts are being reproduced, the aura of authenticity extends to adjacent material.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that *The Executioner's Song* subscribes to a guileless model of realism. Borrowing from Henry James, we might say that the 'air of reality' in Mailer's work is polluted by the presence of other genre codes and by the marked transition from 'the story of one's hero... [to] the story of one's story'.¹³ In 'Western Voices' the imprisonment and execution of Gilmore threatens to become secondary to questions of the construction and ownership of the Gilmore narrative. On death row, Gilmore becomes the eye at the dead centre of a textual hurricane of legal documents, media reports, interviews, letters and contracts. According to Phyllis Frus, 'the process of production of *The Executioner's Song* is revealed in the narrative, since the second half (book 2) is 'about' how

¹² Cited in Chris Anderson, *Style as Argument contemporary American nonfiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p.117.

¹³ Henry James, the phrase 'air of reality' comes from James's 'The Art of Fiction' (London: Macmillan, 1888), p.390. The subsequent quotation comes from the preface to *The Ambassadors* collected in Henry James's *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2011), p.313.

the information in book 1 was gathered'.¹⁴ This process ends precisely at the point when all of the materials which have been meticulously collated in the book are about to be handed over to the writer Norman Mailer. Self-reflexivity, which as Christine Brooke-Rose reminds us, 'is a form of stylization', problematizes and at times threatens to negate the classical realist code.¹⁵ Metafictional discourses which foreground questions of reading, writing and authorship challenge naïve positivist assumptions with a version of 'reality' as a social and in this instance a specifically literary construction.

A key figure in this regard, one who vies with Gilmore for the limelight in Book Two, is Larry Schiller. A former journalist who went on to become a writer, photographer and producer, Schiller established a relationship with Gilmore and purchased the media rights to his story. Schiller conducted extensive interviews with Gilmore, Nicole Baker and others, he became the curator of Gilmore's correspondence, he collated trial testimony and commissioned others to write pieces. Ultimately, having laid the groundwork, Schiller handed over the project of writing to Mailer and the two also collaborated on the film adaptation of *The Executioner's Song*.¹⁶ Schiller expresses a determination to bear witness and record with absolute fidelity:

He realized that if he was going to take accurate notes at the execution, he might not have a second to remove his glance from the scene and so he would have to learn to separate his hand from his eye, and do it without ever referring to the pad, and to himself he said, 'For the first time, Schiller, you can't fictionalize, you can't make it up, you can't *embroider*'. (p.859)

As a surrogate author within the text, Schiller implicitly subscribes to a realist aesthetic which opposes the camera eye which merely records empirical detail to exercises in fictional 'embroidery' (a trope with similar gender connotations to the 'jewellery' of Capote's style). At the same time, however, Schiller openly entertains different ways of telling the tale:

A scenario could be worked up of a guy who comes out of prison and struggles with his old con habits, but finally kills a man, a real study of the pains of getting out of

¹⁴ Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p.189.

¹⁵ Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.371.

¹⁶ *The Executioner's Song* (1982) was directed by Schiller whilst Mailer wrote the screenplay.

jail. That way they could do capital punishment and whether a man had a right to die, and never touch upon a love story (p.595).

The 'real study' still has to be 'worked up' and genre codes (prison drama, romance) must come into play. Schiller's commitment to objectivity is at odds with a recognition of the impossibility of the hand erasing itself as it writes: 'Actually' said Schiller to himself, 'I have become part of it. All around me, I'm becoming part of the story' (p.714). The same recognition is achieved by freelance writer Dennis Boaz: 'I'm a character in this thing I'm writing... so I don't plan out everything I do. I'm being acted upon by the real author of these events. Whoever or whatever that is' (p.627). The ethical and political consequences of the writer's involvement in their subject is grasped even more keenly by Barry Farrell when he is hired by Schiller to interview Gilmore for *Playboy*: '[of] course, one Barry Farrell had become an integral part of this machine that was making it impossible for Gilmore to take an appeal' (p.832).

Especially in the second half of *The Executioner's Song*, the story talks to itself at a volume which interrupts the possibility of the reader simply listening to a straightforward account of historical events. The implicit stylistic allusions to Hemingway are gestured towards by a telegram Schiller sends to Gary which borrows from Schiller's report on Hemingway's suicide (p.763). In an earlier telegram, Schiller reassures Gilmore and perhaps threatens to unsettle the reader with the following: 'WE WISH TO PRESENT YOUR STORY AS TRUTH NOT FICTION STOP' (p.598). At High School, Grace McGinnis taught Gary in a Creative Class and remembers an insightful conversation with his brother, Mikal, about Capote's *In Cold Blood* (p.456). In their childhood the Gilmore brothers had studied the dictionary avidly. Gary encourages Nicole to do the same, but she misreads a word: '*anyhow it's TAUTOLOGIC not TANTALOGIC. Look again*' (p.478). Irony is evident in the lexical choice here (the tautological repetitions of metafictional self-reflexivity) and in the steady stream of meta-commentaries by characters on the state of the story we are reading. The producer David Susskind is initially excited: 'I think this story's got several layers of importance and interest and could make very exciting, dramatic material' (p.603). However, following Nicole's suicide attempt, Susskind revises his original assessment:

The story was getting to be, in Susskind's view, a very sensational, malodorous, exploitative mess... It's no longer a story about the breakdown of the criminal justice

system, it's a farce... "I think anybody who does the story now is jumping on a dead and putrefying body. It's bizarre and sick" (p.629).

Philip Roth famously complained that

[t]he American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.¹⁷

Mailer had anticipated Roth's grievance in 'The Man Who Studied Yoga', an early short story where a frustrated writer, Sam Slovoda, gives up on his novel because '[h]e cannot find a form... He does not want to write a realistic novel because reality is no longer realistic'.¹⁸ Much of the surface of *The Executioner's Song* appears to suggest an unruffled realism guided by the principles of transparency, comprehensiveness and coherence, but there are undercurrents which take the story into troubled waters. The 'real story' becomes increasingly elusive and torn between conflicting aesthetic, commercial, legal and political frames. Nicole confesses that '[s]ome of it was real, some was made-up' (p.728) and even when the 'real' is present at crucial points its meaning is far from immanent: '[t]he news lived in the air of the courtroom: ...a man was going to be executed. It was real but it was not comprehensible. The man was standing there' (p.447). The air of reality threatens to become toxic.

In his cell at one point, Gary engages in what might be read as a metafictional allegory of the naïvely realist author:

Then he fell in love with the Magic Marker... on all the walls, he wrote 'WALL', wrote 'CEILING' on the ceiling, 'TABLE' on the table, 'BENCH' on the bench, 'CHOWER' in the shower... Finally, he printed on Gibbs's face and his own: 'FOREHEAD', 'NOSE', 'CHEEK', 'CHIN' (p.388).

On occasion, this process appears to be taken to parodic excess by Mailer himself. After he has murdered Bennie Bushnell, Gary hides out in a room at the Holiday Inn. Chapter 14, 'The

¹⁷ Philip Roth, 'Writing American Fiction', *Commentary*, March 1961, p.225.

¹⁸ Norman Mailer, 'The Man Who Studied Yoga' in *Advertisements for Myself*, p.175.

Motel Room', offers a remarkable density of descriptive detail for what one might assume to be a rather bland interior: the curtains, the chairs, the desk, the beds, the laminated swimming pool regulations. The reader's eye is taken from the TV to the TV stand, from the chromium ball feet of the TV stand to their rubber casters and on to the impression they leave on the 'blue shaggy synthetic-fabric rug' (p.233). To return to Henry James, there is no 'figure in the carpet' here, but only a manic accumulation of empirical details which seems compensatory for a lack of answers to the mystery posed by the murders. The forensic scrutiny of the motel room finishes in the bathroom with a close-up on the softness and absorbency of toilet paper which 'would stick to the anus' (p.234). Drawing attention to the messy materialism beneath the plastic surfaces of consumer society is a signature move by Mailer, but it leaves the reader no closer to understanding why Gilmore has committed murder. If the pages of *The Executioner's Song* are to absorb the reality of the Gilmore story something more than realism is required.

A similar recognition was at the heart of an emergent school of fiction in the late 1970s where Raymond Carver was the head teacher and notable pupils included Richard Ford and Jayne Anne Phillips. Both individually and collectively these writers were tagged with a variety of labels: 'dirty realism' was the most popular but others included 'new social realism' and 'K-Mart realism', 'hick chic', 'Diet-Pepsi minimalism' and even 'post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism'.¹⁹ *The Executioner's Song* shares key socio-political and aesthetic affinities with dirty realism. Mailer offers a sympathetic but unsentimental portrayal of the working class and unemployed: people who live in trailer homes, work in gas stations and motels and shop, as Gary is seen to do, at K-Mart. The main stylistic signature of dirty realism was minimalism. Carver's short stories avoided figurative language in favour of everyday speech and precise physical description. Much of Book One is written in precisely this style and whilst this is a very long novel, it is composed from a series of short sections punctuated by innumerable breaks which might have appeared as self-contained stories in an anthology of dirty realist prose. Central to the minimalism of dirty realist writing and of Mailer's work is the act of leaving a lot unsaid. The empty spaces between sections in Mailer's work become increasingly conspicuous as visual

¹⁹ John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times*, 28th December 1986, section 7, p.1.

markers of absence, mystery and a profound sense of the ultimate impenetrability of actions and events.

There is a hole in the heart of *The Executioner's Song* and its formal emblem is the line break. The thousands of blank white spaces between sections evoke the absolute extinction of Being involved in execution, but even before he is shot in the heart Gilmore is repeatedly associated with a troubling absence. The decisive act in Book One, the murder of Max Jensen, is condensed into a series of short single clause sentences delivered in an uncannily anaesthetized aesthetic which mirrors the automaton behavior of the killer. This anti-epiphany is rendered in the same numbed naturalism evident subsequently in the Holiday Inn:

It was a bathroom with green tiles that came to the height of your chest, and tan-painted walls. The floor, six feet by eight feet, was laid in dull gray tiles. A rack for paper towels on the wall had Towel Saver printed on it. The toilet had a split seat. An overhead light was in the wall.

Gilmore brought the Automatic to Jensen's head. 'This one is for me,' he said, and fired.

'This one is for Nicole,' he said, and fired again. The body reacted each time.

He stood up. There was a lot of blood. It spread across the floor at a surprising rate. Some of it got onto the bottom of his pants.

He walked out of the rest room with the bills in his pocket, and the coin changer in his hand, walked by the big Coke machine and the phone on the wall, walked out of this real clean gas station. (p.224)

Immediately after the murders Gary's face is 'blank' (p.245). His account of the night is oddly atonal (p.799) and riddled with blind spots: 'some of it is totally blank' (p.440). Gary claims that when his sentence was delivered he 'probably felt less than anyone in the courtroom' (p.693) and during interviews he frequently disappears inside himself: '[b]lank space was there to look back at Schiller' (p.693). These affective aporia and the flat prose style move beyond the emotional reticence of Hemingway and towards the formal and thematic signatures of blank fiction. With their numb recitation of the surfaces of consumerist non-places and spree killings by charismatic but oddly detached killers, a line might be drawn

from *The Executioner's Song* to Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Gilmore, like Patrick Bateman, occupies the 'psychopathic flats' (p.799). Passages in *The Executioner's Song* read like proto-blank fiction with their insensate commentary on incidents of extreme violence: 'Martin took his new wife in the woods and stabbed her twenty times, cut her throat, cut the unborn baby out of her body, stabbed at the baby, went home' (p.413).

In his seminal work on postmodernism Fredric Jameson identified a 'new kind of flatness' as the 'supreme formal feature' of contemporary cultural production.²⁰ Jameson paired this depthlessness with a 'waning of affect' and sought to map both phenomenon onto developments in global capitalist economic and social relations.²¹ Connections between formal and affective flattening and consumerism in *The Executioner's Song* might confirm Jameson's pronouncement. Whilst Gilmore claims that one of the bullets is for him and one for Nicole, the presence of a third party at the crime scene might be detected. In the build-up to the murders, much of Gilmore's frustration is tied to his inability to keep up payments on his prize possession: a six-cylinder '66 Mustang. In a letter to Nicole he seems to confess that he has destroyed their lives 'because I was so spoiled and couldn't immediately have a white pickup truck I wanted' (p.306). It might be noted that the commodity Gary covets is branded after a breed of horse iconically associated with the American West and that his violent disappointment is directed at people in the workplaces which service a car culture (a gas station and a motel). Whilst Gary's anger is fueled by pecuniary debt, he comes to terms with his fate in relation to the mystical notion of 'Karmic debt'. We might, at this point, consider the extent to which punishment itself is underpinned by the economic principle of restitution. As Derrida observes in his work on the death penalty: 'the origin of the legal subject, and notably of penal law, is commercial law; it is the law of commerce, debt, the market, the exchange between things, bodies and monetary signs'.²² Although Gilmore conceptualizes his punishment as the price to be paid for injuries he has inflicted in this and previous lives, part of Mailer's focus is on commodity envy as a cause of crime and how the media capitalizes on capital punishment. This process, of course, includes the condemned man himself as he sells his story to the highest bidder. Gilmore recognizes the irony of his situation when he proposes using his execution as a means of advertising Timex watches

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p.9.

²¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.10.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), p.152.

(p.831). His status as commercial opportunity and brand is ironically underscored at a public talk by his agent, Larry Schiller, who is challenged by a Mormon student for wearing ‘a Gary Gilmore belt’ (p.876) when in fact the interlocking G’s on the buckle are the Gucci logo. Whilst Gilmore’s defiant last words were the inspiration for a global marketing brand, the fate of his body underscores Mailer’s contempt for a styleless and soulless corporate America: ‘Gary’s ashes had been put into a plastic bag of the sort you sell bread in, a cellophane bag with the printing from the bread company clearly on it. That freaked Schiller out... coloured printing all over it, not festive, but cheap, a 59 cents loaf of bread’ (p.1022).

The ideology of the form

‘...the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style’.

Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’²³

Whilst ‘Western Voices’ combines the western genre with a dirty realist and proto-blank fiction aesthetic, meta-fictional and meta-nonfictional discourses come to the fore in ‘Eastern Voices’. As noted in our introduction, the generic indeterminacy of *The Executioner’s Song* is evidenced by the fact that it garnered awards as both ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction’. This hybridity is a signature of the new journalism to which Mailer’s work made a powerful contribution alongside that of Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote.²⁴ New journalism emerged in the 60s and 70s in part as a response to developments in media ecology. At the same time that novelists such as Philip Roth were expressing exasperation at their inability to compete with ‘reality’ as it was reported by a burgeoning media industry, challenges were being issued to the ability of conventional journalism to report the full story of events such as the Vietnam War. Both genres, accordingly, pushed at their boundaries and converged on a middle ground. In the context of accelerating hypermediation – of which the Gilmore execution is a prime time example – Mailer seeks to forge new modes of self-reflexive literary journalism in his ‘true-life novel’. Meta-journalism takes different forms in *The Executioner’s Song*. Firstly, and most visibly, there is the inclusion of numerous quotations from newspapers and TV reports. Secondly, there is extensive commentary on and critique of aspects of the media coverage and in particular the lurid and ghoulish entertainment served up by ‘yellow

²³ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’ in *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2010), p.20.

²⁴ Specifically in the context of execution, one could note Orwell’s ‘A Hanging’ (1931) as an early precedent for the new journalism.

journalism' (p.807). Thirdly, as discussed above, Mailer employs a journalistic style which - following in the footsteps of the *Toronto Star's* most famous reporter, Ernest Hemingway - prioritizes the crisp and succinct reporting of factual detail. Fourthly, *The Executioner's Song* both employs and reports on journalistic methodology - the legwork of interviewing and ascertaining facts. At the same time, however, Mailer's approach does not subscribe to a naïve model of journalistic objectivity, but instead poses challenging questions of point of view and veracity. In the 'Afterword', Mailer begins with the following confession:

This book does its best to be a factual account of the activities of Gary Gilmore and the men and women associated with him in the period from April 9, 1976, when he was released from the United States Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois, until his execution a little more than nine months later in Utah State Prison... This does not mean that it has come a great deal closer to the truth than the recollections of the witnesses (p.1051).

The epistemological borders between 'fact', 'fiction' and 'truth' are clouded by the simultaneous insistence on accuracy and artistic license: Mailer admits that some of the interviews, letters, newspaper quotations and dialogue have been altered. In addition and inevitably, the materials require editing, arranging, condensing and crafting. Journalism is not a passive and innocent relaying of an a priori narrative, but the active construction of a story.

This is a recognition which Schiller offers his audience of Mormon students after explaining the sign of the double 'G' on his belt: 'You are a journalist, because you have turned one thing into another, and that is journalism' (p.876). Schiller seems to distinguish between the creative role of the journalist and the historian whose job it is to remain 'accurate to the facts... You recorded history right' (p.600). Conversely, Mailer's approach to writing the past anticipates the principles of new historicism. In 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact', Hayden White reminds us that all stories which claim to be based on fact are still 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*'.²⁵ The sub-title of Mailer's *Armies of the Night* - 'History as a Novel: The Novel as History' - underscores the contention that history must be plotted and that fictions are inevitably historical.²⁶ The meta-fictional discourses in *The Executioner's Song* precisely encourage the reader to

²⁵ Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact' in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.82.

²⁶ Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night* (New York: Plume, 1968).

challenge historical and journalistic accounts of the Gilmore execution including the one which is encouraging this challenge. A hermeneutic of suspicion is cultivated by the intentionally indeterminate borders Mailer traces between history, journalism and fiction. The 'Prince of Truth' is not confined to any one territory. As Gary suggests in one of his letters to Nicole: 'I was looking for a truth that was very rigid, unbending, a single straight line that excluded everything but itself. A simple Truth, unadorned. I was never quite satisfied – I found many truths though' (p.345).

The search for a single truth which splinters apart is repeated throughout the text and especially evident during and after the execution scene. Larry Schiller aims to capture the event with absolute fidelity by painstakingly recording every sensory detail of the condemned man's final moments and in particular the colours Gary sees before they place the hood over his head. Banishing all 'journalistic assumptions' and relying instead on his 'photographer's eye' (p.981), Schiller observes 'the yellow line and the black hood and the black T-shirt Gary was wearing and the white pants, and the shots' (p.990). The myopic concentration on material facts again seems compensatory for the impenetrable mystery of time and death and Schiller's empirical fetishism is subsequently shown to be suspect:

They drove over together to the execution site. When they got inside the cannery, Schiller couldn't believe what he now saw. His description of the events had been accurate in every way but one. He had gotten the colours wrong. The black cloth of the blind was not black but blue, the line on the floor was not yellow but white, and the chair was not black but dark green. He realized that during the execution something had altered in his perception of colour (p.992).

The execution scene is the moment at which for 'the first time... it became real a man was about to be killed' (p.977), but it is at precisely the existential epiphany of the final seconds of a man's life that the realist aesthetic breaks down. Concerns about reliable narration are aggravated by the sheer number of focalizers in the text. In his seminal study of narrative, Genette reminds us to pose the critical questions '*who speaks?*' and '*who sees?*'²⁷ The answer to these questions in *The Executioner's Song* is 'almost everybody'. Although the execution itself lasts only ten pages, it is seen from seven separate points of view. Alongside Schiller there are two lawyers, a sheriff, Gary's uncle, a counsellor and a priest and each

²⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983).

hones in on different details from the warmth of the condemned man's final handshake, to the surreal theatricality of proceedings and the deafening blast of the rifles. Following the execution, the emotional recoil of over twenty different characters is relayed in short fragments again over the space of ten pages. Across the thousand-page text the reader encounters over one hundred distinct focalizers. Whilst many of Mailer's sentences are indebted to Hemingway's style, the structure of *The Executioner's Song* with its epic scale, prodigious cast including historical figures, multiple genre codes and inclusion of newspaper clippings is modelled on Dos Passos's epic trilogy *U.S.A* (1937). This is not an arbitrary aesthetic choice. The form of the novel reflects the suturing of punishment practices within the intricate fabric of social relations. Gilmore's crime and punishment is weaved together with the lives of lovers, family and friends, working class communities in Utah, national and local legal systems and media grids, religious institutions and subcultures (the Mormon and Catholic Church and New Age mysticism) and political factions (including the NAACP and the Utah Coalition against the Death Penalty). Writing about the 'hip' perspective, Mailer insisted that subjects need to be 'seen more as a vector in a network of forces than as a static character in a crystallized field'.²⁸ By positioning Gilmore within a network of forces, Mailer undermines the dominant punitive ideology which seeks to erase structural determinants and isolate individuals as responsible agents.

The heteroglossia of *The Executioner's Song* is dialectically inclusive, but the Prince of Truth is lost in the crowd. Notable absences from the chorus of voices are Mailer and Gilmore: the normally vocal author imposes a strict silence on himself and the reader rarely gets unmediated access to Gilmore's interiority. The condemned man is dead centre without being central and ultimately eludes a panoptic web of speculative gazes. Near the beginning, when Gary takes a job at an insulation plant, he eats lunch on his own: 'just sat on a piece of machinery off to the side and ate the food in all the presence of his own thoughts. Nobody knew what he was thinking' (p.55). As the moment of death moves closer the reader is taken further away from Gilmore's thoughts and our reliance on third-parties means that 'Gary Gilmore' is shattered in a prism of perspectives. Mailer's literary cubism willfully cultivates contradiction. On the one hand, Gilmore might be valorized as a class hero. In his introduction to Jack Abbott's prison autobiography, *In the Belly of the Beast*, Mailer proclaimed that '[n]ot only the worst of the young are sent to prison, but the best - that is, the

²⁸ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster' in *Advertisements for Myself*, p.348.

proudest, the bravest, the most daring, the most enterprising, and the most undefeated of the poor.²⁹ On the other hand, whilst posing a subversive challenge to the authority of the judiciary, Gilmore might also be vilified as a class traitor who sold out his peers on Death Row for blood money and a short stint in the media spotlight. There is compelling evidence to suggest that Gilmore is simply a narcissistic and manipulative murderer, but certain of his features also match Mailer's photo-fit for the 'philosophical psychopath'.³⁰ Alternately classified in Mailerian mythology as the 'hipster' or 'white negro', this is an existentialist rebel who discovers their being on the brink of nothingness. Gilmore chooses to embrace death rather than resign himself to the living death of a life sentence in prison. Within the context of a bland, sterile and repressed Mormon culture, Gilmore embodies the spontaneous nonconformity of the subject who embraces sex, violence and creativity and attempts to find their own unique style rather than simply following a social script. Art is central to this process of self-creation and Gilmore is repeatedly associated with writing and the visual arts. He composes letters and poetry and reads widely including the work of counter-cultural icons such as Ginsberg, Kerouac and Kesey. He sketches and paints and alludes to the work of Michelangelo, Bernini and Van Gogh. Mailer's portrait of the artist as a condemned man concludes with Gilmore's final gesture just after he has been shot: he lifts the hand with which he committed his crimes with, according to Schiller, a movement 'as delicate as the fingers of a pianist raising his hand before he puts it down on the keys' (p.986). Previously, watching Gilmore perform for the cameras in the courtroom, Schiller was struck by his star persona: 'Everybody in that crowded, steaming, incandescent room fixed on him. He drew all eyes, all lenses. Schiller was now twice impressed with Gilmore as an actor... the kind of acting that makes you forget you are in the theatre' (p.675). Adding the performing arts to Gilmore's aesthetic repertoire raises the uncomfortable possibility that what appears to be authentic existentialist rebellion is actually Sartrean bad faith. Gilmore might be impersonating himself for posterity: a condemned man pretending to be a condemned man.

Mailer provides no final verdict on Gilmore. The reader is left hanging between precariously poised possibilities: class hero and traitor, poet and psychopath, victim and villain. Evidence exists to support each case and the hermeneutic and ethical burden of judgement falls to the reader-as-juror. Mailer's refusal to take the stand might be misread as

²⁹ Norman Mailer, 'Introduction' to Jack Henry Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p.xi.

³⁰ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro', p.344.

a failure of commitment. In terms of its content, *The Executioner's Song* is not a strident critique of capital punishment, but the literary execution tells another story. The formal and stylistic complexity of the text engages the reader's participation in aesthetic processes which in themselves foster empathy and critical consciousness. As Sontag reminds us in her seminal essay 'On Style', the content of the form is crucial:

Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world... the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life... All great art induces contemplation, a dynamic contemplation... It is an experience of the qualities or forms of human consciousness.³¹

Circuitous stylistic strategies in *The Executioner's Song* compel the reader's awareness of their active participation in and responsibility for the production of meaning within the literary text and beyond. As Phyllis Frus suggests, Mailer's metafictional experimentation counters 'the consequences of reification with a reflexive conception of art'.³² The social practice of reifying 'criminals' by abstracting them from social and historical processes can be mitigated by aesthetic forms. Ultimately, style is of grave importance in *The Executioner's Song* because it compels us to confront the meanings and mystery of violence and murder in America, thus ensuring that the death sentence of the killing state is not the last word

³¹ Susan Sontag, 'On Style' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p.23.

³² Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, p.179.

The Executioner's Song (1979) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Norman Mailer that depicts the events related to the execution of Gary Gilmore for murder by the state of Utah. It was a finalist for the 1980 National Book Award. The title of the book may be a play on "The Lord High Executioner's Song" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Executioner's Song is the first studio LP released by Canadian speed/thrash metal band Razor in 1985. Most of the tracks on the album were first put to tape on the *Escape the Fire* demo, recorded earlier that year. Track listing. The first episode of the sixth series of BBC sitcom *One Foot in the Grave*. "X-Cutioner's Song", a 1992-1993 *X-Men* crossover story arc. Read more. The Executioner's Song is the 14th episode of Season 10. It aired on February 17, 2015. Dean, Sam and Castiel deal with Cain's (guest star Timothy Omundson) return. Crowley and Rowena (guest star Ruth Connell) continue to grow closer but when Crowley bails on plans with his mother to help the Winchesters, Rowena lets him have it. At a prison in Texas, Tommy Tolliver, a death row inmate, taunts the guard. Later, the lights dim and Cain walks down the hallway. He appears in Tommy's cell where he 5. Mailer, Norman, *The Executioner's Song* (New York: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 23. All further references will be to this edition and are parenthetically cited in the text. 6. On probability, chaos, and order in the contemporary habitus, see Hayles, Katherine N. *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). 7. See Hutcheon, Linda, "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. O'Donnell, Patrick and Davis, Robert Con (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). 8. Norman Mailer tells Gilmore's story--and those of the men and women caught up in his procession toward the firing squad--with implacable authority, steely compassion, and a restraint that evokes the parched landscapes and stern theology of Gilmore's Utah. The Executioner's Song is a trip down the wrong side of the tracks to the deepest sources of American loneliness and violence. It is a towering achievement--impossible to put down, impossible to forget. The Executioner's Song is one of those oxymoronically-named non-fiction novels. In a "Now, the doctor was beside him, pinning a white circle on [Gary] Gilmore's black shirt, and the doctor stepped back." I have no idea how Mailer sustained this style for so long, but he does. Mailer's greatest achievement is his voice. I Love Books Good Books Books To Read My Books Norman Mailer True Crime Books Great Novels Fiction Novels Book Authors. More information Saved by Antiques & Uncommon Treasure. 3. People also love these ideas. Dray Family Grave (texture). Highgate Cemetery, London. Shadow Black Tombstones. Poetry Quotes Words Quotes Me Quotes Sayings Quotes Edgy Quotes Poetry Text The Words Cool Words. [Image] The Laughing Heart. Post with 0 votes and 7676 views. [Image] The Laughing Heart.