The hero as storyteller: Norman Mailer's portrait of Gary Gilmore in The Executioner's Song.

Rosa Palmer Salter

Follow this and additional works at: http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd

Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
THE HERO AS STORYTELLER:
NORMAN MAILER'S
PORTRAIT OF GARY GILMORE
IN
THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG

by
Rosa Palmer Salter

A Thesis
Presented to the Graduate Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University
1981
This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

December 9, 1981
(Date)

Professor in Charge

Chairman of Department
# Table of Contents

Certificate of Approval ........................................ ii
Table of Contents ........................................ iii
Abstract ....................................................... 1

I. Introduction .................................................. 4
II. Gary -- The Pattern Set ...................................... 20
III. The Parables of Power and Powerlessness .................. 34
IV. Of Running a Linn and the Disintegration of Stories .......... 48
V. The Mythologies of Love and Death .......................... 66
VI. Conclusion: A Few More Words on Genre and Merit ........... 97

Selected Bibliography .......................................... 107
Vita ........................................................... 112
The Hero as Storyteller: Norman Mailer's Portrait of Gary Gilmore in The Executioner's Song

Rosa Palmer Salter

Abstract of Thesis:

Common to criticism of the work of Norman Mailer is the assertion that Mailer is a writer in search of a suitable hero for our times. In his recent works, Mailer has tried to create that hero from his own psyche and through his ambitiously stylized prose. However, in The Executioner's Song, his 1979 "true-life novel," Mailer has created a hero from materials outside himself in the character of Gary Gilmore. Although Gilmore was an historical figure, the two-time murderer executed by the State of Utah in 1977 and the first person to die as a result of capital punishment in the United States in more than ten years, Gilmore is also a character in The Executioner's Song. As such, Mailer has presented him as a collection of stories. Some are the stories others tell about him; some are those he tells himself. The thesis examines Gilmore's storytelling behavior and his own stories. It finds that Gilmore uses stories in both authentic and inauthentic ways. He uses stories, for example, to manipulate others, deceive himself, and evade responsibility for his actions. But he also uses stories to help create an identity for himself, communicate with others,
and stave off death. Gilmore makes use of various kinds of stories—parables, fanciful tales that have elements of traditional mythology, and jokes. An examination of Gilmore's storytelling reveals that what is usually termed "truth" is no measure of how effective a story will be in influencing thought or action. The examination also reveals the common motive of all storytelling: to explain reality and give meaning to existence. Because of this latter quality, storytelling—although as morally ambiguous as other activities—can be seen as heroic. Similarly, Gilmore can be seen as heroic because he persists in telling stories. In conclusion, the thesis finds that the emphasis placed on storytelling in the book allows Mailer to break out of what some have seen as a confining style without abandoning a central principle: the premise that "There is finally no way to apprehend complex reality without a fiction."
Then Gilmore laughed, "Shit . . . I like language, but I tell the truth. In jail you rap a lot, you know, to pass the time. Damn near every convict has his little collection of reminiscences, anecdotes, stories, and a person can get sorta practiced at recollecting. You probably got a few yarns you spin on occasion yourself. You know, you go to dinners and different things and, ah, talk to different people, Larry, so you've probably got your favorite little stories yourself. The fact that you tell something more than once to more than one person doesn't make that thing a lie." Gilmore paused. "Larry, I do emphasize things [ . . . ] I've spent a lot of time in the hole, and in the hole, you can't see the guy you're talking to, 'cause he's in the cell next door or down the line from you. So it becomes necessary to [ . . . ] make yourself clear and heard because there might be other conversations going on and a lot of other noise, guards rattling keys and doors. Think about that, you know."

--- The Executioner's Song, p. 850

- 3 -
Introduction

It has become a commonplace of criticism of the writing of Norman Mailer in recent years that Mailer as a novelist is engaged in an impossible task: a search for a representative hero for our times. The task is so trying, critics have asserted, because our times have long since moved beyond not only the traditionally heroic but the last great literary solution to the problem as well, the anti-hero. Socially and culturally fragmented, the times have simply become unheroic. Nonetheless, Mailer has persevered in the task. Consider this evaluation by Laura Adams:

Over the years, Mailer has moved through a series of possible heroes . . . before concluding that the viable hero for our times must be a man in whom the schizophrenic halves of the American psyche, the dream of the extraordinary and the mundane reality can come together. . . . Because we live in an unheroic, deflating age, the hero for our time must be capable of ludicrous self-debasement on the one hand and courageous action on the other. . . . Clearly, the Mailer hero is no Superman but a very human being who on occasion summons up the courage to rise above the beast in himself to outweigh and redeem his failures, although, because he is human, he will fail again. This knowledge is what makes him a whole man and can make America a whole nation.

Some have seen Mailer at attaining this heroic ideal in the creation of Stephen Richard Rojack, the "existential hero" of the novel *An American Dream* and an outgrowth of Mailer's previous formulation of heroism, the hipster of "The White Negro." Adams believes Mailer achieved greatest success when he created his hero from his own psyche in the pioneering journalistic/novelistic work, *The Armies of the Night*.

In his 1979 work, *The Executioner's Song*, billed on its book jacket as another blend of the novel and journalism, Mailer

---


has found—or fashioned—his hero from materials outside himself. Gary Gilmore, the 36-year-old two-time murderer executed by the State of Utah in 1977, the first American to die as a result of capital punishment in more than ten years, emerges from the book as another hero of the type Adams describes: an ambiguous figure who nonetheless gains stature as he strives against great odds. The key to Gilmore as a Mailer hero, however, may be not so much the stature gained as the lingering ambiguity. Because Gilmore is so purposefully ambiguous, Gilmore can be seen as a culmination of much of Mailer's work in character and theme.

As Robert Solotaroff has pointed out, Mailer's chief concern in his work has been ontological—that is, Mailer ultimately has been determined to find, and recreate, the meaning of events as they relate to universal schemes of good and evil. Indeed, Solotaroff contends that Mailer has sometimes overschematized his work—journalistic and fictional—in the quest of portraying his characters as agents of the Devil or the Lord. In fact, Mailer has become bewildered when that revelation of the

---

...moral dimension at the center of things eludes his imagination, as in this "journalistic" description of Richard Nixon in 1968:

[The reporter, Mailer's persona] was left by the television set with the knowledge that for the first time he had not been able to come away with an intimation of what was in a politician's heart, indeed, did not know if he was ready to like Nixon, or detested him for his resolutely nonpoetic binary system, his computer's brain, did not know if the candidate was real as a man, or whole as a machine, lonely in his sad eminence or megalomaniacal, ... a rudder to steer the ship of state or an empty captain above a directionless void, there to loose the fearful nauseas of the century.\(^5\)

The dilemma of Mailer's reporter persona is that he cannot tell if Nixon is "a new and marvellously complex improvement of a devil, or an angel-in-chrysalis"—or significantly, "both."\(^6\)

This latter description of Nixon, asserted by the narrator of \textit{Miami and the Siege of Chicago}, also could be used to describe Gilmore in \textit{The Executioner's Song}, where the ambiguities are dramatized rather than merely asserted. Gilmore is nothing if not a morally inconsistent figure, and this is true despite the constant probings of his personality by himself and others that amount almost to an orgy of absorption in his


\(^6\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 50.
"self." Ultimately he exists as a character without a center, just as he is portrayed as a man without a sense of identity; if a reader comes to The Executioner's Song looking for "the real Gary Gilmore," chances are he still won't find him. This quality of the book has been noted frequently by reviewers, whether they see it as a defect, a strength, or simply a characteristic. It has led one reviewer to complain that:

The reader is left at the end of this exhaustive explanation of the character and destiny of Gary Gilmore unguided by the author and unconfronted with a meaningful shape of existence. Instead, we have a multi-thousand-piece mosaic of bits and pieces of information, signifying nothing, while sentimentally claiming a great deal.  

It has led another reviewer to state that Gilmore, though the "center of the book" is also "the least visible, the least knowable," and it has led a third, Daphne Merkin, to write:

Mailer conspires to leave us wondering, instead of knowing. At the heart of that wonder is Gary Gilmore, about whom we learn a prodigious amount -- sexual predilections (young, very young girls), brand of beer (Coors), favorite authors (Percy Bysshe Shelley, J.P. Donleavy), I.Q. (129), hobbies (reading, drawing, dentistry), dislikes (Blacks, Mormons, psychiatrists) -- without ever fully comprehending his inner mechanics, the emotional synapses, that must have existed between his ability to inspire deep affection in the people


he came in contact with and his ability to shoot
two young men in the head on two successive nights
in July, 1979.9

Reacting to this same sense of ambiguity, Diane Johnson comes to
the conclusion that it is a function of Mailer's cross-genre
approach to his material, an approach she deplores:

The author of a true-life novel tries to have it both ways, to improve the dull,
invent the spicy parts, leave out the inconvenient things. . . . Mailer's crea-
tion of a character, Gary Gilmore, is splendid, but in the long run, it seems
not Gilmore . . . but [Lawrence] Schiller [the book's "producer"] and Mailer who are
congruent sensibilities, projecting on poor crazy Gary a code of Hollywood heroism Gary
couldn't care less about. . . . One can hardly bear to think of the real facts of Gary's
life. . . . It's just that [in the book] you keep wondering which are the true parts.10

The question Johnson raises—how much of The Executioner's
Song can be taken for what is usually referred to as "truth"—is
certainly central to the work. However, that question is finally
unanswerable, because no critic (at present) can have access to the
documents, interviews, and other material that Mailer states he
used in constructing the book.11

9 "Mailer's Cool Killer," The New Leader, 62 (Nov. 19,
1979), p. 17.

10 "Death for Sale," New York Review of Books, 23 (Dec. 6,
1979), pp. 3-4.

11 See Norman Mailer, "An Afterword," The Executioner's
Subsequent references to The Executioner's Song will be cited parenthetically.
But further, any discussion of journalism-vs.-fiction and the novel as antithetical, mutually exclusive opposites may tend to obscure Mailer's method in the work rather than clarify that method.

Such discussions are usually led by two perilously entrenched camps. Those who see Mailer primarily as a novelist tend to believe, as Mailer once stated, that journalism is a secondary, inferior pursuit—that he "diverted" his energies into journalism as part of an egotistical need to serve as a contemporary pundit; that he wished to experiment with vehicles of expression; or that he needed the money that these occasional pieces provided. Indeed, one of the most scathing reviews of The Executioner's Song dismissed the book on just such grounds—that Mailer earned enough from it to "put his feet up and eat bonbons for some time to come." On the other hand, those who try to treat Mailer primarily as a journalist, even a New Journalist, must finally concede that he "blend[s] the empirical eye of the reporter with the moral vision of the novelist."  

---


13 Adams, Existential Battles, pp. 11, 2-4, 7-8.


15 Hollowell, p. 10.
A phrase such as "moral vision," however, implies the dimension of Mailer suggested by Solotaroff's insistence on ontology and Adams' search for the heroic and so emphasizes one important point about much of Mailer's work, but particularly about his cross-genre writing: both the search for meaning and the heroic are the stuff of myth.

It is in this way that The Executioner's Song can best be understood—as myth, a genre that uses history and fiction to transcend both and is ultimately concerned with the meaning of events. By considering the book as myth, one sees the relationship between fiction and journalism in the book become clearer: fiction is the method and history, the raw material of journalism, provides the material. History may be, perhaps, the more important of the two. There would be no Iliad, for example, without the historical fall of Troy, and no American Horatio Alger myth without true-life self-made men. Journalism, of course, has a more direct connection to fiction as well, since it relies not only on the empirical eye but also on repeated stories, constructions by either reporters themselves or other witnesses of events who actually use the techniques of fiction in their creation.

Several reviewers of The Executioner's Song have noted that mythology may be at work in the book, although they have stated that recognition only peripherally. Johnson, for example, treats Mailer's mythologizing urge very negatively. She believes
that Mailer has merely projected his own mythic meaning on the words and acts of decent, if basically ignorant, people, actually exploiting and trivializing them, even as he intends to ennoble them. Mailer's writing, she states, "in the service of a private . . . mythology . . . takes over their words and thoughts while they are still around to speak for themselves, leaving them, as it were, without words, and diminishes their humanity."  

Johnson continues:

No one has mythologized Son of Sam, so fat and creepy. You wonder if Gary Gilmore had looked less like a cowboy this book would have been written. It does have sweep and . . . power, but in the long run, it is a kind of socialist-realist ballet, where the redneck killers are recognizable by their bandanas and the nymphs by the "couple of bruises on those juicy thighs," characters Mailer has assembled before. He seems to have grafted an Eastern urban dream of the Wild West, complete with six-packs and pickup trucks on . . . Gary and Nicole . . . and one can only wish to know how it really was.  

Johnson's version of the myth involved is overstated, but that she recognizes this dimension of the book is significant. The dividing line between fiction and journalism traditionally has been that so-called "empirical writing" has held

17 Ibid., p. 6.
a "commitment to mimesis, or . . . representations of experience"\(^{18}\) while fictional writing deals with causality which can include inversion of time and space.\(^{19}\) Mailer, however, seems to find meaning and experience basically inseparable. He believes that individuals constantly create meanings, constantly interpret the raw data of experience. Those interpretations in turn color all that can be known of that experience and are certainly all that can be recorded. This dimension, exploited by Mailer, is especially overlooked by journalists and traditional historians who so often present memory as fact. Here are some of Mailer's remarks on this subject, taken from "The Political Economy of Time" in \textit{Cannibals and Christians}:

Memory is the mind's embodiment of form; therefore memory, like the mind, is invariably more pure than the event. An event consists not only of forces which are opposed to one another, but also forces which have no relation to the event. Whereas memory has a tendency to retain only the oppositions and the context. . . . Form is the physical equivalent of memory.\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\) Hollowell, p. 11.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 18. Hollowell uses as the basis for his discussion the distinction drawn by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in \textit{The Nature of Narrative} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 11-16.

In other words, the human mind creates meaning out of the chaos and oppositions of experience and remembers that experience in light of its meaning. That experience and its meaning then emerge in some kind of "form." For Mailer, that form is a literary one, as it has been for many down through the ages; for him meanings emerge through "stories," in other words, as myth.

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's discussion of the nature of myth may be helpful here. A myth, they write, "is a traditional plot which can be transmitted." In effect, Mailer does just such a transmission in The Executioner's Song. The plot of Gilmore's story is already familiar to contemporary readers, largely because of the journalistic media coverage of the events surrounding Gilmore's death. Mailer cannot alter that plot; he must remain true to it, just as it was necessary for earlier storytellers to remain true to their stories—storytellers "whose primary allegiance [was] not to fact, not to truth, not to "entertainment, but to the mythos itself." Scholes and Kellogg also discuss the reason and purpose for myths—the bringing of significance to the empirical world, the transcendence and synchronization of historical time with what they call "sacred time." Myth "is the vehicle through which human actions are felt

---

21The Nature of Narrative, p. 12.

22Ibid., p. 11.
to acquire significance . . . . Man's strongest impulse is not to destroy the empirical world, rather it is to transform it into the mythical world, to regain Eden in this life, and to synchronize, once and for all, mythical and empirical reality," according to Scholes and Kellogg.

Richard D. Finholt is one of the few critics to recognize Mailer's mythmaking abilities and intentions. In his essay "Otherwise How Explain: Mailer's New Cosmology," he argues that Mailer is reinventing the structure of the universe and its meaning in much the same way as the Elizabethans invented the Great Chain of Being. In that essay, Finholt also states the following: "Modern mathematics cannot say why its laws work, it cannot even suggest how they work; it can only describe what happens when they work." So, Finholt argues, man always will be confronted by inexplicable phenomena needing myths—to pick up where science and "modern mathematics," our contemporary explicators of reality, leave off.

But so is it also with myths themselves. For although the purpose of myth is to explain the phenomena of daily existence,

---

23 Ibid. p. 135.
24 Will the Real, p. 87.
it too has its limits, and, as with "modern mathematics," its limits lie in its lingering ambiguity. Even myth cannot explain everything. In other words, Mailer's choice of genre may demand the ambiguity that his detractors see as a defect.

One way, then, of considering The Executioner's Song is as a collection of stories that together form Mailer's version of the meaning of Gary Gilmore's saga. But it is not necessarily accurate or fair to say, as Johnson has done, that Mailer projected his own myth upon the individuals who lived out Gary Gilmore's story unless one also realizes that Mailer's projection is just one of many projections by nearly every character in the work. Even Gilmore himself is engaged in trying to project meanings upon his own experience. Such projections are not necessarily a sign of immorality but may be instead a sign of moral vitality since they represent attempts to define experience.

Gary Gilmore may have been an historical figure, but he is also the central character in The Executioner's Song. As such, Mailer has presented him as a collection of stories. That may be one reason that Gilmore seems so elusive, so without a center. Some of these are stories he tells himself about himself; some are the stories that others tell about him, influenced by their own acceptance of public myths or their own personal stories.
Finally, there is the story or myth that Mailer makes of Gilmore as a whole, influenced by his own literary and philosophical constructs—his own myths. The latter two categories lie basically beyond the scope of this paper, and, of course, none of the categories can be clearly demarcated or be considered mutually exclusive because Mailer is the organizing presence of the entire work. But by drawing them, one can better understand two of Mailer's few comments about the book. In one interview, Mailer claimed that the book was not journalism but actually a novel because it attempted to deal with "the unearthliness of common events"; that it is, perhaps, about experience's ability to seem supernatural, to suggest meanings beyond itself.

Second, in the book's afterword, Mailer writes:

This book does its best to be a factual account of the activities of Gary Gilmore and the men and women who associated with him in the period from April 9, 1976, when he was released from the United States Penitentiary at Marion, Ill., until his execution a little more than nine months later in Utah State Prison. . . . [T]he story is as accurate as one can make it. This does not mean it has come a great deal closer than the recollections of

---

25 Death in the West," The Economist, 274 (Nov. 17, 1979), p. 127. No author of the review in which Mailer is quoted is listed.
the witnesses. . . . Of course, two accounts of the same episode would sometimes diverge. In such conflict, the author chose the version that seemed most likely. It would be vanity to assume he was always right.26

These two seemingly contradictory statements can be reconciled in this way. If recollections, "stories," are all that is left of events, then stories "become" the "facts." "There is finally no way," as Mailer has written, "to apprehend complex reality without a fiction."27 The Executioner's Song can "explain" Gary Gilmore only by recounting all of the tales.

Thus, Gilmore himself can comprehend his own "complex reality" only by telling his own stories. Gilmore's stories take various forms in The Executioner's Song. Sometimes they take the form of concise, yet elaborate, parables, which allow his listeners to supply their own meanings and Gilmore to encapsulate the pith of his experience. Gilmore also builds an elaborate structure of story around his experiences with love and death—stories which come close to traditional mythology in their purpose and in their fabulous elements. As his execution nears, after the murders, Gilmore makes increasing use of another kind of specialized story—the joke. As much as

26 The Executioner's Song, p. 1051. Emphasis mine.

anything else in this complex mosaic of a work, Gilmore's stories are the means to his elusive "center" or at least the key to the ambiguities that Mailer exploits in *The Executioner's Song*. 
Gary—The Pattern Set

Before leaving work that night, Spencer had asked if he [Gilmore] had gotten his driver's license yet. Gary said that Oregon still hadn't sent it over. Something about how they couldn't find the license. The story was one darn thing after another. (128)

The Executioner's Song opens with a story. In one crisp paragraph, echoing the language and cadences of the Bible, Mailer places the tale he is about to tell within the largest possible context—immediately forcing the reader into the realm of myth:

Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother's best crop, and it was forbidden to climb in the orchard. She helped him drag away the tree limb, and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary. (5)

The story here, of course, is the central myth of Western civilization, the Fall of Man—and Gary and Brenda can be seen as no less than a latter-day Adam and Eve who strive, sin, and are ashamed. That may seem a large symbolic burden to bear for two practically preschool, unobservant Mormons on a family picnic in a story casually told some thirty-odd years after the event. Nonetheless, that the passage should suggest such bald symbolism is quintessential Mailer, a characteristic of his work.
noted again and again by his critics. As John Hollowell has written, "One paradox of Mailer's nonfiction novels is that despite their everyday realism, they frequently lead him to find mythic patterns of experience."¹ Or, as Michael Johnson contends, not only does Mailer recognize existing myths in experience, he also tries to create the mythic dimension in his own work through patterns of action and, especially, language. Mailer's writing, Johnson states, demonstrates "the ability to recreate the psychological ambience of an event" and is "frequently poetic, and that poetic quality is . . . a kind of electricity to charge the described events with the significance and energy they had when originally experienced and to transform them into a central mythology of the present age."² In either case, Mailer "always suggests more than he asserts."³

That power of suggestion is the consummate attainment of storytelling—the ancient art that is, at its roots, nothing more than the simple recitation of "one darn thing after another" (128). It is an art that Gary Gilmore, psychopathic killer and

¹Between Fact and Fiction, p. 120.

²"Norman Mailer: Journalist," in Will the Real, pp. 174-75, 177.

³Hollowell, p. 95.
death-row convict, had mastered long before he became, via stories about him in the media, "a household name to half of America" (503). Gilmore, at least as Mailer portrays him in The Executioner's Song, is one of the most compulsive storytellers of all time. There is hardly a significant occasion in the book that does not call forth a telling of stories. When Gilmore first gets out of jail on parole, one of the first things he does is to tell some of his "prison stories" (16; see also, 32-33, 37). When he first meets Nicole Barrett, who will become his lover and common-law wife, the two tell each other stories about their pasts and exchange beliefs and dreams (77-78, 83, 89-91). When Lt. Gerald Nielsen, who captures Gilmore after the murders, obtains a confession of them, he and Gilmore first exchange stories about themselves (286-87). Gilmore and his cell-mate Gibbs become friends after they swap crime stories and indulge in a "con mythology" so rich that it even includes its own language (353-59). Finally, Gilmore's relationships with his lawyers, producer Lawrence Schiller, and writer Barry Farrell—which occupy the bulk of the second half of the book—are all based on Gilmore's ability to reconstruct the story of his murders and past life and his ability to tell the story of his present life as he faces his impending death.

Why all this storytelling? In The Executioner's Song, storytelling is portrayed as one of the most basic of human
activities, and the book itself becomes a compendium of the
types, uses, and abuses of stories. (It might even be said
that in the book, the ways people use stories and relate to
storytelling by others become the means by which the reader
comes to judge their moral worth.) Through the book, the
reader comes to see a person's stories as the apparatus of his

4 Reviewers have recognized the storytelling component
of the work. See especially, Hugh Kenner, "To Die in Deseret,"
cit., pp. 57-58; Walter Karp, "Making a Killing," Esquire, 91
(Dec. 1979), pp. 25-26, and Joan Didion, "'I Want to Go Ahead and
Do It.': The Executioner's Song," New York Times Book Review,
(Oct. 7, 1979), pp. 1-2. Didion and Karp state they hear the
"voices" of the work's many characters; Didion, in an interest-
ingly subjective observation, notes the female voices. Kenner
notes Gilmore's special lure: "He [Gilmore] has, or lets it
be perceived that he has, a coherent story" (p. 230). On the
whole, Morgan's review is the most perceptive. He recognizes
Mailer's juggling of various voices, individual and collective,
in the work, and he attempts to relate Mailer's method in
The Executioner's Song to Mailer's earlier writing. Unfortunately,
Morgan allows a stance against capital punishment to tilt his
treatment of why Gilmore wants to die to the side of con-
gamesmanship; Morgan does not seem to sense an alternative
motive—that Gilmore was not playing a game or testing the
system at all but rather was insisting on a satisfactory ending
to his own story.

5 Brought immediately to mind is Schiller, whose moral
worth is determined almost entirely by how he handles Gilmore's
story. Schiller is at his most despicable when he lies about his
past to Gilmore to get Gilmore's sympathy during Schiller's last
interview with the convict—all the while allowing Barry Farrell
to eavesdrop on a conversation Gilmore believes is private (932-
33). Schiller is perhaps at his most admirable when he recognizes
the importance of an authentically told tale: "For the first
time, Schiller, you can't fictionalize. You can't embroider"
(859). After this statement to himself, Schiller refuses to sell
the story to the highest bidder, as had been his past practice.
personhood, as intensely personal possessions which explain the world to oneself and also provide a means of communication with others. The book also demonstrates that stories have power in and of themselves—they can, in other words, affect other people's emotions and actions—and that the power of story can be abused.

A voracious reader of stories while he is in prison, Gilmore himself is depicted as understanding these qualities of stories well enough to use them in several ways. He can, for example, "run a line" with the best of con-men and fast-talking hustlers—that is, use a story, not necessarily a true one, in order to get his own way or evade responsibility for his actions. He is also not above "bullshitting"—"reciting out his hind end" (16) as his cousin Brenda rather indelicately puts it—if he thinks it is likely to enhance his image. Both techniques involve manipulation—not only of the reality upon which the stories are based, but also of the people to whom the stories are told. In fact, few of Gilmore's stories about himself do not involve some kind of manipulation. Nonetheless, through these stories the reader also sees Gilmore trying to explain his circumstances—to come to terms with himself, to connect with others, and, finally, to stave off death. Stories, therefore, can be seen as an important part of Gilmore's search for identity.
Jennifer Bailey defines Mailer's approach to this search in this way:

Mailer explores the discrepancy that seems to exist between the individual and the world. . . . Mailer tries to resolve this dilemma by developing the idea that identity is always a fiction in so far as it depends on a constantly changing milieu for its definition. . . . Advertisements for Myself [for example] was a breakthrough in that Mailer made himself a protagonist whose identity is a complex of roles that are triggered . . . by a variety of contexts, both autobiographical and cultural.  

Bailey calls this sort of approach "Mailer's fiction of the shifting identity" or "radical fictionalizing," and she sees it as the enduring hallmark of Mailer's talent as a writer.  

I believe Mailer has used this technique, modified somewhat, in his presentation of Gilmore's character—making Gilmore the one who seeks to create and recreate an identity through the various stories he tells about himself in various circumstances.  

---

6 Quick-Change Artist, p. 5.  
7 Ibid., p. 6.  
8 Gilmore's identity, his sense of self, though tentative, is portrayed as being very important to him. An example of an incident in which this characteristic comes into play is Gilmore's conversation with his brother Mikal (846-47). Mikal has written Gilmore a letter that describes the meaning of life as Mikal sees it. (The message, ironically, has come via CBS's Bill Moyers, it is later revealed [847].) Mikal writes: "In life was where one found redemption, not death" (847). Gilmore responds with the meaning of life as he sees it (via Nietzsche): "A time comes when a man should rise to meet the occasion. That's what I'm trying to do, Mikal." (847). Gilmore then speaks
But much of the time, Gilmore finds he has a problem with those stories and storytelling itself—a limited repertoire. Having been in prison for eighteen of his thirty-five-odd years, he finds he doesn't have much experience on which to draw for even the best-motivated of his verbal art. The stories he tells before the murders, his relatives find "awfully gross" (34), for example. As a result, most of Gilmore's listeners before the murders can't relate to the stories he tells, and he, similarly, can't relate to theirs (see especially 21, 37-38); the situation is once referred to (with understated, black humor) as Gilmore's "conversational problem" (38). No single explanation can sufficiently account for Gilmore's murders—or, later, his decision not to fight his state-ordered execution—but the two acts can be seen, on one level, as an attempt to tell, in action itself, an authentic story. 9

9 Gilmore's motto is "Do it!" and it is introduced early (23, 40). His final remark (or is it?; see pp. 984-85, 992) is "Let's do it." The remarks place him in a long line of Mailer hipsters and psychopaths. See Mailer's comments on the psychopath's innate ability to act out his desires in Adv., pp. 346-47. The phrase, "Let's do it" is also identified with Nicole (90).
Before looking at the stories Gilmore tells himself, one should examine the book's first story, which might be titled, "Gary and Brenda in the Utah Garden of Eden." Richly suggestive, the story outlines Mailer's intentions in his ambiguous characterization of Gilmore, and the story also introduces the reader to Mailer's mythic context in the work as a whole. The story also introduces two themes that underlie many of Gilmore's stories about himself: power, the assertion of ego, and escape, the evasion of the consequences of one's actions.

From this first story, it is easy to see why Brenda is willing to sponsor Gilmore's parole. Besides their blood relationship, the pair's personalities have much in common. Brenda, the reader is later told, doesn't mind "a few waves in her life" (9); she, like Gilmore, likes taking chances. In this story, she has done just that. By climbing to the top of the forbidden tree, Brenda has asserted her six-year-old's ego in defiance of

---

10. The story is apparently told by Brenda about Gary, just as most of what the reader learns about Gilmore is learned through stories about him told by others. The word "recollection" used in the telling (5) intimates that the story is not reality as experienced but reality "rearranged" to make it show forth its mythic meaning. The story is therefore a function of memory. As her "first recollection" of Gary, the story has assumed a special place in her consciousness; it colors her whole relationship to Gilmore and his "meaning" in her life. The first story, therefore, sets up the process by which a person develops one's personal mythology and makes it clear that what Mailer is relying on in constructing the book is redactions of portions of those personal mythologies.
family rules and common-sense dictates of safety: she is clearly a guilty party. But at six or close to thirty-five, it is apparently part of Brenda's makeup to take such risks and hope she won't get caught. At thirty-five she is conversant with both guilt and the need of the guilty for second chances: "She could feel awfully sympathetic to somebody who had been boxed-in. 'He's paid his dues,' she told Johnny [her husband], 'and I want to bring him home'"(9).

This later development of Brenda's character is in line with other suggestions raised in the first story's Eden-like setting. The setting brings to mind not only the first Eden but also the New Edens of America itself and even of the Mormon settlers' Kingdom of Deseret. It underscores the particularly American myth (or dream, perhaps) of the second chance, and it brings to mind the heroes of those myths. Is Mailer going to make Gilmore another Natty Bumppo, the glamorized "man who turns his back on white society. A man who keeps his moral integrity hard and intact. An isolate, almost selfless stoic . . . the

\[11\] Mailer's title of the first half of the work, "Western Voices," further underscores that this is an American work that pits the frontier against the corrupt, corporate, and legalistic East of the second half, "Eastern Voices." (The titles also suggest that the first half of the work is about Western civilization's myth of meaning through an active domination of nature and fate while the second half deals with the Oriental, Eastern ideal of meaning through passive harmony with nature and mystical acceptance of fate.)
very intrinsic, most American"?\(^{12}\) The tendency might be to portray Gilmore as a Romantic rebel on a journey to Mailer's own realm of the "violent and the perfumed."\(^{13}\) On the other hand, there is a second possibility raised by the story's suggestion of the Biblical Eden. The Eden story of the Bible basically portrays man as a victim of forces that he cannot control, despite his free will. This portrayal of man can also be seen as having a traditionally American counterpart. The heroes of American literary realism and naturalism (or, for that matter, much of the New Journalism for the past two decades) are often victims of a System that beats them in the end. To an extent, these are the poles of expectation against which the reader measures Mailer's actual treatment of Gilmore.

When one examines the first story, however, one finds that Gilmore's role in it is quite complex. First, he is described in equivocal language that suggests him as both a savior figure (he "caught" Brenda, keeping her from falling) and as a judge (he also "caught" her in the act of breaking the branch; that is, he discovered her sin). Yet, as he helps Brenda evade punishment by taking the lead in dragging away the tree limb, he abandons the former god-like role to become an accomplice in sin and evasion, hiding like Adam with Eve in the Garden.

\(^{12}\)D.H. Lawrence, as quoted in Hollowell, p. 63.

Further, there is a twist to Mailer's version of this Eden myth. There is no snake in this garden. The snake, however, appears later, in one of Gilmore's parables about himself—one which, significantly, closes the section of the book Mailer entitles "Gary," the same section which the Eden story opens:

The worst story Gary ever told came back to her now. One night, in Brenda's living room, he couldn't stop laughing as he told about a tattoo he put once on a convict named Fungoo.

"He was strong and dumb," said Gary, "and he loved me. One time when we were in Isolation, Fungoo was on the cleaning detail, and so he was able to walk by my cell. Damn if he didn't ask me to do a rosebud on the back of his neck. I took out my needle and my india ink, and instead of a rosebud, tattooed a real skinny little dick on him and peanut-sized balls. . . . When he found out what I'd done, he went crazy." . . . Now he laughed so hard he almost fell off the couch.

"But Fungoo was so dumb he couldn't get mad at me. Came back and said, 'Gary, I can't go around with a pecker on my neck.'

"'Okay,' I told him, 'I'll make it into a snake.' Only I got inspired and made it into a big three-headed cock. It had the ugliest warts you ever laid eyes on. I couldn't hardly keep from laughing all the while I was doing it. 'Make sure it's a nice snake,' Fungoo kept saying." Right there in their living room the memory was still living in his veins. 'Oh,' I said, 'I believe this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.'

'When Fungoo finally got to see it with a mirror, he went into shock. Couldn't even hit me. We'd had some hash smuggled into Isolation, and he decided I was bombed out of my
head. He blamed the weed, not me. The last time I saw him, he had tattooed a giant rattlesnake all over his neck to cover the three pricks. He didn't trust anybody by then, so he done it himself with soot and water." Brenda and Johnny's smiles had become as congealed as the grease on a cold steak.

"Guess that's an ugly story, huh," said Gary. "Yeah," he said, "a couple of times I got to feel real bad about it. It sure fucked up Fungoo's world. I guess I must have racked up real bad Karma on that one [. . .] but couldn't resist." He sighed. (67-68)

This is an example of Gilmore's parables about himself, and, like the story of Gary and Brenda in the Utah Garden of Eden, it is about ego and evasion. No devil or distinct, exterior evil power tempts Gilmore into misusing Fungoo in this story, just as no devil prompted the children in the earlier story. Instead, despite the ties of family and friendship, love and trust, the sinners just "couldn't resist" (68). The point here seems to be that the egocentric need for power over others and the urge to take advantage of others' trust are inborn—Mailer's version, perhaps, of original sin. If there is an evil power loose in the world, then it resides within the individual.\(^{14}\) Similarly, basic is the reaction to sin, which is not honest.

---

\(^{14}\) See, for example, Kenner: "The secret is very likely that there was no secret. All that's to be said is that . . . Gary Gilmore simply killed. . . . I suspect that Norman Mailer knows this: the truth that is written in all his thousand of margin-to-margin white spaces [is] . . . that the heart of man is very often desperately wicked" (p. 231).
confession but evasive denial. The children "hope no one will notice," and they drag away the broken tree limb; Gilmore does not contradict Fungoo's inclination to make allowances and "blame the weed, not me." Interestingly, storytelling also plays a part in Gilmore's evasion of the consequences of his action in the parable. Gilmore maintains Fungoo's trust by telling Fungoo that the tattoo is "the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" (67), playing on the obscene meaning of "thing"; he is not necessarily lying, but he is misusing the power of story.

Mailer, through the coupling of the Garden of Eden story and the Fungoo story through the image of the snake, allusion, and placement, here treats instinctual rebellion, which he has celebrated previously in works such as "The White Negro," An American Dream, and The Armies of the Night, in a way that stresses its more negative aspects. In both these stories, Gilmore does not so much rebel against something unjust, stifling, or morally corrupt as he merely rebels, asserting his ego out of some inherent urge towards sin: "He [Gilmore] had, Spencer [McGrath, Gilmore's boss] decided, an awfully large ego" (192). What Gilmore rebels against, in the

---


- 32 -
Fungoo story, at least, is actually justice and morality itself—the standards and the inhibitions that make civilization possible in the first place and that protect the weak from the strong, the dumb from the clever, and that allow human honesty and trust. (No reason is given why Gilmore should have wanted to misuse Fungoo, save for the fact that "he was strong and dumb.") Although Gilmore feels momentary remorse and pity for his victim after the event, he nonetheless takes as the "meaning" of this story the fact that he "couldn't resist" his exploitative urges. The sigh at the end of the storytelling may be a sign that Gilmore does not demonically take delight in the act, or it may mean that he is simply puzzled by it, or it may mean that he accepts the act as the way things are if not the way things should be; the sigh, together with Gilmore's remark that he fears the consequences of his action on himself ("real bad Karma") shows urges toward some kind of morality. But his chief reaction to the memory "still living in his veins" like an opiate drug is unrepentent, distancing laughter at the powerlessness of his victim—laughter, in other words, at his victim's expense. Brenda may see the six-year-old Gary as a hero, and the naive Fungoo may love him. But Gilmore's relation of such a story about himself clearly forces the reader from the start to see that Mailer will make much of deep contradictions and ambiguities in his portrayal of Gilmore's character.
The Parables of Power
and Powerlessness

Now Gary also told everybody about this black dude he killed in jail who had been trying to make a nice white kid his punk. The kid asked Gary for help, so he and another buddy got ahold of some pipes. They had to. The convict they were taking on was a bad nigger, and had been a professional fighter, but they caught him on a stairway and beat him half to death with the pipes. Then they put him in his cell and stabbed him with a homemade knife 57 times.

Rikki [Baker, Nicole's cousin] thought the story was talk. By telling it to everybody, Gary was just trying to make himself look big. Still, that didn't leave Rikki feeling comfortable. Any fellow that wanted to live on such a story could hardly back down if he wanted to lean on you, and you pushed back. (55)

For Rikki Baker, master bullshitter (see especially 39-40), stories may be just "talk," but the notation in this passage that people do indeed "live on" stories—coupled with the power of a story to "live in [one's] veins" noted in the story of Fungoo—points to the importance of stories as part of an individual's identity. The story of Fungoo is one of Gilmore's first stories of self-definition, stories that he tells over and over again to specific, different audiences to explain himself and his past. The stories are always about power—either the uses of power or the fear of being powerless.
Included in the first category—stories about the uses of power—are what Brenda calls Gilmore's "prison stories" (37): the story of Fungoo, the story of Skeezix the pervert (37-38), the story of the hammer attack (33) and the story of the 57-times stabbing (noted above). Also in this category is the story of the curling-iron robbery, although the event took place before Gilmore's prison term (141).

The story of Skeezix, like the story of Fungoo, depicts Gilmore preying on the basically defenseless for his own amusement or ego gratification, as he pretends to take a photograph of Skeezix as he performs fellatio on himself. The damage inflicted by this predatory action is apparently minimal: "Skeezix was so dumb he was still waiting for the pictures to come back" (38). In the story of Fungoo, the damage is apparently psychological, and greater: "He [Fungoo] didn't trust anybody by that time ... it sure fucked up Fungoo's world" (67). The audience for both these stories is Gilmore's relatives, Brenda and/or Johnny, and the stories seem to be told for their humorous value, in an attempt to establish an emotional kinship with the pair through humor. Ironically, Brenda's reaction to them is that "... they were crude. Gary could tell an awfully gross story" (37).

The next two stories involve much more serious consequences—physical damage to the victims, and, Gilmore
says, death. Yet Gilmore depicts himself in an inflated, almost
heroic role in both stories, someone who works out a kind of
primitive prison justice through the violence: "LeRoy was my
personal friend . . . when I got out [of Isolation], this buddy
of mine gave me a little toy hammer to wear on a chain and nick-
named me Hammersmith" (33). In the hammer attack, Gilmore
allegedly avenges a beating of a fellow inmate, LeRoy, by LeRoy's
pusher, to whom the convict is in debt; in the stabbing story,
Gilmore avenges his victim's perverted sexual coercion of another
inmate. However, the details of both attacks show a cowardly
approach to the victim and a degree of violence far beyond what
might be considered justified in the world outside prison. In
each case, the victim, weaponless, was approached from behind by
someone with a weapon. In the case of the stabbing, there are
two attackers and just one victim, and the attack is made in a
place without egress, a stairwell.  

Gilmore seems to tell these stories out of bravado. He
tells the hammer-attack story to Sterling and Marie Baker, for

1Gilmore later retracts the remark in being interviewed
by Bob Moody:

MOODY: The next question has been asked a number
of times. Have you ever killed anyone before Bushnell
and Jensen? [. . .] How about that guy you beat with a
pipe?
GILMORE: He lived. (sigh) Kind of altered his
life, though. (870)

2Compare Gilmore's approach to Pete Galovan (124) and
Gilmore's Uncle Vern's reaction to it (325).
example, after Gilmore's Uncle Vern tells him it might be a good idea for Gilmore to start looking for another job because Vern is having trouble dealing with Gilmore at Vern's shoe-repair shop. The stabbing story is told three times: to Rikki Baker during a poker game (Gilmore is vulnerable because he habitually cheats at the games) (55), to coworker Craig Taylor after Gilmore takes on Pete Galovan (127), and to Spencer McGrath, Gilmore's boss, after Gilmore has violated parole by stealing a pair of water skis. These are all occasions when Gilmore's vulnerability is at the fore; his stories are rightly interpreted by his listeners as attempts to enhance his image.

The final story, that of the curling-iron robbery, seems to be Gilmore's own moral measuring-stick. It is the ugliest story of all. But it is important to note that Gilmore stresses that he did not perform the action that the story describes; he was only the accomplice to the man who used the hot iron to attack the owner of a grocery store during a robbery. Gilmore's audience for this story is Nicole; it is as if he is telling her that what he has done so far in their relationship—shoplifting—is not so bad when compared to this act of purely sadistic, gratuitous violence.

Mailer makes an interesting disclaimer here in light of the reportage-vs.-fiction debate: "Today Gary began to speak of prison. Now and again he would go on about that. This may have been one of those days" (127). (Emphasis mine) It is useful for Mailer's characterization for it to have been "one of those days"; therefore, it is!
Nicole's reaction to this story is important. It is laughter: "She couldn't help herself. She laughed. The story got way in. . . . Her laughter reached to the place where she hated people who had a lot of things and acted hot shit about it" (142). Nicole laughs at the story because she senses how a metaphor (acting "hot shit") has been literalized in the story; how, in fact, the action of Gilmore's accomplice is symbolically just (if in actuality horrific), as the shopkeeper in the story comes to represent all people who "had a lot of things" (142). The placement of this story and Nicole's reaction to it show Nicole—who consciously has begun to hate Gilmore, as is noted both before and after the storytelling passage—unconsciously bonding herself to him through the laughter, as is emphasized by the mixed sexual/anal imagery of penetration used both in the story itself and her reaction to the story. Although Nicole realizes that "Whenever something bothered him [Gilmore], he got brave . . . In the beginning it had been fun . . . [but] now she had to notice that if anything went wrong he'd steal to cheer them up" (140-41) and that "More and more . . . it was like she had two souls and one of them loved Gary a lot less than the other" (142), it is as if unconsciously Nicole has discovered that she, too, shares Gilmore's violent and resentful urges. It is as if she understands the need to assert power, even retaliatory power, over others, although she apparently feels constraints
that Gilmore does not feel. Significantly, Nicole does not leave Gilmore at this point, but rather first submits to him sexually (143) and then accompanies him, in an open act of rebellion and desperation, when he tries to sell the stolen guns, using her children as "insurance against a State Trooper waving them over for too little" (155).

Such laughter, then, becomes a bond in rebellion for Gilmore and Nicole. But usually laughter at Gilmore's storytelling is a distancing device on the part of his audience; "Brenda and Johnny's smiles became as congealed as the grease on a cold steak" (68). That is why one of the book's most powerful moments is the following exchange between Gilmore and Kathryne Baker:

'He started telling stories. One after another. They couldn't believe him. Told of tattooing a man named Fungoo, and taking a fake photograph of a pervert named Skeezix, and then there was a fellow he hit over the head with a hammer, and he stabbed a nigger 57 times. He'd look at them carefully, say, Now did you understand that? His voice got gruff.

They would put on a smile. Gary, the ladies would say, that's something else, you know. They got themselves to laugh. Kathryne didn't know if she was more afraid for Nicole or herself. About the time he'd stayed an hour and a half, she asked if he wouldn't be late getting back to work.

To hell with the job, said Gary. If they didn't like it over at the job, they knew what they could do. Then he told her
about a friend of his who gave it to the manager of a supermarket with a hot curling iron.

All the while, he watched them real close. He had to see their reaction. They felt they better have a reaction. Weren't you afraid, Gary? they would ask. Didn't you think somebody would catch you?

He did a lot of boasting. Sounded like he was banging along in a boat from rock to rock. When he left, he thanked them for being so sociable.

Nicole heard about the lunch. There was a piece of him, she decided, that liked to tell crazy stories to grown-ups. It must have gotten locked in at the age of eight. (150-51)

This is Gilmore's storytelling at its most compulsive. His actions, as he carefully studies his audience's reactions, and the imagery of a drifting boat make it clear to the reader that this is an attempt by Gilmore, further and further adrift socially, to "connect." The use of the phrase "locked in at the age of eight!" to describe Gilmore's storytelling habit further underscores that Gilmore is a prisoner of his own stories. The storytelling comes at a time when Gilmore believes his parole may be in jeopardy: when he is having problems with his car, Val Conlin, and the job, and when his relationship with Nicole is deteriorating. Shortly after the episode, Gilmore hits Nicole for the first time and threatens her with a knife when she admits that she "wouldn't mind" dying (151-52). Later that same night, he steals the guns he will use in the
murders—the elements that unbalance the equation by assuring that if Gilmore ever again feels powerless or adrift, power is readily at hand.

Whether Gilmore's attempt to connect is successful for him is unclear; the "meaning" he apparently takes from the lunchtime conversation is stated in equivocal terms: "When he left, he thanked them for being so sociable" (150). There are, however, indications that the attempt has failed. Nicole dismisses the occasion as an example of Gilmore's "telling crazy stories to grown-ups" (151), and the women, distancing themselves from Gilmore through laughter, do not see the event as possibly an acknowledgement of Gilmore's dangerous impulses—or at least they do not state that recognition. In light of this incident, it is perhaps significant that Lt. Nielsen, in obtaining Gilmore's confession to the murders, appeals to him in this way: "'Gary, . . . I have to think like a good policeman doing a good job. You know, if I can prevent [emphasis mine] these kinds of things from happening, that would make me successful in my work'" (288). The appeal makes little logical sense, but it may make emotional sense to Gilmore. Perhaps Gilmore hopes that if he tells his stories to Kathy and Kathryne, they, or someone else, will prevent him from repeating the pattern of his past violence.

However, his audience notes not that Gilmore may be desperate, evil, or mentally ill but rather reacts wonderingly to
the notion that he can act out his desires, transgress society's laws, and moral values, and not get caught. These reactions merely reinforce Gilmore's own behavior and morality as set forth in the other parables and in the Utah-Garden-of-Eden story—actions based on the assertion of ego and the evasion of responsibility. "Locked in at the age of eight," the phrase used to describe Gilmore's penchant for storytelling, can also be seen as applying to his level of moral growth.

The other side of Gilmore's obsessive need for power over others is his fear of being powerless, a victim or an outsider in some way. Descriptions of Gilmore by others frequently stress this "alien" aspect of his character. When, for example, he writes to Brenda that being in prison is like living on another planet, she envisions "the moon" (7); when Gilmore appears at Kathryne Baker's door before the lunchtime conversation, he is described as a man who "looked like . . . [he] had just crawled out of the earth" (149). Nicole reports that Gilmore "could be as stiff as a 14-year-old around the wrong people" (123), and Gilmore himself reveals that he comprehends his own alienation when he wistfully acknowledges to his Uncle Vern, "'I want a


5 For example, see Gilmore's reaction upon meeting Toni Gurney for the first time. He finds her attractive and says, "'I wish you weren't my cousin . . . and married to such a big tall dude'" (17). Which drives Gilmore—the rather morally advanced dedication to the idea that sex with a close relative is wrong or simple fear of punishment from Toni's husband?
home . . . I want a family. I want to live like other people live'" (31). Gilmore, however, does not share this very vulnerable part of himself with many; significantly, only to Nicole does he relate a series of stories that depict him as a victim:

A. His seventh-grade class voted on whether they should send Valentines to each other. He was the only one to vote against it. He thought they were too old. When he lost, he bought Valentines to mail to everybody. Nobody sent him one. After a couple of days he got tired going to the mailbox.

B. On his thirteenth birthday his mother let him pick between having a party and getting a $20 bill. He chose the party and invited just [his two best friends] Charley and Jim. They took the money their folks gave them for Gary and spent it on themselves. Then they told him. (103-04)

Gilmore's major story about being a victim is the story about what happened to him when he was given the drug Proloxin by prison officials, allegedly to curb his violent tendencies. At first, Gilmore gives only a sketchy outline of this incident, but it is the first story he reveals to his cousin Brenda after his release on parole. The incident, Brenda notes, has left Gilmore a "marked man":

She reached out to touch his cheek at a place where he had a very bad scar, and Gary said, "Nice looking, isn't it?"

Brenda said, "I'm sorry, Gary, I didn't mean to embarrass you."

This set up such a pause that Johnny finally asked, "How'd it happen?"
"A guard hit me," said Gary. He smiled. "They had me tied down for a shot of Proloxin—and I managed to spit in the doctor's face. Then I got clobbered." (15)

Unlike most of Gilmore's stories, which are told all at once, this story unfolds gradually throughout the work's first half, and the details are corroborated by several recounts, including Gilmore's mother and her friend, Grace McGinniss, both of whom note the physical weakness, glazed eyes, impairment of intellectual function, emotional displacement, and intense rage they saw in Gilmore after the drug was administered (455, 468-69). Dr. Woods, one of Gilmore's psychiatrists after the murders, admits that he "actually hated Proloxin" (399-400), and Woods hints that the drug may have been given to Gilmore in excess doses out of institutional convenience without regard to its detrimental effects on the prisoners. Gilmore testifies briefly about the drug's dosages and effects during competency hearings, but he describes his experience most fully in two sharply contrasting letters to Nicole. The first letter is direct narrative—straightforward, chronological storytelling, full of concrete, "journalistic" details:

One time I was chained to a bed for two weeks spread-eagled hand and foot, flat on my back. When they came in to laughingly ask me how I was doing, I spit on them and got punched out for it. And then they shot me with that foul drug Proloxin and made a zombie out of me for four months. I was virtually paralyzed. I
couldn't stand up without help and when I was raised to my feet I'd wonder what the fuck I wanted to stand up for and I'd sit back down. When it was driving me the worst I went for three weeks without sleep. I just sat on the corner of the bed—I hallucinated to the edge of insanity... I lost about 50 pounds, I couldn't get the food to my mouth. Getting up to take a piss was a major effort, I dreaded it, it would take me about 15-20 minutes—I couldn't get the pants buttoned. After a while I could barely see; my eyes had filled with some kind of white discharge that dried real thick on the lashes and I couldn't reach up to wipe it away and I couldn't see through it. (328)

The second letter, however, approaches the experience in a different way. The second letter describes events in a highly symbolic language of demons, images of prison locks and harness, and private symbols—especially "The Oldness," Gilmore's symbolic shorthand for his premonition of his own death. In this letter, significantly, narrative breaks down; a portion of the letter reads like poetry and is arranged typographically like a poem. Still another part of the letter is a string of demonic nouns and adjectives, and a third section dissolves into a typographical moan (361-62). Both times Gilmore attempts to deal with this part of his past life, he does so to clarify something in his present. 6 The first letter

---

6 The second letter's subject is not the Proloxin experience but rather Gilmore's present situation in jail. Yet Gilmore states clearly that this is the second time such "demons" have attacked him, citing the Proloxin experience as the first (362), and one can by extension view the letter as describing Gilmore's experience with the drug.
specifically states that Gilmore felt something similar to how it felt being on Proloxin after Nicole left him and before he committed the murders. The second letter was written after Gilmore has tried to explain to Nicole why he doesn't want her to have sex in his absence (359-61). Though the storytelling techniques and the circumstances under which the stories are told differ, Gilmore takes the same "meaning" from the experience of being a victim: "I never begged them and I never cried, not even when I was alone and I was completely alone. I knew that it would pass eventually, and it did and I was able to shake it . . . and felt strong for it" (328), he writes in the first letter. The second letter is even more pithy: "Left me drained and 50 pounds lighter but stronger than they [the demons or the institutional powers that victimized him; the reference is unclear] will ever be" (362). When Gilmore mentions to Lt. Nielsen that he has had experience with Proloxin in prison (287), Gilmore is drawing upon a complex personal mythology of victimizing and victimization. This persistent theme of his stories makes what seems like an offhand remark in a letter loom large:

What do I do now? I don't know. Hang myself?

I've thought about that for years, and I may do that. Hope that the state executes me? That's more acceptable and easier than suicide. . . . What do I do, rot in prison? growing old and bitter and eventually work this around in my mind to where it reads that I'm just a victim of society's bullshit? What do I do? (306)
Gilmore is determined not to be a victim again, but the passage is also clear on another point—Gilmore above all wants to maintain, accurately and authentically, his story.
Of Running a Line and the Disintegration of Stories

. . . Gilmore said he had gone down to City Center Motel and happened to walk right into the robbery.

When Esplin asked Gilmore why he didn't go to the police after he was shot, Gilmore said being an ex-con, he was afraid they wouldn't believe him. To the lawyer, the story sounded like a bunch of bullshit. (283)

He liked to go at a case as though he were the defense lawyer. . . . In this situation, he had been looking for the defense to find a better motive for Gilmore than robbery when he went to the City Center Motel. Going, for instance, to get a room, or dropping by to resume a dispute. Maybe Bushnell had once refused to rent to Gilmore because he was intoxicated. In that case, having come in with no intent to rob, he could have shot Bushnell without premeditation. The robbery would have been an afterthought. That would be Murder Two. Wootoon expected such a defense as a matter of course. He had not really known what he could do to refute it if Gary got on the stand and told a convincing tale. (431)

. . . Barrett had one big worry leaning over him. He finally came in with this heavy rap to his father, real dramatic, like a television series. Barrett's father, being an ex-cop, tended to buy it. "Look," Jim told him, "Some guys fronted me a little dope, and I blew it all. Now I can't pay. They're coming
down hard on me and I gotta get out of town." With that, he talked his father into getting a used van, put a mattress in back, and took off. Only a long time later did Nicole decide Barrett had run a line on his father and wasn't in that kind of trouble at all. (99)

What is usually called "truth" is no measure of the effectiveness of a story. That paradox is one that Mailer continually exploits in *The Executioner's Song* by dramatizing various aspects of the paradox. A story can be effective—that is, believable—even if it isn't "true," if it seems to be consistent in itself. If a story's details mesh; if a story builds to a climax of emotion or action; if its ending seems to follow from the rest of it, then that story will be accepted by its listener. Further, if a story is somehow consistent with emotions which the listener has felt or events he has experienced or can even imagine happening, or even if the story is consistent with other stories, then it is also likely that the story will be accepted. Once a story has won such acceptance, then the storyteller is in a position of power, for stories, once accepted, have an uncanny ability to influence people's feelings and actions. In short, a storyteller can manipulate his listeners, gain control over them, by virtue of simply telling a story. If a storyteller is aware of this quality of story, then he can use it to his advantage. This is
the basis of storytelling behavior in *The Executioner's Song* that is called either "bullshit" or "running a line."

There is a subtle distinction between the two. The former, as lawyer Mike Esplin uses the word, comes to mean a story that cannot be believed as having basis in fact. Esplin thus rejects Gilmore's story about the murders because the details of the story—particularly the reluctance by Gilmore to call the police about the robbery—do not add up. At the other end of the storytelling spectrum is Jim Barrett's storytelling, interpreted by Nicole as "running a line." Here, the details of the story may have been totally without basis in fact, but Barrett's father (being an ex-cop and thus by implication used to the inconsistent stories of criminals trying to evade punishment for their crimes) accepts those details because they sound consistent—in other words, make sense. The implication is also given that the story is accepted by Barrett's father not because it seems to have its basis in experience but because it is consistent with Barrett's father's imagination—one that has been largely shaped by the simplistically consistent stories of television police shows.¹

¹Barrett's father is not the only one who reacts to art as if it were life. See Gilmore's reaction to "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" (58-59).
Both prosecutor Noall Wootton and Gilmore's cousin Toni Gurney understand the power of stories and how stories work better than does Barrett's father. Wootton, recognizing that a trial is as much an exercise in persuasion as an exercise in law or "truth," knows that he is defenseless against testimony that satisfies a jury's need for a consistent story in the midst of conflicting testimony. Toni Gurney makes a similar distinction. She makes a conscious decision to "accept" Gilmore's story about what happened between Gilmore and her daughter rather than believe the story to be absolutely "true." The reasons for her acceptance show how adroit Gilmore can be at storytelling. He has appealed to her sense of family loyalty, a morality that she shows she reveres and understands when she replies, "'I'm a mother first'" (138). Gilmore's cellmate Gibbs will later describe the technique Gilmore uses in this way: "Gilmore had a quality Gibbs could recognize. He accommodated. Gibbs believed he himself could always get near somebody. Just use the side that was like them. Gilmore did the same" (358).

Gilmore's ability to run a line is demonstrated most clearly in two episodes in the book's first half, "Western Voices." The first involves Gilmore's first violation of parole, after he has been rejected by Margie Quinn. No two of Gilmore's renditions of this incident—in which Gilmore sets out on a whim for Salt Lake City late one Saturday night and ends up in an Idaho bar—are
exactly alike, and Mailer here makes no effort to "choose the version that seem[s] most likely" (1051). Instead, Mailer exploits the differences in the tales to show how Gilmore is able to weave strands of "truth" and "falsehood" in various accounts—all tailored to affect his listeners. Ultimately, truth and falsehood in the tales become indistinguishable.

In the first story, Gary's motivation is first to get someone to pick him up in Idaho and later to avoid complications with his parole. In other words, Gilmore is trying to evade the consequences of an action by manipulating other people through his story. To his no-nonsense Uncle Vern, no sucker for any sorry tale and always able to see through Gilmore, Gilmore gives only the sketchiest of outlines of the incident: "this dude" picked up Gilmore; Gilmore "fell asleep and the fellow went right through Salk Lake. By the time he woke up it was Idaho" (46). But when Gilmore later relates the same incident to his cousin Brenda, the details have changed. "This dude" has been replaced by "this fellow in Provo who has friends in Idaho" who volunteers to take Gilmore to Portland, Ore., because Gilmore allegedly wanted to visit his mother there. Although the story originally fails to work—that is, convince Johnny or Brenda to come pick up Gilmore—Gilmore is appealing to what should have been a sure thing: Brenda's sense
of family loyalty, the same quality that Gilmore used to manipulate Toni Gurney and that led Brenda to help sponsor Gilmore's parole in the first place.

Still more contradictory details of Gilmore's story emerge later. Though Gilmore tells Brenda he is out of money when he is trying to convince her to come to Idaho, when she arrives, she finds him drunk, with money on the bar, and with still more money tied up in a pool game. Gilmore tells three versions of what happened to the man in the white pickup truck— one to Brenda, one to Idaho authorities, and one to his parole officer, Mont Court; significantly, apparently Gilmore does not tell Court how the man happened to go into convulsions, and Gilmore changes his motivation for the Salt Lake/Idaho/Portland trip to one that Court will probably question least— the desire to have sex (52). Meanwhile, as Brenda tries to piece together the story Gilmore had told, she comes up with still another, although hypothetical, version of events that she is more likely to believe: "... had he rode off with [the man in the pickup truck] because the man would be easier to rob that way? And how had he gotten the fellow to drop the charges? By his boyish smile?" (46). No matter how one tries to account for the divergences in Gilmore's stories, the details never all fit.

In the second episode, Gilmore, perhaps under the influence of Nicole, is more faithful to the details of the
incidents, but he is still trying to evade the consequences of his actions. And, he again does not tell the entire story. The incident involves the impounding of Nicole's car and Gilmore's attempted theft of a tape deck from a discount store. When Gilmore turns himself in to Lt. Nielsen, Gilmore tells him neither about the stolen guns, nor about the stolen loudspeakers in the car's trunk, nor about what happened between Nicole and himself on the road prior to the incident, an event which may, in fact, have motivated the attempted theft. Nonetheless, when the "report came in and the events were as Gilmore described" (161), Gilmore is released on the basis of the consistency of that report with his story (161-62). (Gilmore's own guilty-but-repentent manner may also have had something to do with his release.) Gilmore then takes advantage of an inexperienced judge and court procedure to run yet another line that will win him more time before his sentencing—time which he hopes will allow things to "cool off" (164) so the punishment will not be severe.

From these two episodes, one can glean just how great is Gilmore's knowledge of how stories work. He is so successful at running a line not only because he "accommodated" but also because he always uses some part of reality as the basis of his story, so that even if all the details do not quite add up, enough of them are consistent enough to compensate. Gilmore is
willing to make himself look bad if it will ultimately make him look more innocent—and thus make his story more acceptable to his listener as he himself becomes more appealing. Finally, he treats motivation in a very selective way. Gilmore is able to divorce motivation from action and cause from effect or even invent motivation—whichever suits his manipulative purpose at the moment.

Ironically, for one who himself manipulates stories so often and so well, Gilmore expects absolute truth from others. In fact, it seems sometimes that he does not even consider the possibility that others have the same abilities and inclinations with a story that he has; he does not seem able to comprehend that other people might be fully capable of running a line on him. For example, Gilmore seems never to conceive of the possibility that Gibbs, his cellmate, might be anything other than what Gilmore judges him to be—"a good convict...no higher praise" (359); when Gilmore finally discovers that Gibbs is actually a state's-evidence witness, Gilmore admits in a note to Nicole that Gibbs "really had me fooled" (1039). When someone is not altogether truthful with him, Gilmore is apt to get extremely angry. Both times that he strikes Nicole, for example, can be traced to anger over what Gilmore considers a lie. The first time comes after Nicole has admitted to herself that the stories about herself that she has been telling Gilmore weren't "straight. More
and more she put old boyfriends down and made believe they were nothing in her life" (107). The second time Gilmore strikes her is after she doesn't admit to him that she has spent the day with her ex-husband, Jim Barrett (179).

But Gilmore's ability to run a line eventually runs out. Mailer makes clear, for example, that Gilmore is captured after the murders not because of superior police work, his own stupidity, or even bad luck. Instead, Gilmore becomes a victim of those who manipulate stories to manipulate him, while at the same time his own ability to tell a convincing story deserts him.

Brenda becomes the first to run a line on Gilmore. Like him, she values absolute truthfulness; although she wants to see Gilmore captured because she fears more killing, she does not want to have to "betray him to do it" (262). She is upset that "Gary's trust was the weapon she was using to nail him" (262). Brenda invents a series of "likely stories" during her telephone conversations with Gilmore while he waits at Craig Taylor's house after the motel murder, thus giving the police sufficient time to set up a strategy for Gilmore's capture. She invents, for example, the story that her husband, Johnny, had to stop for gasoline as an excuse for his delayed arrival; Gilmore apparently believes the story because "Johnny was famous as the family character who always delayed everybody while he got gas" (262) (Emphasis mine.) Other fabrications follow: Brenda tells Craig
Taylor that Johnny had probably gotten lost in the unfamiliar neighborhood; finally, she tells Gilmore she gave Johnny the wrong house number. (The latter excuse is an example of Gilmore's technique of a storyteller making himself look bad for the sake of the believability of the story itself.) There is a glaring inconsistency in Brenda's stories, too. Since she and Johnny have contact via a Citizens' Band radio, Brenda could have contacted Johnny at any time to determine if he had, indeed, gotten lost. But Gilmore apparently doesn't pick up this inconsistency, even when Brenda says she will use the C.B. to give Johnny the proper house number. All during the incident, Brenda acts as if she has accepted the story Gilmore has told her, and that, in part, apparently provides the consistency that Gilmore needs to accept her stories.

The second person to run a line on Gilmore is Lt. Gerald Nielsen. Nielsen's use of story in this way is deliberate and manipulative; he states that he "enjoys playing a part" as part of police work—in this case, the part is the "role of the old friend and the good cop" (285). Nielsen also understands the need for consistency in stories. He notes, for example, that there is a psychological impact of a confession on police morale: "Once the police knew their man was guilty, they could feel more incentive to keep plugging hard on detail work. . . . The confession would integrate the case, make it a psychological
success" (290). When Nielsen questions Gilmore about the murders, the two of them begin by exchanging stories about themselves, and when they do, Lt. Nielsen deliberately does not relate the part of his past that includes F.B.I. training, just as he does tell about his Mormon family life, his Brigham Young University education, and his working his way up on the police force (287). Nielsen manipulates Gilmore by constructing stories to which Nielsen believes Gilmore will respond. His stories are successful; Gilmore develops an emotional bond with the lieutenant and confesses. Mailer subtly underscores that Gilmore responds to Nielsen's manipulation of story by noting that Nielsen and Gilmore engage in a discussion of "what a trout is likely to accept in terms of a fly" (287) (fly-fishing is one of Nielsen's hobbies) prior to the questioning that leads to Gilmore's confession. Gilmore, Nielsen notes, is interested in the subject of fly-fishing. The exchange suggests that Gilmore, usually the lurer, has become the trout in his session with Nielsen, the expert fisherman (286-89).

No one, however, is able to accept the story that Gilmore tells in order to try to escape responsibility for the killings. He at first maintains his innocence, telling his cousin Brenda "some story about a man robbing a store and there he was getting shot in the attempt to prevent it" (261). Brenda immediately characterizes the tale as "a shitty story" and Gilmore as "a
shitty liar" (261). Lt. Nielsen immediately sees in his second major conversation with Gilmore that the details of his story don't add up:

GILMORE: You know I can account for last night real well, and I can account for tonight . . .

NIELSEN: Not too well, Gary. (275)

Yet the versions of the killings that Gilmore gives to Nielsen have the same characteristics as Gilmore's earlier attempts at running a line. In the stories of the murders, Gilmore includes various realistic details and relates parts of events that actually happened: taking the truck in for service, driving around with April, breaking up with Nicole, walking into the motel (275-76). The details, in one sense, make the stories sound plausible. Gilmore, too, is again willing to make himself look bad in order to gain sympathy in admitting that he took his girlfriend's kid sister to a motel: sex is one motivation, Gilmore seems to reason, that all men, including Nielsen, will instinctively understand. But the details of the story of the Bushnell murder break down after Gilmore relates that he walked into the motel—just as the story itself takes on an eerie emotional truthfulness:

GILMORE: . . . I went and had some work done on my truck down at Penney's. You'll see the receipts in the glove box, and I did some drinking. The truck kept stopping so I took it down here . . . and told them, 'Listen, I'll
leave my truck down here and I'll pick it up in the morning and go to work and go down here and rent a room.' I walked in and this guy had a gun on this guy, and I grabbed it and he tried to shoot me in the head, and I pushed the gun up, and it got me in the hand. By that time we was about outside, so I just went back down and got my truck and went out to Pleasant Grove . . . . (275)

Gilmore's need not to be responsible for the killing, both personally and emotionally as well as legally, is probably overwhelming, as Nielsen eventually comes to discover: Gilmore would provide details about the incident "up to the point he entered the service station and then he would talk about everything after he left. But he did not wish to describe the crime itself" (291). And Gilmore's story about the Bushnell murder as related above is simply too coincidental to be believable. Yet the language he uses—grammatically and syntactically ambiguous—suggest a schizophrenic episode, as he places himself in the role of observer, watching part of himself commit the act and another part of himself try to prevent it. The story also makes personal sense to Gilmore—a point underscored when Gilmore tells Lt. Nielsen that he hid "that thing" (291) in a certain bush because he remembered the spot from when he was a child (291). (Nielsen thinks Gilmore means the cash drawer from the robbery; Gilmore most probably means the gun which prosecutor Wootton finds [274] and which Gilmore cannot yet refer to by name because he has not come to terms with his crime.) Parts of the
story Gilmore tells are true—Gilmore did, for example, push a
gun up, and he did get shot in the hand. But the events occurred
after the robbery when he was discarding the gun. Parts of the
story may make sense only to Gilmore. Who, for example, is the
"we" of the grammatically lapsed phrase, "we was . . . outside"?
Gilmore and the robber? Gilmore and his alter ego? Is Gilmore
using the imperial "we," the mark of power? Who is "this guy"
who "had a gun on this guy"? The phrase recalls the indefinite-
ness of some of Gilmore's earlier attempts to run a line—for
example, "this fellow . . . who had friends in Idaho" (46). Is
the first "this guy" the nonexistent robber? Or is it Gilmore,
obliquely referring to himself or some part of himself? Could
both references to "this guy" refer to Gilmore, teasingly sug-
gesting that the murder was an attempt by Gilmore to prevent
suicide? The questions are unanswerable, but the sense of de-
tachment from the action itself is believable enough and
similar to one which Nicole describes as "like seeing a movie of
herself floating down a river, and seeing it mostly for herself
and just telling . . . a couple of the sights" (107).

From the point of the murders on, Gilmore never again
regains the ability to run a line as he did before the killings.
One can, of course, view any of Gilmore's efforts with Dennis
Boaz, Larry Schiller, and Barry Farrell as one long, manipulative
story told for the purpose of making money, gaining fame, or
escaping execution. One can even see Gilmore's statements that he wants to be executed as a line run to persuade someone to commute the sentence out of compassion or perversity. Certainly the statements have one of the characteristics of Gilmore's earlier attempts at running a line—Gilmore's admission of guilt in order to make himself seem more innocent. Gilmore does not stop trying to run a line after the murders, but the stories he tells in that vein distinctly change in character. They become less grounded in realistic detail and actual events, as if Gilmore knows there is no chance for escape from stories based in actuality. Consider the difference between these two attempts:

Now Gary said to Cahoon in a nice confidential voice, "Look, I'm in for five days. I'm not being held for anything but a traffic violation. So I would like out of here right now. You see," he said, "I've got to be under a doctor's care. As you may know, I came in with this cast on, and things of this nature want attention. I'd like to be taken to the hospital. The hand has to have its medication, and if you can't get me out, you see, there could be complications." (301)

Gary said he had $50,000, and he looked Ron right in the eye. His pale, gray-blue eyes looked as deep as the sky on one of those odd mornings when you cannot tell by the light of dawn whether good or bad weather lies ahead. "Yes, Ron," he said, "I've got $50,000, or to be exact about it, access to $50,000, and I'll give it to you. All I want is that the next time you go outside, leave me the keys to your extra clothes." (907)
The first story is told early in Gilmore's captivity, and the second is told right before he is executed. The first continues in Gilmore's tradition, having its basis in details rooted in actuality (Gilmore's problems with his hand). But it is totally removed from actuality in its description of the reason Gilmore is being held. The $50,000 of the second story has only the slimmest of chances of existing at all; the storytelling, which plays on Stanger's lawyerish sense of exactness ("to be exact about it, access to $50,000"), if it is to succeed, must stimulate Stanger's greed to the extent that he will be unable to quickly determine the consequences of an action. Both stories—although the former is far more believable—fail. Ironically, Gilmore's jailer finds Gilmore a "pretty good con man" on the basis of the first story. Stanger, presented with the most unbelievable of Gilmore's tales, ironically finds it as evidence that Gilmore is a truthful person, someone who "meant what he said. If he had to stay in prison, he wanted to die. But if he could get outside, that was another game" (908).

In Gilmore's first letter to Nicole from prison, in which he expresses remorse and guilt at the murders and also tries to link some motivation to the killing ("I was so spoiled and couldn't immediately have a white truck that I wanted" [306], Gilmore writes that:
I'd like to stand in the sight of God. To know that I'm just and right and clean. When you're this way you know it. And when you're not, you know that too. It's inside each of us -- but I guess I ran from it and when I did try to approach it, I went about it wrong, became discouraged, bored, lazy and finally unacceptable. (306)

The word "unacceptable" as it is used here carries a weight of meaning. Not only is it pure jargon, a word that might be stamped on a jar of contaminated peanut butter or used in an anthropologist's report on some alien form of culture, as one reviewer has suggested, but it also has a rich religious significance. Its opposite, "acceptable," describes the state of sacrificial perfection in Christian virtue that Gilmore describes in the passage as "just and right and clean . . . in the sight of God" (306); Gilmore's statement that he feels unacceptable can be seen as an important recognition of sinfulness and an urge towards moral responsibility.

But beyond that, "acceptable" is a word that is used in The Executioner's Song to apply to a story in judgment of it. It is a word that implies not "truth" as the ultimate standard for a story but rather consistency and believability. Gilmore seems to understand this concept; it is he, after all, who, after ruining Margie Quinn's car, realizes that he must "get working on an acceptable story in case Margie Quinn called the

---

cops" (57). Later, the word "accept" plays an important role in Gilmore's explanation to his mother of why he does not want to appeal his death sentence (696). After the murders, Gilmore seems to discover what may be the most important thing in his life. It is not simply the difference between right and wrong, legal and illegal, truth and falsehood. Before the murders, Gilmore may have done things that were wrong or illegal, but he was always able to weave a story that would explain away his guilt, even if he had to manipulate reality to do it. But the details of the murders are too inflexible to allow for his manipulation, and the details are too damning. No one will accept any other explanation for the murders than the truth—that Gilmore committed them. There is no way out. Not only has Gilmore committed an immoral and illegal act, but he has also become the victim of a story that cannot be made "acceptable." It now becomes his task to construct a new story to deal with his new situation as a condemned man that will make that condition "acceptable," to himself and to others.
The Mythologies of Love and Death

Get me that blade. I'll come in the nite and take you away and for whatever it is worth for as long as it can last until I am caught—or killed and we will live laff love sing be together come together.

Like we're supposed to be. (365)

In the concluding chapter of *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer has written a particularly artistic passage, especially if one defines art as form following function or, in this case, form following meaning. Aquarius, Mailer's psychic astronaut, confronts a moon rock and, despite what science, technology, and his own exhaustive intellectual efforts have done to subdue the mystery, finds himself baffled afresh. Aquarius has come to regard the rock, Mailer writes, "as savages who knew that if the universe was a lock, then its key was a metaphor rather than measure."¹

The key to understanding, to meaning, and to truth, Mailer says in this passage through the poetry of his rhetoric, is invention, the bringing to bear of one's imagination upon the awe-inspiring or mystifying phenomena of existence. That is what mythology does. At its most basic, mythology is the

invention of stories to explain what exists but cannot be fathomed any other way. For Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*, as in life, one might argue, the two most mystifying circumstances—and thus, those most in need of stories to explain them—are love and death. They are the subjects of Gilmore's most extensive storytelling. Gilmore's stories about love and death have the characteristics of his storytelling noted earlier. A blend of falsehood and truth, of illusion and reality, they are both creative and destructive. They are manipulative and escapist, but they are also honest and morally responsible. They also have a kind of internal consistency and elements of symbolic and thematic unity that set them apart from the other stories that Gilmore tells, for they have as their single purpose a most rigorous task—making sense of Gilmore's two central experiences.

Gilmore weaves an elaborate set of stories around his relationship with Nicole Barrett, a relationship that must be examined before those stories can be seen as a coherent whole. The relationship between the two can best be described as an obsession, a term Mailer once defined in an interview in this way:

An obsession is created in the wake of some event which has altered our life profoundly, or perhaps we have passed through some relationship with someone else who has altered our life drastically; . . . it's the
most fundamental sort of event or relation. It has marked us, and yet it's morally ambiguous.  

Certainly Gilmore's relationship with Nicole altered Gilmore's life in some very serious ways; Gilmore writes to Nicole at one point that he killed in response to the pain of losing her love (327-29), and he writes in response to one of Barry Farrell and Larry Schiller's questions that he killed Max Jensen and Ben Bushnell "because I did not want to kill Nicole" (691). These statements do nothing if they do not reveal a profoundly morally ambiguous dimension of Nicole and Gilmore's relationship. Another way of perceiving the relationship is to view it as an example of what Jean Radford has called "the twin sides of the American male's attitude towards women" portrayed in Mailer, which she sees as "a combination of stereotyped romanticism and cynical hostility."  

Richard Foster takes note of this same quality when he writes in "Mailer and the Fitzgerald Tradition" that Mailer's men tend to be "agents of motive and choice" while Mailer's women tend to be "promissary images of value and possibility."

---


Radford sees this kind of relationship repeatedly dramatized in Mailer's work. Men, in Mailer, tend to see women's love as a measure and reflection of their own worth, Radford contends; the love of a woman helps the men feel special, important, and powerful, and it encourages them to think that they can achieve anything they want in the future, which holds forth limitless possibility. Thus, because the men do not see women as independent beings with qualities—and failings—of their own, they must always be disappointed when the illusion ends. When the men realize that "love does not solve personal problems," as Radford puts it, when they are forced to

"... come to terms with the fact that they have not made it as "the big guy," that they are ordinary and no woman's love can change that fact, they feel bitter and deceived. ... Since love, and a particular woman's love had seemed to promise some way out ... their resentment and disappointment is directed at their one-time hope of escape, at their partner in romantic illusions."  

Certainly some of the frequent anger Gilmore directs at Nicole because of her sexually promiscuous relationships with other men can be seen as an expression of disillusionment

---


6 Ibid., p. 125.
and disappointment (see especially 406-407). But the keys to the relationship seem to lie in two of Radford's phrases, "romantic illusions" and "hope for escape." Much of Gilmore's relationship with Nicole is based on illusion, and that fact is the basic ambiguity of the relationship. From the pair's first encounter, this ambiguity is stressed in Mailer's narrative. When Gilmore and Nicole first meet at Sterling and Ruthann Baker's house, they believe it is love at first sight, but the enchanted evening ends not with a romantic goodnight kiss but rather with a closeup of two struggling naked bodies having sex on a living-room floor (79). The reader has already been told that the sordid reality is that the floor is, in fact, borrowed from a relative; that children from Nicole's previous encounters are sleeping in the next room; that neither party is sexually naive, and that the two lovers might be interrupted at any private moment. (In fact, they are interrupted by Ruthann at one point [77-81].) Perhaps Nicole and Gilmore hold hands "like they were locked together at the wrist" (63)—language as suggestive of the meaning of the relationship as the relationship itself is intense— but Nicole, at 19, with two children, three marriages, and "more guys than you wanted to count" (72), may be, in reality, far closer to being "one more poverty-stricken welfare witch" (65), as Gilmore's cousin Brenda characterizes her, than a young innocent in the first
bloom of love. Indeed, only the "space cadet" (64) Brenda believes Nicole to be would respond to the oldest pick-up line in the book, "I know you" (73), by thinking, "No, I never met him before, I know that. Maybe I know him from another [life]time" (73).

But Gilmore, like Mailer's "hero in eclipse," Charley Eitel in _The Deer Park_, is "profoundly sentimental about sex." It is a characteristic of Gilmore recognizable from the first days after he gets out of jail, when he tells the story about his "prison romance with a fat girl named Becky" (32). To Brenda and her husband, Johnny, Gilmore recounts that he and Becky corresponded while he was in prison and that "They were going to get married, but Becky had to go into the hospital for an operation. She died on the table" (32). This story is pure sentiment and melodrama, and it is also an example of selective recall, at least if a version of the story recounted later by Gilmore's mother is to be believed (see 463). Gilmore has painted himself as "the big guy," and he has heightened the drama. And, for him there must be drama in love. Being in love with Nicole means "the fullest two months I've known in this life" (329), he writes. It means being soulmates, an intense emotional and physical

---

commitment that excludes the rest of the world from the world that the two lovers create for themselves. Consider this passage in which Gilmore creates a story about a "place in the darkness" to explain his immediate, deep attraction for Nicole:

He said, "Hey, there's a place in the darkness. You know what I mean." He said, "I think I met you there. I knew you there." He looked at her and smiled and said, "I wonder if Sterling knows about that place? Should we tell him? They both looked at Sterling, and he was sitting there with a funny kind of smile on his face, like he knew it was coming down that way. Then Gary said, "He knows. You can see it in his eyes that he knows." Nicole laughed with delight.

They sat on the couch for a couple of hours and they laughed and talked. It hardly mattered whether Sterling was in the room or not. (78, 77)

The relationship with Nicole marks the first time in his life that Gilmore has had a deep, sustaining relationship with a woman. However, as Radford has pointed out in her discussion of other works by Mailer, the relationship is soon shown to be but a partial solution. Very quickly, the separateness of Gilmore and Nicole's experience is shown to have escapist tendencies. These tendencies are underscored in the kind of stories Gilmore tells Nicole. On the one hand, Gilmore can share with Nicole stories about his past, which Nicole describes as "Very definite. He gave it in a few words. A happened, then B and C. Conclusion had to be D. . . . When his stories got too boiled down . . . it got like listening to some old cowboy cutting a piece of dried
meat into small chunks and chewing on them" (103-04).

However, unlike Nicole's stories, which usually are based solidly in a reality that may seem unreal at times (see 88-102), Gilmore also relies heavily on stories that seem based deliberately in fantasy. These stories form a major part of his storytelling to Nicole. For example, Gilmore tells Nicole about his "celestial guitar" (104) and his "guardian angel" (104).

The latter story, with its plot about a mysterious stranger who gives sustenance to Gilmore and his family in the middle of the desert, has elements both of a television thriller (a "Twilight Zone or Alfred Hitchcock tale, perhaps, but without the horrific ending) and the Biblical stories of the Exodus and the tale of the Good Samaritan. Gilmore also tends to describe Nicole in mythical or fairy-tale terms. She is his "magic elf" (344) and his "Angel" (329); she is also his "little white bird that perched on my shoulder before we were both born again into this life" (787). 8 Nicole lives in a house "like something funky out of a fairy tale" (117), a description that underscores the role she plays in Gilmore's imagination. Finally, while Gilmore is in prison, the two of them term "the silver sword" the razor

---

8 The "white bird" endearment is important, for the phrase also suggests the Paraclete or Holy Spirit, the sanctifier in Christian mythology. This "sanctifier" role is one that Nicole seems to play in Gilmore's own personal and emotional development. See pp. 75-76 of this discussion for further details.
blade which Nicole uses to try to commit suicide and a file which Nicole is to procure for the escape attempt Gilmore dreams of making (365). The terminology appears to be taken from Arthurian and related mythology, but it seems not to be suggestive of any particular story so much as it directly links the psychological and emotional escapism of the fantasy stories of Gilmore and Nicole's romance with actual escape. 9

In one way, the storytelling that Gilmore and Nicole share while in love has a certain honesty; it is not just illusion and wishful thinking. To tell these stories and feel the emotions which prompt them, Gilmore must abandon his cool, tough, ex-con mentality. There is, in fact, a kind of innocence and vulnerability in passages like this one, in which Gilmore concocts a story about what he dreams could happen if he would escape from prison and stay sober:

... I would take you to the bathtub and frolic in the water with you for a while and scrub each others back and butts and arms and legs and balls and cock and pink cunt and tell you a story while we both soaked and you smoked a cigarette. (365)

9 Another linking of sentiment to escape comes in a brief passage in which Gilmore tells Nicole about his mother. "Tears come to his eyes" (83) when he speaks of her and his desire to visit her, but the visit never materializes. Instead, Nicole and Gilmore end the conversation by "talking about islands they could lease for 99 years. Gary said . . . he was going to get some information on the subject" (83).
Nonetheless, the activities in the passage never actually happen. Gilmore is constructing a story about a fantasized future.

Yet, to maintain his illusions, Gilmore builds an elaborate set of stories around Nicole herself. He uses Nicole to explain his past (see 787 for one example), give meaning to his present, and give hope for his future. In his stories about Nicole, he depicts her as his salvation, and he paints their love as a kind of sanctification. Simply put, Gilmore believes he will become better, "righteous," perhaps, because of Nicole and her love for him. "Angel, no man ever loved a woman more than I love you. . . . And you keep making me more than I am" (511), Gilmore writes at one point, writing at another, "Perhaps I'm beginning to grow . . . grow with me. Love me. Teach me. . . . Softly grow stronger with me. O Fair Nicole" (406). He seeks to set their love apart as a kind of holy refuge; "Get those bastards [Nicole's other lovers] out of our life!" (407) he berates Nicole at one point. It is clear that, for Gilmore, life as it is "supposed to be" (365) is being in love with Nicole away from the rest of the world; being "back in Spanish Fork, tending your little garden, making love" (556).

To make Gilmore more than he is, Nicole must be, in Gilmore's mind at least, good and pure and perfect herself.
That is how he depicts her. For example the ambiguous syntax of many of Gilmore's letters to Nicole from prison suggestively identifies Nicole with God and/or Christ. There are also these descriptions of Nicole in Gilmore's prison letters:

I look into your eyes and I can see for at least a thousand years. I see no evil or menace, I see beauty and strength and love that doesn't have any bullshit to it. You're just you, and you're not afraid, are you? I haven't seen you show any fear. That's remarkable. . . . It's like you've passed your test in life and know it. Like you've been to the edge. And looked over. You're precious, Nicole. (327)

Your honesty astounds me. I've thought long and hard of you, little elf, of your experience—the men who have known you, have loved you, have been loved in return [. . .]

[But] [y]ou have always been so very honest and open with me, you are just Nicole and you present yourself as you are, without pretense. (404)

We were together for only two months, . . . but I believe I have known you, that we've known each other, for so much longer—a thousand, two thousand years?—I don't know what we were to each other before, I will know, as you will also when it becomes ultimately clear one day—but I feel we were always lovers. . . . [It] was a recognition, a renewal, a reunion [when we first met]. Me and Nicole; from a long time ago. I have always loved you, Angel. Let's don't ever hurt each other again. (329)

10 See especially 306, 360, 403, 405. It is worth noting that Nicole also frequently writes using the same ambiguous construction. See, for example, 788, 815.
As therapeutic as this kind of storytelling may be for Gilmore, since it causes him to learn to value others and respect life, its effect on Nicole is devastating. Gilmore presents these stories to Nicole as truth. They are not. They ultimately drive her into conflict—"One life on earth, another on Mars" (329), as she explains it—and suicide. For Nicole has two untenable choices. She can, of course, believe what Gilmore tells her about herself— that she is a good, pure person, "the most important person in the world" (334); that she is honest, fearless, and brave, "a very strong girl, a very strong soul" (474); that she has been to the Abyss and survived—but, as a corollary to those beliefs, she must join Gilmore in his course to death. Or she can choose instead what she sees as the devastating truth about herself. In Gilmore's stories, she is pure and perfect— she has to be if she is to help him become good. But Nicole's real life is vastly different from that image. She faces the ultimate poverty of selling herself for food stamps, and she also faces the knowledge of her promiscuity with Tom Dynamite, the store-management trainee Cliff, and the president of the Sundowners. She becomes acutely conscious of the disparity of her actual life and what Gary believes:

Albert Johnson [the store manager with whom Nicole has sex in exchange for food stamps] hadn't been bad to her, but it was an ugly experience. With all she had mentioned to Gary about her life, she could never tell him about the store manager. . . . It just came
over her how it might seem peculiar to be in love with a man and making it with guys on the outside. She had never experienced this feeling before. . . . Something she had to ponder. (338, 349)

So there is no real choice for Nicole, lacking as she is in self-image and self-respect. There is no middle ground.

This severe psychic dislocation is finally what drives Nicole to her first suicide attempt. She simply cannot square what she knows about herself with the story that Gilmore has created about her. Whether intentional or not, the truth of the matter is that Gilmore's stories about Nicole are manipulative. Soon after the first letters from prison, in which Gilmore develops the "Nicole myth," Gilmore begins to ask Nicole to do things for him:

Maybe when you get your next check, you could get me a couple of things, okay? What I would like to have is a couple of "Flair" felt-tip pens, one brown and one blue, with fine points—and a fairly decent watercolor brush: a Grumbacher Sable Round No. 5 watercolor—and a decent pad of paper (345).

Later, of course, Gilmore will ask for much more—a knife blade for an escape attempt, a fatal dose of pills, and ultimately, that Nicole join him in swallowing them. Ironically, one of the first to state an awareness of Gilmore's manipulation of Nicole is Tamera Smith, portrayed as a basically naive, Mormon reporter for the Deseret News and the first to interview
Nicole. Tamera develops the notion that Gilmore is playing a Manson-like "beautiful guru" (634) role with Nicole:

By the time she [Tamera] calmed down one way, she was getting angry another. Gary was just a manipulator of the worst kind. It was one thing, Tamera thought, to try to talk someone into going to bed with you, but to manipulate them to die with you, that was totally selfish. All those letters, where he was so insanely jealous. Couldn't stand the thought of her meeting another man or something. Boy, Tamera thought, just boy! (586)

The implication of the last line is that Gilmore's manipulative nature is a sign of immaturity. Tamera's perception is on-target. But Nicole is also so immature as to be willing to be manipulated. It is not until Nicole is hospitalized in a mental hospital after her suicide attempt, after she loses all control of her life while hospitalized (see 765), that she begins to develop some measure of self-esteem. This development can be seen through her exchanging of one story about herself—the one Gary has created—for another. One important aspect of this new story is that it dissociates God and Gilmore. In the hospital, as Nicole comes out of her overdose, she at first refuses to give up her identification with Gilmore and his view of her. Kathryn, her mother, finally convinces her to change her psychic orientation by offering her an alternative story to explain her existence:
"Look, Sissy," said Kathryne, "if God wanted you, you'd be gone. You know, it just isn't your time. He doesn't want you yet." "I don't want to live," said Nicole. "Listen, baby," said Kathryne, "God has too much left for you to do before you can go." Nicole just laughed, and then she began to cry, and she said, "Oh, Mama." (623) Later, Nicole will come to accept this explanation as her own:

Finally, they let Kathryne take her out to the utility room . . . where . . . Kathryne could sit with Nicole while she smoked. There they would relax. Once, Nicole even said, "Maybe I'm glad I'm here. I don't know." Nicole never admitted it exactly, but Kathryne decided she hadn't really wanted to die, just had to prove to Gary she loved him enough. Finally, Nicole did say right out loud, "I thought it was wrong to take my life, and if God thought so also, I'd stay alive. But if it wasn't a sin, I would die." (632)

In fact, while Nicole is hospitalized, she develops a more extensive explanation of her existence independent of Gilmore, as she compares herself to others in the institution. She, in fact, develops into something of a moralist:

The stuff going on in the meetings was incredible. She was no great brain, but compared to these asses, all totally involved in their own bullshit, she couldn't help opening her mouth to show them a better way. . . . Nicole tried not to get involved, but after a while she couldn't help it. Those rules were so fucking stupid. You had to try to improve them. (726, 728)
Just as one explanation of herself and her role succeeds to others for Nicole, helping her to grow and survive, so Gilmore's stories about death can be seen as a succession of explanations, each yielding to another as time passes and his situation changes, all designed to serve a similar end. The elements of Gilmore's stories about death come from a combination of Eastern mysticism, existentialism, Christianity and his own imagination. Some of his stories about death are less authentic, morally speaking, than others, for Gilmore seems to create some stories about death in order to avoid facing its huge, fearsome implications. The sources of Gilmore's ideas about death are beyond the scope of this paper. What is important, however, is that the ways Gilmore comes to explain his coming death, both to himself and others, can be seen as crucial in determining whether he attains any heroic stature.

Gilmore's explanation of death begins to emerge in his first letter from prison (305-6). In this letter are stated two ideas which Mailer has developed in previous works. Specifically, Gilmore writes of his belief that he has been executed before, stating that he has had a precognition of his own death, which he calls "The Oldness" (305) or "being in a box" (634): "That clear, cold thing that I hate so much. It's more than a feeling—it's a sort of knowledge. Like a total
awareness of being in a box and it's bright daylite outside and the whole world is going on without me" (344). The concept is similar to what Mailer has previously termed "dread"—"the complex of emotions felt when an individual realizes consciously that death is a process he must undergo."\(^{11}\) Dread is the experience from which authenticity, "the converse of alienation,"\(^ {12}\) flows. The second idea stated by Gilmore and previously developed by Mailer is that life and death are both journeys and that man, neither wholly good nor wholly evil, is always in transit between God and the Devil.\(^ {13}\) "I'm not Beelzebub [the Devil]," Gilmore writes from prison. "I know the Devil can't feel love. But I might be further from God than I am from the Devil, which is not a good thing" (305).


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) For Mailer's first dissection of this idea, see the conversation between Hearn and Cummings in The Naked and the Dead (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Co., 1948), p. 323. By later stages in his career, "God" and "the Devil" have come to represent much more complexity than might meet the eye. I follow Solotaroff's interpretation, Down Mailer's Way, pp. 116-23 and 139-42.
In Gilmore's explanations of death, he wavers between the two poles suggested by "God and the Devil." On the one hand, on the side of "God," he takes complete moral responsibility for his killings, saying he deserves death for them and implying even that he feels remorse. 14 Also, in an elaborately conceived theory of reincarnation, Gilmore conceives the idea that he is paying in his awful present for the sins of a past life, and he adds that he believes he will have to pay in the next life for wrongs he has committed in his present life (305-6). Gilmore also develops the morally responsible idea that people "always have a choice" (306) in what they do— an ironic recognition, since, after Gilmore chooses to kill (if indeed he does so), he will have very little choice in what happens to him after the state decides to end his life.

On the other hand, on the side of the "Devil," Gilmore also states early in this first letter that being executed would be "easier than suicide" (306). This statement certainly suggests that Gilmore's acceptance of his execution is tantamount to suicide, and thus a moral coward's way out. Accepting an execution

---

14 See 305-6; see also 833, where Gilmore regrets the murders but dismisses sentimental remorse. See also 799-800, where Gilmore tells the murders as straight narrative— treating them indeed as they might have been, a series of neutral, independent acts in time, "Neither . . . hard or easy" (800). Ironically, Farrell reacts to the narrative version, possibly the most interesting passage in the book, with impatience, noting that Gilmore needed "to be pushed out of the psychopathic flats" (799).
can thus be seen as an escape—the lesser of two evils, since Gilmore believes that life in prison would be worse than death.\footnote{See 706, 736, and 846-47. Gilmore also hates the constant noise and artificial lighting of prison.} Accepting a death imposed by others can be seen as a way for Gilmore to avoid the awesome responsibility of facing both his disturbed psyche and the guilt that most assuredly must come with the knowledge that one is capable of murdering two people. Similarly, Gilmore's story that his conduct has somehow been influenced by a past life which remains unknown to him also serves as an escape from moral responsibility, for the theory obscures his direct responsibility for the murders and the rest of his behavior in his present life. Hence, the basic moral ambiguities of Gilmore's explanations of death are underscored early. The questions linger: when Gilmore does go to his death, is it a positive moral statement? Or is it an evasion of even harder choices?

After this first letter, which sets forth the basics of Gilmore's explanation of death, Gilmore begins to add more details. He states that when he dies, he will find Nicole after death (345); that death will "be familiar" (488); that dying "is just changin' form" (403). In some of his letters, he becomes extremely specific—and fanciful—about what will happen after he dies:
If I was to look from the other side and see another man with you, I can't say right now what I would do.

I believe that I would seek a way to have my soul, my very being extinguished from existence.

If a thing like that is not possible, I would consider hurling myself toward the center of the planet Uranus, that most evil of places, that I might become forever such that I could not change.

... [W]hen you die ... [d]on't be sidetracked by lonely and forlorn spirits who call to you as they pass by -- they may even reach out and clutch.

Whenever this does occur to us, we must keep the other in mind. Somehow, Angel eyes, This is one of those things that I KNOW. When you die, you will be free as never before in life -- be able to travel at tremendous speed by just thinking of some place you will be there. It's a natural thing and you adjust. It's just consciousness unencumbered by body. (487, 488)

How can Gilmore be so certain about these things? Obviously, he cannot be certain at all. Death remains an unknowable, as Gilmore appears to recognize in this passage:

What will I meet when I die? The Oldness? Vengeful ghosts? A dark gulf? Will my spirit be flung about the universe faster than thought? Will I be judged and sentenced, as so many churches would have us believe? Will I be called to and clutched at by lost spirits? Will there be nothing? [. . .] Just an end? [. . .] I can't even picture the concept of nothing-- I don't think that "nothing" exists. There is always something— some energy. But how long a journey is death? Is it instantaneous? Does it take minutes, hours, weeks? What dies first -- the body, of course— but then does the personality
dissolve? Are there different levels of
death— some darker and heavier than
others, some more and some less material?
(344-45)

It is clear from these passages that Gilmore creates
his stories about death in an attempt to control its enormity,
although that control is, finally, impossible. Death remains,
as Stanley Guttman has written, "the final uncertainty" which
"colors the whole of human experience." Yet, Guttman
continues:

Death is a major preoccupation of the
Romantic consciousness. If order, value, and
identity are to be created by the individual
man, then his death has enormous significance.
... One cannot learn about death; one cannot
explain or understand it. Valid knowledge and
authentic experience [however] are identical.
Thus, death, which can never be known, is the
ultimate existential experience.  

Existential anxiety runs deep— even, apparently, in convicted
murderers— and Gilmore needs his stories about death to
alleviate this gnawing uncertainty and remain in control, even
in dying itself. "The thing about death," Gilmore writes to
Nicole at one point, "is that you got to stay in control." (488)

---

16 Mankind in Barbary, p. 167.
17 Ibid., p. 67.
18 Gilmore needs to control himself and others, and con-
trol is a recurrent theme of his. He tries to control his physi-
cal body through a hunger strike (730) and constant exercise (887,
908). He tries to control Schiller (758-59) and the state (672,
733, 814), and even fear itself (789). Control and endurance are
the themes of Gilmore's poem, "I Am the Land Lord Here" (737)
and one of the few stories he tells of his childhood (795).
Perhaps most telling of Gilmore's need to control death through his stories is the following passage, which expresses his reaction to Nicole's first failed suicide attempt:

Just listen—and don't become rebellious or stubborn or independent, as is often your immediate reaction when told to do or not to do a thing. Okay. What I am telling you is this: you are not to go before me. You mention this in your letter, and I always take you serious. I don't like to tell anyone, but especially you, to do or not to do anything. Without giving them a reason. The reasons are this. I desire to go first. Period. I desire it. Second, I believe I may know a bit more ABOUT THE TRANSITION FROM LIFE TO DEATH than you do. I just think I do. I intend and expect to become instantly in your physical presence—wherever you are at the time. I will do all in my power to calm and soothe your grief, pain and fear. I will wrap my very soul and all the tremendous love I feel around you. You are not to go before me, Nicole Kathryn Gilmore. Do not disobey me. (514)

Gilmore's rage in this passage is barely suppressed, and rage is a reaction that often erupts when Gilmore lacks control over himself or a wished-for outcome. Rage is the word he uses to describe the motivation for his murders ("Murder is just a thing of itself, a rage and rage is not reason" [514]); and similarly, whenever any uncertainty enters his situation while he is on Death Row, as, for example, when he must be resentedenced, Gilmore also becomes rageful:
Schiller could see Gary give a look like everyone around him was scum.

After lunch . . . it was like talking to steel. Gary was as cold and hard and icy fevered as Ron had ever seen him. It burned your eyes to look into his rage. Man, Gary was triggered. Call it possessed. (745-46)

Thus, a suicide by Nicole at any but the appointed hour would disrupt the story that Gilmore has taken such pains to construct. It would interfere with his efforts to explain—and thus control—death. He needs the story to face the enormous experience which lies ahead of him. Yet, necessary as this kind of coherent vision is to the mind and the psyche, it has the danger of becoming dogma if left unexamined or unchallenged. "Men may need to control their lives and environment," as one critic has written, "but attempts to control lead to totalitarian structures and attitudes."

Dogma is merely totalitarianism of the mind, and certainly Gilmore is totalitarian in his approach to explaining death. In fact, in one letter, Gilmore (although the language sounds very much like Mailer's description of General Cummings in *The Naked and the Dead*) admits to a preoccupation with finding a single, rigid truth which eludes him:

---


20 See pp. 570-71: "There was order, but he [Cummings] could not reduce it to a single curve. Things eluded him. . . . To mold [ . . . ] to mold the curve."
I got into a search for Truth really heavily at one time. I was looking for a truth that was very rigid, unbending, a single straight line that excluded everything but itself. A simple truth, plain, unbending. I was never quite satisfied. (346)

At some point in Gilmore's confrontation with death, although it is difficult to say exactly when, he comes to a realization that he cannot control death. For example, in one letter, when he confronts the possibility of his own death, the narrative breaks down into sentence fragments, disparate and gruesome images that form a kind of macabre poetry, obscenity, and what amounts to a long, typographical moan (362). Immediately following this contorted letter, apparently unable to cope with the thought of the state's executing him, Gilmore begins to make plans for an escape from prison and thus from his sentence of death (364-65). The best example of Gilmore's emotional collapse at the prospect of death is his "last tape" (940-43) made at a unique point in his life. It is made on the eve of his execution, but a stay of execution is ordered while Gilmore is in the midst of speaking, which casts the execution in doubt. For Gilmore, it is truly an uncertain moment, and one thing the tape shows is that although Gilmore has been able to construct a story to explain death, he has not been able to construct one that will explain his future life. The tape, with its fragmented, yet suggestive, language, nearly defies analysis. Suffice it to say that in it, Gilmore couples sex
and death, guilt at manipulating Nicole and further manipulation of her, despair and hope. To one of Gilmore's lawyers, the disjointed speech of Gilmore sounds like "an actor, putting on a mask, taking it off, putting on another" (941), as if "each of his [Gilmore's] personalities took a turn" (941). These inconsistencies seem to indicate that, at the moment of truth, Gilmore's carefully constructed, consistent story has failed him. Part of the tape's content also seems to show that he himself is aware that his explanation of death is by no means a certainty; Gilmore admits, on tape, "I ain't going to the planet Uranus" (943). Such a journey had been part of his death mythology. This statement is as close as the reader will come to an admission by Gilmore that his stories about death have been built on his intense desire to be with Nicole again—that she is the only thing that makes for meaning in his life or in his death. But it seems significant that in this tape, disjointed as it may seem, Gilmore is still striving to create an alternative explanation. For example, at one moment, he states, "Johnny Cash knows I'm alive, he knows you're alive, he likes us" (942), which is perhaps his clearest statement of the simple human need to know that someone

21 One specific coupling is Gilmore's misquotation of "Rock of Ages." The phrase "when my eyelids close in death" in the hymn becomes "when my eyelids close in bed," thus linking sex with death and sex and Gilmore's love for Nicole with salvation (942).
else has acknowledged the importance of one's existence and has embraced one as a fellow human being. It is a statement that communion among human beings is a way of overcoming the isolation of death. Second, Gilmore begins to express a hope that perhaps the meaning of his existence is simply that he is supposed to exist, and instead of wishing for death, there are glimpses that he wishes to continue his life: "I hope, God I hope, oh my God, I just fucking hope [. . .] . . . Nicole, I don't know what's happening, Maybe we're supposed to live a little longer, listen, I took everything you gave me . . . ." (943).

It is as if this explanation could become as valid to Gilmore as his former explanations of the meaning of death. Basically, however, the tape shows a Gilmore stripped of his stories explaining death, and that is the Gilmore that walks to the electric chair, clutching a magazine photograph of Nicole.

What Gilmore cannot control about death is its fundamental irony. Though all mankind lives in its shadow, it always seems a surprise ending when it finally comes. We try to ignore it; we believe, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that it will never happen to us. As Gilmore writes with superb irony when asked by Schiller and Farrell if he had ever thought about death prior to receiving the death sentence:

A lot.
In depth.
A very lot.
Oh yes. (736)
The irony of death is that it's a two-headed coin. If we live morally or immorally; if we try to explain our existence, or if we don't the outcome is always the same—death.

One vehicle for dealing with the ironies of death is the joke, and it is a vehicle that Gilmore uses more and more frequently as his death approaches. The joke serves several functions. Especially, it breaks the tension and anxiety anyone feels at the prospect of death. It also allows Gilmore to state indirectly that he too fears death and may not want to die. And it helps Gilmore deal with death's ironies by its very form. For Gilmore, the joke is a form of storytelling. For what is a joke but a story with a surprise ending? Jokes allow Gilmore to tell the truth in ways that other kinds of stories—which have as their basis internal consistency, not surprise—do not.

This latter quality of jokes is something that Barry Farrell, the moralist "with an inner life exasperatingly Catholic" (832) whom Schiller at one point accuses of trying to "shape his questions upon conclusions he's already made" (837), fails to understand or appreciate. Farrell, looking intently for cause and effect and trying to discern a consistent motivation to explain Gilmore's actions, becomes impatient at the tendency of his intermediaries to joke with Gilmore:

---

22 Farrell lands, rather cheaply, but perhaps validly, on sex: homosexuality and pedophilia. See 880-82. An alternative explanation of Gilmore's two "clues" might be, for example, a longing to regain innocence.
Some of those sisters at the Catholic school in Portland, Gilmore would confide to the lawyers, gave us real whippings. "They used to go insane with frustration," Gary said, "trying to make me conform. I got beat by them more than once. It wasn't like when they disciplined other children there. My father finally took me out of the school." Farrell [thought] . . . here at last might be the beginning of some nitty-gritty. Stanger, however, chose to say, "Oh, gee, those nuns always seemed so nice in the movies." Gilmore answered, "Yeah, in the movies." Stanger cackled.

To Farrell's ears, at that moment, it went: Cackle, cackle, cackle. He went wild listening to those tapes. (834-35)

The irony of this passage, of course, is that it is now Farrell himself, not the nuns, who is forcing Gilmore to conform to a preconceived world view. With the passage's stress on the punch line pointing out the difference between the ambiguities of life and the consistency of the stories in the movies, it's not difficult for the reader to see why someone like Farrell—or for that matter, the nuns—would go "insane with frustration." Another example of Gilmore's joketelling similarly highlights the limitation of consistent stories. Gilmore and Gibbs are together in a cell shortly after Gilmore's arrest, and the two start joking at Gilmore's serious prospect of execution:

Gilmore, tonight, would break his arm if he could make a good joke. . . . "What's your last best request when they're hanging you?" he asked, and answered, "Use a rubber rope." Pretended to be bouncing on the end, he put his face into a scowl, and said, "Guess I'll be hanging around for a while.

"That is enough," said Gibbs, "to choke you up." (357-58)

Part of the brilliance of this passage is the interspersing with Gilmore's humor the atmosphere of the prison at the particular time. It houses, along with Gilmore and Gibbs, a sappy, "sorry," crying drunk in an adjacent cell. In a cruel practical joke—and the joke, like other kinds of stories, can be used to victimize—Gilmore and Gibbs, from a belief in their own superiority, mercilessly taunt the drunk with a story they make up about how he has killed a child with an automobile while driving under the influence of alcohol. The drunk believes the story, although it is totally untrue. Like Gilmore's earlier attempts at "running a line," this one is successful because the story seems consistent with the drunk's own view of himself, which is that he is a victim of life, the kind of man who has worked out a story in his own mind that places him in a position of weakness and allows his life's condition to defeat him.

Gilmore's jokes about death, on the other hand, have a peculiarly life-affirming quality, since they acknowledge man's powerlessness at death yet refuse to acknowledge defeat. It is worth noting that while the Catholic Farrell does not appreciate Gilmore's attempts at humor, Cline Campbell, the Mormon prison
chaplain does, noting Gilmore's ability to exploit even the bleakest of human situations: "I laugh more with this guy than with anyone" (863), Campbell notes. Even in Gilmore's last moments before his execution, he jokes with Bob Moody, his lawyer, and his Uncle Vern:

... Gary started to squeeze his hand, right there in the chair, as if he could crush Vern's knuckles. He said to Vern, "Come on, I'll give you a go [at arm wrestling]," and Vern said, "Gary I could pull you right out of that chair if I wanted to."

Gary said, "Would you?" (982)

Perhaps Gilmore's best joke on the subject of death—and perhaps his most perceptive statement of his situation—is this one, noted by Schiller and Farrell as having the same quality as "Bob Hope on a good night, same maniacal see-through X-ray eye, same hatred of bullshit" (831):

GILMORE: 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's stopped," and then he can put the stethoscope on the Timex and say, "She's still running, folks." (831)

A surprise ending—the not dying after all—is what we all secretly hope for from death. But the truth is that that will never happen, and, we all must learn to deal with the simple fact that death will prove to all of us that we are not
unique; we will not miraculously survive it. We still need to believe, however, against all knowledge, that life and death have meaning and that something of us will remain. And so, we tell stories to explain, to endure.
Conclusion:
A Few More Words on Genre and Merit

INTERVIEWER: How old were you then? Eleven? Twelve? Why did you want guns?

GILMORE: Well, see, in Portland, at that time, there was a gang. I don't know if you have ever heard of it -- probably not. But, man, I figured that, well, I would like to be in the Broadway gang. And I figured the best way to get in was to go down and hang around Broadway and sell 'em guns. I knew they wanted guns. I mean, I -- I don't even know if the gang existed [. . .] it may have been a myth. But I heard about them, you know? So I thought, I wanted to be part of an outfit like that [. . .] the Broadway boys. (794)

GILMORE: Well, this is kind of a personal thing. It'll sound like a strange incident to you, but it had a lasting effect on me. I was about eleven years old and I was coming home from school, and I thought I'd take a short cut. I climbed down this hill, a drop about fifty feet, and I got tangled in these briar bushes, and blackberry, and thornberry. Some of these bushes were fifty feet high, I guess, down in this wild, overgrown area in southeast Portland. I thought it would be a short cut, but there was no pass through there. Nobody had gone through there before. At one point, I could have turned around and gone back, but I chose to just go on, and it took me about three hours to pick my way. All during that time, I never stopped for a rest and . . . I knew if I just kept going I'd get out, but I was also aware that I
could get hopelessly stuck in there, I was a block or so from any houses, and if I screamed [. . .] well, I could have died in there. My screams would have gone unheard. So I just kept going. It was kind of a personal thing. . . . (laughs) It made me feel a little different about a lot of things.

INTERVIEWER: What things?

GILMORE: Just being aware that I never did get afraid. I knew that if I just kept going I'd get out. It left me with a distinct feeling, like a kind of overcoming myself. (795-96)

If one must classify it in a genre, The Executioner's Song is a nonfiction novel. Definitions of the term "nonfiction novel," however, remain problematic. In general, the term describes works based on contemporary situations but which treat the events of those situations in such a way as to allow "the mythic underside of the surrealistic facts of post-industrialist society"¹ to be revealed. The nonfiction novel is based on the premise that reality, especially American reality since the 1950's, has somehow actually changed in character, to become more discontinuous, inexplicable, and "fiction-like."²

Several comments by Mas' ud Zavarzadeh on the nature of this genre seem in order here. The nonfiction novel refuses


²Ibid., p. 9.
to interpret the nature of reality, he writes, because it is "the narrative of a consciousness which is engulfed and overwhelmed by the enormity of stark actualities." "Facts" are not used "not to endorse an imposed vision or interpretation of reality, but in their full literal value." The nonfiction novelist becomes "the neutral transcriber" of these "fictive facts"; "no longer capable of accepting any single interpretation of events, the nonfiction novelist does not assemble his sensory impressions into a significant form in order to formulate a particular metaphysic or convey a single vision of reality, as the fictive novelist does." Zavarzadeh concludes, "His [the nonfiction novelist's] observations, unlike those of the fictive novelist, are . . . not a means for fleshing out his epiphanic vision of the ultimate structure of reality, but an end in themselves."6

At first glance, Mailer's treatment of his Gilmore material may seem to follow this pattern. First, the book is long—inordinately long, perhaps—and packed full of detail. Second, that detail, through the so-called "flatness" of his

---

3 Ibid., p. 41.
4 Ibid., p. 42.
5 Ibid., P. 43.
6 Ibid.
style, makes it seem that none of those facts is any more important than any other. It is almost as if Mailer has piled fact upon fact as he earlier piled metaphor upon metaphor, as if, if all the facts are recounted, the mysterious "true meaning" of reality will somehow emerge from them on its own.

In part, that conclusion may be true. But Mailer also mocks this tendency towards overfactualization in the book itself as he describes Larry Schiller's preparation to witness Gilmore's execution. Schiller actually practices taking notes so he will be able to get on paper everything that happens during the execution (858-59); yet he misses several details anyway (992). Reality takes vengeance upon people like Schiller; this is, after all, "the real world . . . where nothing is more difficult to discover than a simple fact."

No, Mailer is not a neutral registrar. Zavarzadeh notes as much when he writes in his treatment of Mailer as a nonfiction novelist that Mailer suffers a "conflict between [his] will to totalize and the defiant emergent actualities" and "longs for the old grand pattern of meaning." Mailer's is a "totalizing

---

7 For one of several such complaints, see Pearl K. Bell, "Settling for Less," Commentary, 69 (Feb. 1980), p. 67-68.
8 The Deer Park, p. 318.
9 Mythopoeic Reality, p. 159.
imagination." That may be one reason for the "facts." Without all the parts, how can one assemble the meaning of the whole? But second, and this is crucial in *The Executioner's Song*, those "facts" are not the basis of the work. Stories are the building blocks of the book, not "facts." The book rests in the stories told by its characters; no "fact" is given unless it is integral to a story told by a character.

In order to assess Mailer's method in *The Executioner's Song*, one must come to grips with two perceptive, watershed critical evaluations by Robert Solotaroff and Jean Radford. Solotaroff writes:

> The difference between 1958 and 1972 is that between a man desperate to believe these metaphors which offered so much possibility for his life, writing and the world [and a man who is more tentative]. ... Crudely put, I think that Mailer's belief in his metaphors was far more intense . . . between 1958 and 1966 than from 1967 to the present. 10

Radford takes on the style which such tentativeness has engendered, which she views as becoming "exhausted," repetitious and tedious:

> . . . [Mailer] has developed a new aesthetic of the novel where the author must be at all times 'visible,' exposed and central to his fiction. . . . Mailer's new conception of fiction and the author's role within it has serious limitations. . . . [A]nchored in the author's personality and ideas, his literary work can become only an infinite series of

---

variations on the same themes and characters which . . . leads to repetitiousness. . . . In his latest books this [muscular] style is pushed to its farthest limits; the long extended sentence structures often fall into incoherence with the strain of carrying his hyperbolisms, involuted metaphysical symbols, the rhetoric of prophetic cultural generalisations and self-parody. The dichotomous metaphorical structures through which he approaches nearly all experience have become as rigid as the "totalitarian prose of the communications engineers" which they were originally evolved to explode. . . . The obvious question he faces is then whether to continue writing an even more ornate and decadent variation of this style with the self-imposed task of changing the world through his writing, or whether he can break out from this pattern.

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer has broken out from the repetitive sound of his own voice. He has written in the third person, for the first time since the novels of the 1960's. Storytelling, as the orientation and organization of the work, has allowed Mailer to achieve this breakthrough.

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer no longer needs to play the God-like role to write in the third person, nor does he need to be merely a neutral registrar of "facts." Instead, he registers the attempts of others to bring meaning to their experience through their own stories, which are, at bottom, fictions. He does so in an authorial voice that is uniquely appropriate for "the ancient art of storytelling"—the oral

---

And if Mailer filters Gilmore's story as a whole through his consciousness and his own mythology as he tells that story, such filtering is simply part of the art of storytelling—Mailer is no different from anyone else.

An awareness of this process, to me, is the "revolution in the consciousness of our times" that Mailer has stated he has been interested in bringing to the culture for so many years. He has wanted to show his audience that reality is indeed chaotic but that meaning must be brought to it if we are to survive. He has wanted to show that every scheme of meaning even "Truth" itself, is a fiction—something imposed, forced, on reality. Mailer once wrote some sharp words of self-criticism on his own tendency to try to force reality but ended with the hope that "perchance [He] could find reality [Truth] by being honest enough to perceive it." In *The Executioner's Song*, however, Mailer seems to have abandoned such hope for salvation through honest perception. Honest perception is still important,

12."The ancient art of storytelling" is the focus of the book according to its book jacket. For some comments on the oral voice and storytelling style that seem particularly relevant to *The Executioner's Song*, see Nancy Willard, "The Well-Tempered Falsehood: The Art of Storytelling," *Massachusetts Review*, 19 (1968), p. 377: "Now suppose you have resolved to try writing as if you were telling a story. You are ready to simplify your style and to emphasize action and plot more than you wish to do again." (Emphasis mine.)


14 *The Presidential Papers*, p. 60.
but even the most perceptive of explanations remains incomplete; the meaning of reality remains couched in ambiguity. So be it, Mailer seems to say, that is the deepest truth I have been able to glean so far.

Yet the soul of man, let alone of Mailer, cannot be satisfied without an explanation that makes sense, and in *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer glorifies those who search for such an explanation and damns those who are too caught up in their explanations to see their gaping inconsistencies and inadequacies. That is where storytelling comes into the picture. Stories are the means by which we pass along our explanations. In killing and in dying, Gary Gilmore told a story in action that made his life make some kind of sense to him— even though, as one of his lawyers notes, "a coherent philosophy came no easier to him than anybody else" (837). He told in words a series of other stories which had the same end. Thus, murder and, if one might term it as such, state-sanctioned suicide are not the last words on Gilmore's potential or actual heroism. Storytelling is the measure, the activity, which ultimately allows Gilmore to "rise above the beast in himself."\(^{15}\)

The way Gilmore uses stories— both authentically, as in his attempts to create an identity and forge communion with

---

\(^{15}\)Adams, p. 7.
others, and inauthentically, as in his various attempts to "run a line," to use stories to deceive himself or others, to manipulate reality or other people or evade responsibility for his actions—shows that storytelling, too, is a morally ambiguous act. But as much as anything else, The Executioner's Song shows that it is stories about reality that shape us—whether or not those stories are "factual." Gilmore used stories to bring meaning to his existence. In that sense, he is no different from any of us—he merely had to face head-on the exigencies of life—such as survival and murder, violence and his own death—from which most of us insulate ourselves.

We rely on second-hand (and worse!) stories; Gilmore created his own. In that sense, Gilmore is both a "very human being" and "extraordinary," in Adams' words. Through storytelling, Gilmore becomes heroic. For, at the last, nothing is more important than a story, told authentically and to the end:

"Hey look," said Gilmore, "listen. One time I was driving down the street in Portland. I was just fucking around, about half high, and I seen two guys walk out of a bar. I was just a youngster, man, 19, 20, something like that, and one of these dudes is a young Chicano about my age and the other's about 40, an older dude. So I said, Hey, you guys want to see some girls? Get in. And they got in the back. I had a '49 Chevro-let, two door, you know, fastback? And they got in. And I drove out to Clackamas County, a very dark [. . .] now I'm telling you the truth, I ain't making this up, I'm not dramatizing, I'm going to be blasted out of my fucking boots, and
I swear to Jesus Christ on everything that's holy that I'm telling you the truth ver-
fucking-batim. This is a strange story."

"Okay."

"They got back there," said Gary, "and I got to telling them about these broads, I was just embroidering how they had big tits and liked to fuck and had a party going and how I left the party to get some guys to bring out there because they were short on dudes, and these two were about half-drunk, and I drove 'em down a pitch-black fucking road, it had gravel on it, you know, not a rough road, black, smooth, flat, chipped fucking concrete, that's how I remember it, and I reached down under the seat—I always kept a baseball bat or a pipe, you know—and I reached down under the seat [. . .] just a minute."

Schiller was not following the story. He knew they were getting it on tape, and so he leaned over the table to see if Barry had a question for Gilmore, and as he did, he was listening to something about a pipe, a baseball bat or whatever it was, and then he heard Gary say, "Jesus Fucking Christ."

Schiller could feel a shift in the silence.

"Lieutenant Fagan just told me that Ritter issued a Stay," said Gary. "Son of a bitch. Goddamn foul motherfucker."

"Okay," said Schiller, "let's just hold this shit together." . . . Now he wanted to hear the story. (763)
Selected Bibliography


"Death in the West." The Economist, 273 (Nov. 17, 1979) p. 127.


- 109 -


Mortimer, Penelope. "Lusting After Ghosts." New Statesman, 98 (Nov. 23, 1979), 812.


- 110 -
Vita

Rosa Palmer Salter was born Feb. 24, 1953 in Norristown, Pa., the daughter of Cleveland C. Palmer Jr. and Rosalie Sinclair Palmer. After graduating with honors from A.D. Eisenhower High School, Norristown, Pa., in 1971, she attended Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pa., where she majored in English and secondary education and received an A.B., summa cum laude, in 1975. She was the recipient of an Aaron Levan Dettra scholarship and was named to Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Tau Delta. In 1975, she received a teaching assistantship from Lehigh University and served as a teaching assistant in the Department of English from 1975-77. In 1972, she was employed part-time by the Call-Chronicle Newspapers, Inc., Allentown, Pa., as a columnist and editorial assistant. She secured full-time employment at the Call-Chronicle as an assistant to the managing editor of the Sunday Call-Chronicle in 1977 and also began duties as a staff writer. In 1979, she was promoted to full-time general assignment reporter. She resides with her husband, Thomas Alan Salter, at 154 Green St., Sellersville, Pa.