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- 1 In January 1977, Gary Gilmore was executed in Utah for the murders of Max Jensen, a gas station attendant, and Ben Bushnell, a motel manager. Preferring death to a life in prison, Gilmore refused to appeal his sentence. In a landmark case, he was the first person to be executed in the U.S. in a decade after a Supreme Court ruling against capital punishment in 1972. *The Executioner's Song* (1979), in one thousand pages, documents the period from Gilmore's release from Illinois State Penitentiary in April 1976, to his execution just over nine months later. After the execution, Norman Mailer went to Provo, Utah, to interview the families, friends, lawyers, legislators and civil rights activists involved in the "true-life story" and to prepare the groundwork for his first western. The purpose of this paper is to address and account for the western voice(s) used by Mailer in his treatment of Gary Gilmore's life story. The minimalist approach to narration and minimal authorial presence is read alongside and contrasted with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers" and explored by way of Mailer's use of tragic and cinematic properties, as well as oral-based, real life testimonies.
- 2 "The Executioner's Song" had been used as a title in earlier works: it first appears as the title of a poem in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966), and then as a chapter heading in *The Fight* (1975), a documentary novel on the heavyweight contest in Zaire. The poem's speaker associates an executioner's work with the poet's labour for inspiration: "if (I) could kill cleanly..." he might execute "a fist of the Lord's creation/into the womb of that muse which gives us poems" (131). If this is the source, the title of the Gilmore life story refers to Mailer. He executes a "song" in a literary *coup de grace*. In *The Fight*, "The Executioner's Song" refers to Muhammad Ali, who would execute a "fine ending" against George Foreman – self-determinism – which would "live in legend" (200). Therefore, Gilmore, defined in the book as "his own writer" executes – again self-

determinism – a defiant ending to his life (793). The title could even target the Attorney General's office, and other advocates of capital punishment, who 'sing' of death.

- 3 "Execute" derives from the Latin 'ex(s)equi' – to follow. Mailer's position in *The Executioner's Song* is also one of "following". After ten consecutive autobiographical works, Mailer rid his prose of every discernable feature of his earlier narrative presence. His previous voices, idiom, favoured vocabulary and polemical strategies disappear in *The Executioner's Song*; he is neither a character, nor a thinly-veiled narrator. Jean Radford goes as far as to deny both the existence of a narrator or a single voice:

Not only have the usual tags 'she said' or 'he said' been omitted, the narrator's voice is virtually effaced in favour of the diction, syntax and grammar of the original speaker or interviewees (55).

- 4 Other absences include the understated representation of Gary Gilmore and of his victims' widows. After beginning work at an insulation plant, Gilmore "just sat on a piece of machinery off to the side and ate the food in all the presence of his own thoughts. Nobody knew what he was thinking" (55). This is as relevant to the readers of *The Executioner's Song* as it is for the characters involved in Gilmore's story. Every character, with the exception of Gilmore, has free indirect discourse; Gilmore's thoughts, in contrast, do not appear. Moments before his death, this "veritable Houdini" tells the book's producer, Lawrence Schiller, "You're going to help me escape" (982). Mailer makes certain that Gilmore's thoughts escape the reader's detection. Of the widows, only Colleen Jensen appears in "Eastern Voices" after her husband's death in "Western Voices," as if to reiterate her marginalised position in the story. Her return to the narrative consists of two paragraphs in which the narrator makes known that "she did not tell" her enquiring school students about her life after her husband's death (1000). She appears, in effect, for the narrator to point to her concealment, disappearance, during the capital punishment proceedings.
- 5 Notwithstanding these self-excising features, *The Executioner's Song* is a self-referential study. The second book "Eastern Voices" regales the genesis of the first book "Western Voices". Lawrence Schiller's "book" – Gary Gilmore's "true-life story" – ends as the writing of "The Executioner's Song" begins. The penultimate chapter, with its transcript of Schiller's first interview with Nicole Baker, Gilmore's girlfriend, closes with the producer's grievance, "so he went on with the interviews and at times was ready to cry in his sleep that he was a writer without hands" (1043). "Eastern Voices" ends just as the work begins to find a writer (Norman Mailer) rather than a speaker ("a writer without hands") to craft the life stories that comprise "Western Voices".
- 6 Mailer may have sought to pre-empt charges of complicity in the Gilmore case by alluding to his absence. A decade earlier, Kenneth Tynan entitled his review of *In Cold Blood* – Truman Capote's "non-fiction novel" on the execution of two men in Kansas for the murder of four members of a farming family – "For Cold Cash". Tynan cited Capote's five year research on the lives of the condemned men and his remonstrations at the capital punishment process. The review targeted Capote's absenteeism in the defence of the lives of Perry Smith and Dick Hickcock between 1960 and 1965. Mailer's title refers to the position of representation, or Schiller's plans for a literary re-enactment, in the original proceedings. In the fourth chapter of "Eastern Voices" Lawrence Schiller is introduced as a book and film producer who "put together a project that became a book about Marilyn Monroe" (629): a reference to Norman

Mailer's "novel-biography" *Marilyn* (1973). Schiller and Mailer worked together on *The Faith of Graffiti* (1974) and for a fourth time for *Oswald's Tale* (1995), the life story of John F. Kennedy's assassin. Schiller buys the rights to Gary Gilmore's "true-life story" and hires *Life* columnist Barry Farrell to prepare interview material. Schiller concedes: "all around me, I'm becoming part of the story" (714). Farrell realized he had "become an integral part of this machine that was making it impossible for Gilmore to take an appeal" (831). Schiller's 'true-life story' had, to a certain extent, an influence on the capital punishment proceedings, by obliging Gilmore to fulfill his contract. The question of Mailer's place in the proceedings arises, which he responds to by forcing the reader to recognise his absence at the very end of the second book. "Eastern Voices" is another chapter in the saga of Mailer's self-referential vein of writing, the making of *The Executioner's Song* moulding the content of *The Executioner's Song*.

- 7 A larger question which persists in criticism of *The Executioner's Son* relates to Mailer's literary contribution: if he has not invented a style or dialogue, narrative action and its arrangement, what has he done and where does he appear? A few features of the text provide a clarification of this discussion point: (1) an emphasis on appearance (2) an understated authorial intention. Mailer presents a surface world of North American life in *The Executioner's Song*. Every character, with the exception of Gilmore's fellow prison inmate Gibbs, is described as handsome in appearance. In the case of women, there is reference to their beauty, in the case of men, their strength:

Brenda knew her power in conversations like these. She might be that much nearer to thirty-five than thirty, but she hadn't gone into marriage four times without knowing she was pretty attractive on the hoof, and the parole officer, Mont Court, was blond and tall with a husky build. Just an average good-looking American guy, very much on the Mr. Clean side, but all the same, Brenda thought, pretty likeable (9).

- 8 The aesthetic ground-plan is to attract the readers' eyes to the surface of the page, or to deny depth and interpretation. Along with his decision not to present Gilmore's thoughts, Mailer veils Gilmore's motive for murder, and the intentions beneath his behaviour, to suggest the difference – or lack of difference – between two types of killing, murder and execution. There is a virtue, for Mailer, in dispensing with a centred, authoritative narrative voice. If murder and execution are denied an interpretation or a stated intention, they are indistinguishable on the surface: killings by gunfire. The appearance of murder and execution (this is true in the Gilmore case if not in the Clutter/Smith case) is the same. As a means of introducing this idea, Mailer documents the surface world.
- 9 The influence of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) on *The Executioner's Song* is evident in this regard. Capote's title referred to both the killing of the Clutter family and the execution of Smith and Hickcock:

"Maybe I drink too much, but I sure as hell never killed four people in cold blood."
"Yeah, and how about hanging the bastard? That's pretty goddam cold-blooded too" (298).

- 10 Mailer revised Capote's verdict on the shared properties of murder and execution, even taking his chapter heading for the execution "The Turkey Shoot" from the latter's description of the hangman as a "turkey buzzard huffing then smoothing its neck feathers" in the final part of the novel (214). There is a fundamental difference, however, between the two books. *The Executioner's Song* is not in keeping with *In Cold Blood* in its presentation of the tenuous boundaries between the true life act and the

narration of the act. *In Cold Blood* exercises a judgment, as discussed in due course, on the capital punishment process. The *Executioner's Song* serves a plea in defence of its characters on both sides of the legal divide and, by implication, an apology by its author.

- 11 Neither writer spoke favourably of the other's work, Capote charged Mailer with having "stolen" his non-fiction novel technique, while undertaking none of the extensive research that went into his own book (Plimpton 214). And, with this in mind, Capote and Mailer differ most in their varying dependency on the spoken testimonies of others. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's narration recreates the "prairie twang" that Capote describes, although only includes in his dialogues, as a Kansas (western) accent in the opening paragraph of *In Cold Blood* (1). Gilmore's speech, for instance, is described by his cousin, Brenda, as "twangy, held back" in the first chapter, "The First Day" (10). The regional dialect is accentuated for the page: "but, boy, I got tore up on that plane. I was happier than hell," Gilmore says to Brenda on meeting her after his release (13). Capote retained the literary veneer ("grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples") he brought to earlier novels, serving to increase, an intended effect, his narrator's distance from the West: "Holcomb, too, can be seen from great distances," suggests the narrator, conveying the impression on the eye to a visitor, "not that there is much to see"(1).
- 12 Mailer worked against the written word, the baroque design of the documentary novels between *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), and concentrated on reproducing the idiom, or spoken word, of Utah's working men and women. Mailer strove, in a renewal of the spirit of the American Renaissance of the previous century, to produce a democratic literature and corresponding vernacular; if not a paean to working class life, *The Executioner's Song* nevertheless confers equality to the various voices, and grants an equal treatment of the various subjects.
- 13 Novelists have a tendency to distort speech, abstract the written word from the spoken word, to support authorial intention. Mailer argues along these lines in his essay on the 1964 Republican Convention, with a parody of the speech of William Faulkner's Quentin Compson: 'Nobody of course was Quentin Compson. Nobody spoke like that any more' he concluded (*Cannibals* 8). Sentences that would not be spoken by a storyteller are written for their worth in referring to something beyond themselves or for their metaphorical value. *The Executioner's Song* shuns metaphorical elaborations and poetic license in its minimalist aesthetic. The place of the spoken word is clarified in the differences between the narrative contents of the first part of *The Executioner's Song* and the first chapter of *In Cold Blood* (passages of equal length). Mailer's and Capote's differing strategies can be gauged in their opening references to a New World Eden. The second of the twenty-two sections that form the first chapter describes Mr Clutter's morning journey through his orchard:

The little collection of fruit bearers growing by the river was his attempt to contrive, rain or no, a patch of the paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden, he envisioned. [...] Passing through the orchard, Mr Clutter proceeded along beside the river, which was shallow here and strewn with island – midstream beaches of soft sand, to which, on Sundays gone by, hot-weather Sabbaths when Bonnie had still 'felt up to things', picnic baskets had been carted, family afternoons whiled away waiting for a twitch at the end of a fish line. Mr Clutter seldom encountered trespassers on his property (11).

- 14 American individualism has its effect on Capote's narration: his descriptiveness ("a patch of paradise", "the green, apple scented Eden" and "hot-weather Sabbaths") does not belong to the oral, group storytelling tradition. Narration in *In Cold Blood* testifies to the isolating effects of individualism on the lives, experience and speech of its characters. Capote's narration, in contrast to Mailer's voice, is an abstraction of the spoken word. In terms of the larger story, or any story, Clutter's walk is inconsequential to the narrative's progress. For Capote, the description clarifies aspects of Clutter's character, focusing on a setting which is woven into the larger framework of his thematic concerns, Smith's and Hickcock's assault on utopia. Nevertheless, the act itself, Clutter's walk, defies dialogue, or spoken report, other than the bare statement – he passed through an orchard. The description is, however, a means of creating mood. Capote's first sixteen sections, before the killers' arrival on the Clutter property and the subsequent discovery of their corpses, represent complete tranquillity, as in the stated case. The Clutters' last day is marked by its normalcy, just as Smith's and Hickcock's journey is marked by obliviousness, on their part, to the gravity of what is underway. For the Clutters' last day, Capote reports only fragments of dialogue. In terms of concrete verbs, or physical acts, Capote includes Mr Clutter permitting pheasant hunters to shoot on his land; Nancy teaching Jolene Katz to bake a cake; Mrs Clutter showing the girl her miniatures and retiring to bed; Kenyon varnishing a mahogany chest as a wedding present; Mr Clutter, presiding at a 4-H meeting, proposing to honour a neighbour at an Achievement Banquet; the family watching television together in the evening (11–50). Cases of developed dialogue involve a resident employee asking Clutter if he can return to his wife to care for their sick infant, Nancy's detection of the scent of cigarette smoke in her father's study, and Herb's disheartened response to news of a neighbour's plans to move to Nebraska (10–34). All of which refer to an injury to, or failing of others, and a relation between people, in contrast to the independent position of each family member (baking a cake, varnishing a chest, retiring to bed) during the majority of the day. Capote represents a silent country, on the brink of an explosive noise, as one side of national life collides with another.
- 15 Nothing of this kind could appear in *The Executioner's Song*; the basis of the narration is an oral testimony or a dialogue. In a later true life story, *Oswald's Tale*, Mailer returned to the lean prose of *The Executioner's Song*. The foundation of narrative here is fragments of conversation and, more often, speculation or gossip. For instance, discussion of the state of Marina's marriage to Oswald:
- She bumped into Misha Smolsky once on the street, and she asked her how she was doing with her man, and she answered, 'very difficult'. Misha said, 'If it is difficult, why did you jump into it?' She said, 'No, he's not a bad guy, but food is very difficult' (452).
- 16 In *The Poetics of Norman Mailer's Non-Fiction*, Markku Lehtimäki also gauges the central position of the spoken word in Mailer's true-life story:
- In *The Executioner's Song* there are several instances where the narration not only 'imitates' dialogic communication but is actually derived from a tape-recorded interview between the author and real-life person. This type of conventional discourse both represents and foregrounds oral storytelling or 'natural' narratives (274).
- 17 Mailer's novel also opens in an orchard; the mood of this incident, as with most in the novel, is a distillation of various strong or unpleasant sensations which, in each case

and in contrast to Capote's opening, bring about a fraught dialogue. In this first chapter, the children are frightened by the prospect of discipline, at some point verbal, for their transgression:

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).

- 18 Mailer begins his narrative with the imprint of an event on memory. "There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively" Walter Benjamin argues, "than the chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis" (91). Mailer first concentrates on a literal fall, and then a metaphorical fall-from-grace. Each incident in the novel appears to have been selected for its potential mark on memory, rather than its worth in referring to an idea beyond itself. Capote, without detracting any less from his purpose, does not include acts of magnitude in the Clutters' last day, which contributes to the force of the final discovery itself. *In Cold Blood* draws on the features of a psychological novel: free-indirect discourse, the past ever intrusive in the present consciousness. In order to increase the depth of his characters' experience on that last day, Capote retreats from their acts to their thoughts. In his introduction of Perry Smith to the narrative, Capote delineates Smith's consciousness as he waits for Dick in the Little Jewel café. In the present, Smith's singular, concrete act is to chain-smoke. Of the past, the reader discovers, Smith has Cherokee and Irish parentage, collected maps, and dreamt of prospecting and singing in Las Vegas. This description of a chain-smoking reverie consists of four extended paragraphs (12–15). *The Executioner's Song*, in contrast, thrives on pure narration (Benjamin's "chaste compactness") and the absence of psychological delineation. Capote's narration is descriptive, and has proportionally less dialogue than *The Executioner's Song*. The dialogue, indicating a relationship or exchange between two or more people, is the starting point for the narration in Mailer's novel. Using as many words as Capote does for the Clutters' last day, in the first part of *The Executioner's Song* Mailer describes Gary Gilmore's first day (the influence of *In Cold Blood* is evident in Mailer's inversion of Capote's first chapter title), his first week and first month:

The First Day

Brenda, aged six, falls from an apple tree. She is caught by Gary.

Brenda and her sister Toni sponsor Gary's parole from Illinois State Penitentiary.

Gary flies to Utah to live with Brenda, exchanging his bus ticket for the comfort of air travel.

The First Week

Gary moves to Uncle Vern's house. Brenda helps him buy clothes.

Gary begins work at Vern's shoe shop.

A date is arranged with Lu Anne Price. He raises his fist after she rejects his advances.

The First Month

Gary is unable to speak during a family dinner.

Gary and Rikki Baker chase girls in GTO automobile.

Toni and Brenda discuss Gary's financial dependency on Vern.

They recommend new residence and employment.

Marjorie Quinn refuses to speak to Gary after passing out on a drunken date with him.

Gary is arrested, though not charged, for fighting with a driver after hitchhiking to Idaho. Brenda and Toni drive to Idaho to collect him from a bar.

Gary begins work at insulation plant; he smashes the windshield of Marjorie's Quinn's car. Rikki Baker refuses to help Gary rob a bank.
 Gary swears and shouts in the cinema in the presence of Brenda and her husband.
 Gary pays Val Conlin his first instalment for a Mustang.
 Gary introduces his new girlfriend Nicole to Brenda.

- 19 Gilmore is the catalyst for most discussion, the subject of other people's dialogues in *The Executioner's Song*: Uncle Vern advising patience after Gary goes over his ill-tempered first date; Brenda informing Gary of the financial strain that he has put on her father; Brenda's and Vern's arguments with Gary over his hitchhiking and arrest in Idaho; Brenda, Johnny and Spencer McGrath expressing dismay at Gilmore's relationship with a teenage mother (31–66).

- 20 Mailer presents a panoramic view of the social activity that revolves around Gilmore's hour to hour behaviour, the antics of the self-defined "eternal recidivist" (798). Without irony, Mailer provisionally entitled his life story of Gary Gilmore "American Virtue" – based on his response to the character of the western social landscape (Lennon 390). *The Executioner's Song* is Mailer's version of an American tragedy, whereas *In Cold Blood* is a protest against a number of institutions in the U.S. Intention is undercut in several ways; in Mailer's faint presence, in the absence of free-indirect discourse in the characterisation of Gilmore, and in the absence of lingering judgement on the part of the hundreds of characters that comprise *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer has done this for an aesthetic effect. In *Poetics*, Aristotle has a definition of the most effective tragic narrative:

Necessarily, we are concerned with interactions between people who are closely connected with each other, or between enemies, or between neutrals. If enemy acts on enemy, there is nothing pitiable either in the action itself or in its imminence, except in respect of the actual suffering in itself (20).

- 21 Gilmore murders two Mormon family men at their respective workplaces. His paltry profit discredits the financial motive; the crime as direct cause-effect is also untenable. Gilmore's intention is not to inflict injury on an enemy, but nor does he, as Aristotle would have it, commit the pitiable deed of harming a relation. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer is out to achieve a tragic effect by understating intentionally hateful acts between people. To produce a cathartic conclusion to his story, the reader has to develop longing for the injured or absent (after death, disappearance, separation) characters. Longing for the tragic figure is limited if the character has continuously and intentionally committed hateful acts towards others. As Aristotle continues, "it is better if the action is performed in ignorance and followed by recognition – there is nothing *disgusting* in this, and the recognition has great emotional impact" (23). In *In Cold Blood*, the execution is knowingly undertaken by the prosecutors, which Capote protests against. Mailer withdrew anger, disgust – whether for his protagonist or his protagonist's opponents – and critical judgement from his proceedings to ensure readers were not led into opposition to any specific character or group. Rather than use a third-person narrator as a commentator on the character and psychology of his people, his characters gave their verdicts on one another. In the absence of a fixed perspective, readers journey between various positions on murder, capital punishment and media coverage. In contrast, Capote's narrator raises objections to the prosecution and the supporters of capital punishment. He gives the example of the selection of a juror who testifies to opposition to capital punishment by principle, but not in the case of Smith and Hickcock. The narrator concludes: it is "a declaration which, to some who

heard it, seemed clearly indicative of prejudice" (265). On the worth of his protagonists' legal representation, the narrator interjects: "a classic country lawyer more happily at home with land deeds than ill deeds" (275). Capote's response to the prosecuting attorney and Judge is evident in his critical description of "[a] citric smile [that] bent Green's tiny lips" and the latter's deflection of the defence testimony – "his Honour saw that it went no further" (288). Capote's narrator defines the eventual hanging of Hickcock and Smith as a "ritual of vengeance" (331). The narrator's judgements are not a feature of the first three chapters; Capote interprets, and presents without censure, the thoughts of the Clutters, Smith and Hickcock. He does this without an undercurrent of indignation, either to the family's lives or the latter's criminality. In *The Executioner's Song*, judgements reside and rest with the characters. The narrative progresses through the eyes of the witnesses; the possibility of a single consciousness, voice or verdict gaining advantage over others is reduced. The presentation or presence of every character's intention, or the absence of intention, bitter thought, altered the tone of his writing considerably from Capote's prose voice. In an interview with George Plimpton, Mailer distinguished between his technique and Capote's approach: "What the hell is *In Cold Blood* finally? It's the description of a crime from the outside" (214). Capote treated those characters that acted 'in cold blood' from a distant, external perspective, according to Mailer. Capote does not present the internal life of the 'cold-blooded' authority figures; he does, however, describe the inward existence of Smith and Hickcock. In contrast, Mailer largely avoided identification with Gilmore. As Robert Merrill suggests, "no one in *The Executioner's Song* offers a more persuasive psychological profile of Gilmore than Gilmore himself" (172). As Gilmore recedes, Mailer encourages the reader to pity other characters, rather than side with or oppose anyone in particular. In an early stage of his enterprise, Schiller concedes, "I have a big problem. Where are the sympathetic characters?" (646). Mailer's personal position on the criminal and execution case does not intrude on, or conflict with his characters' voices and consciousness. The characters in *The Executioner's Song*, with the exception of Gilmore, are sympathetic, due to the fact the narrator, in so far as there is one, does not adopt a critical position on his characters. Merrill argues:

If we read the book as Mailer conceived it, we must feel compassion for nearly every character – for Kathy Maynard as well as Larry Schiller, for Earl Dorious as well as Kathryn Baker, for the youthful April Baker as well as the elderly Bessie Gilmore (178).

- 22 Mailer ensures that Schiller and every other character are pitiable. Every character's intentions towards others are 'virtuous' if limited. Schiller, whom other characters consider a "carrion bird" is depicted as a conscience-burdened, self-critical figure:

He said to himself: 'I don't know any longer whether what I'm doing is morally right,' and that made him cry even more. He had been saying to himself for weeks that he was not part of the circus, that he had instincts which raised him above, a desire to record history, true history, not journalistic crap, but now he felt as if he was finally part of the circus and might even be the biggest part of it (857).

- 23 In his pitying rather than indignant tone of narration, Mailer meant to draw in the reader, rather than "disgust" or repel, to encourage absorption in the novel's group life.
- 24 *The Executioner's Song* has over one hundred characters (active agents rather than named persons in the narrative), by far Mailer's largest assemblage. Mailer's "true-life story" has a panoramic perspective that proved popular with the writer, but elusive in

the society for several reasons. Group activity in an advanced individualistic, capitalist state is limited; participation in 'national' affairs is also restricted by representational government. *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* dealt with group life, or the dissolution of individualism, to various degrees. The first describes a U.S. platoon, consisting of thirteen soldiers, waging war on a Japanese army for control of a Pacific Island. The characters represent a cross-section of American life, bound together by circumstance (and need of medical attention) rather than nationalism or patriotism. In *The Armies of the Night*, his delineation of the protest march to the Pentagon, Mailer joins with 150,000 Americans to register opposition to government foreign policy in South East Asia. In both cases the individual's independence dissolves in the group activity: a march, a riot as in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1969) or a litter-bearing mission. In *The Executioner's Song*, he weaves together family, social and political group life: various families (Damico, Nicol, Gurney, Baker, Gilmore), working class communities (Orem and Provo, Utah) and a legal (Utah State Prison and the Attorney General's office), media (ABC News and *Salt Lake Tribune*), religious (Mormon, Catholic) and political (UCLA and the Utah Coalition against the Death Penalty) backdrop attending to and determined by Gary Gilmore.

- 25 The difference between *The Executioner's Song* and the earlier works is that, while Mailer created a group presence, a mountain patrol and a vigil at night before the Pentagon in *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Armies of the Night*, he did not bind together the individuals who made up the group. For instance, consider the basis of the relationship between Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell in *The Armies of the Night*. Mailer and Lowell drink together at a party and discuss their roles for the march; Mailer and Lowell speak separately to an audience of anti-war protestors at a Washington theatre; Mailer and Lowell dine together and compliment one another on their speeches at the Department of Justice; Mailer and Lowell march to the Pentagon together and stand to the side of a Yippie exorcism ceremony; Lowell fails to follow Mailer to the Pentagon lawns, at which point the latter is arrested (13–129). As a character, Lowell is a presence, rather than a narrative agent. He shares with Mailer nothing other than that which they share with hundreds of thousands in their group: the personal desire to get to the Pentagon to protest a war. In contrast, in *The Executioner's Song*, characters act in concert with one another, or in opposition to one another, aiding or injuring one another directly, and serving only as narrative agents: Gary catches his cousin Brenda when she falls from a tree; Brenda acts as a sponsor for Gary's parole; Brenda asks Gary to find new lodgings and new work; Brenda drives to Idaho to bring her penniless cousin back to Utah after another arrest; Brenda alerts the police to Gary's whereabouts after the second murder while he waits for her husband to arrive (6–264).
- 26 The broad social scope of *The Executioner's Song* is assisted by its partial ties to the oral or storytelling tradition. *The Executioner's Song* is a story of a man who is executed after refusing to appeal his death sentence. *The Armies of the Night* is the story of a man who tries to gain entry to the country's military headquarters to protest its workings. In contrast, *The Naked and the Dead*, the narrative of a mountain patrol, belongs to the tradition of novelistic discourse. What separates *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner's Song* is a memorable story about a protagonist. *The Naked and the Dead* narrates a patrol, rather than regaling the tale of Croft's mission to force his soldiers to the summit of a mountain. The first two texts, *The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* are based on a line of reasoning which, in turn, possess a meaning: a person's choice between a lesser life and death, and a person's decision to confront his

country's political authorities for its unacceptable war. Both define the qualities of the protagonist and his antagonist. The opposition of good/attractive traits and evil/unattractive characteristics marks the said stories: Gilmore's plea for a dignified death versus Gilmore's senseless murder of two married men; Mailer's brave confrontation at the Pentagon versus the brutality of the military police. These central acts are memorable and the foundation of every other incident in the story. In consequence, the imaginative potential and moral significance of the protagonist's exceptional situation resonates in the memory, without which storytelling is restricted.

- 27 *The Executioner's Song* is not entirely bound to that oral tradition, group network. As with *In Cold Blood*, its narrative does not progress purely through cause and effect. Gilmore's killing of Jensen and Bushnell is not a direct or intentional effect of his separation from Nicole. A narrative with cause-effect ties between each episode, in its strict and memorable ordering of events, would be repeatable for the reader, as in the oral tradition, as a story in which the final statement completes a series of acts: *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* still consist of fragments. In the final part, "The Fading of the Heart", Mailer ends his narrative with forty two fragments that describe the response of the principal characters to Gilmore's death. Where fragmentation does exist in both texts, the effects are cinematic, as Frederick Karl states: "Each paragraph like a burst of film reel, existing in itself, but carrying the viewer forward to the next unit" (522). Again *In Cold Blood* has an influence over *The Executioner's Song*. Capote's Eisenstein-like montage or juxtaposition of the Clutter family's last day and Perry and Dick's journey across the state of Kansas to their farm leads Mailer to cut between Colleen Jensen's work and worries during the day and night of her husband's death and Gilmore's journey from the gas station where he would kill her husband to the motel where he would spend the night. *The Executioner's Song* is cinematic not only in the fragmented arrangement of the narrative, the gaps between paragraphs resembling the cuts between shots, but in the brevity of the descriptions of landscape. In its pre-publication form, John Aldridge described *The Executioner's Song* as "a sort of immense prose photograph", meaning the narrative had an unusual visual aspect for the printed word (176). In realist literature, the narrator is known for delineating setting, furniture and fashions as a record of the material world inhabited by the people of a certain age and class. In the first chapter of *In Cold Blood*, the narrator describes the precise furnishing of the Clutters' house:

As for the interior, there were spongy displays of liver-coloured carpet intermittently abolishing the glare of varnished, resounding floors; [...] a breakfast alcove featuring a banquette upholstered in blue-and-white plastic. This sort of furnishing was what Mr and Mrs Clutter liked, as did the majority of their acquaintances, whose homes, by and large, were similarly furnished (7).

- 28 These details are largely avoided in *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer's consideration to setting consists of occasional simple sentences:

Right outside the door was a lot of open space. Beyond the backyard were orchards and fields and then the mountains. A dirt road went past the house and up the slope of the valley into the canyon (5).

The mountains had been gold and purple at dawn, but now in the morning they were big and brown and bald and had grey rain-soaked snow in the ridges. It got into their mood (18).

- 29 The colours of the landscape, more than anything, “got into their mood”: colours, not the signs for colours, affected mood. For Morris Dickstein, *The Executioner's Song* concentrates on the pre-rational mood or response to an environment:
- 30 Mailer's old belief in personal freedom gives way here to a brooding sense of how the unvaried landscape, Mormon culture, and dysfunctional families resonate in people's lives without fully explaining their behaviour. (161)
- 31 The description of setting is cinematic in that it succeeds through spectacle, with a broad emphasis on the present. In film, the audience does not have to be told there is a mountain in the background. It may not even register as a word, or a conscious thought, beyond its primary features, colour, shape and form, as Mailer implies. Language, indicated in the continual use of the past tense, is bound to the past, whereas spectacle lives in the present. Mailer's cinematic aesthetic is also a reflection of a broader minimalist approach to language. Realist literature, and a great deal of novelistic discourse, describes places and property and outward garb to sustain the reader's mental landscape whether incidental to the plot or not. The writer guards against potential hazards of the imagination to ensure the reader sees the world the writer intends to project in language. This is not necessary in cinema; the world exists, on screen after set-design, for the audience.
- 32 Both Mailer and Capote introduce film-inspired documentary techniques to their novels. Capote very often encloses character's viewpoints in quotation marks. The Chaplain's clerk at Kansas State Penitentiary, Willy-Jay, is described as Perry's “real and only friend” (40). By sealing statements in this way, Capote intimates an interviewer/interviewee dialogue between the narrator and his characters. The narrator repeats and incorporates disclosed information, witness testimonies, police reports, culminating in Capote's allusion to his own prison visits between 1960 and 1965: “‘Nobody ever comes to see him except you,’ he (Hickock) said, nodding at the journalist, who was as acquainted with Smith as he was with Hickock” (327). Mailer's division of his prose into separated, isolated paragraphs also suggests a witness testifying to an undisclosed reporter or director. For instance, Mailer shifts back and forth between the perspectives of ten characters in “The Turkey Shoot” chapter as if each character were asked, in turn, for their interpretation at critical moments in the proceedings.
- 33 Capote registers his position on the capital punishment-divide through the narrator's aside-like commentary during the trial. In the absence of broad public opposition at the time, Capote assumes the voice of dissent to the trial, sentencing and hanging of Smith and Hickcock. Capote intends to draw conclusions as to the mainsprings of Smith's “motiveless” crime, which lead him to make analogies between Mrs Clutter's illness (“*it was physical, a matter of misplaced vertebrae*”) and Smith's own mental disorder (5). In an interview with George Plimpton, Mailer's criticised Capote's judgement on this subject:
- I think Truman decided too quickly this is all heredity, that in their genes his killers were doomed and directed to act in this fashion; there was no other outcome possible (214).
- 34 Mailer's final statement would, in fact, reinforce the premise of Capote's aesthetic arrangement of his material: the montage of the Clutters' last day and Smith and Hickcock's journey to their property; this illustrates an inevitable drift rather than a cause-effect (logical) narrative progression.

- 35 *The Executioner's Song* looks to restore language to the specified incident. Mailer is determined to reconcile the word to the world, and to bridge the gulf between the word and the world (not an unusual goal in realist or representational writing). Even though he uses the past rather than the present tense, Mailer closes the gap between the event and the narration of the event. In her *Lectures in America* Gertrude Stein argues that art should "live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present" (112). Although Hemingway, rather than Stein, is the more obvious source and influence, *The Executioner's Song* is committed in its child-like immediacy to the "complete actual present". To clarify, consider a recent position taken by Mailer regarding the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York. In *Why Are We at War?* he gives an account for a public's muted responses to representations of life's most critical situations, or its suspension of belief:

The one thing TV always promises us is that, deep down, what we see on television is not real. [...] The most astonishing events, even terrifying events, nonetheless have a touch of non-existence when seen on the tube. [...] It's why we can watch anything on TV (8).

- 36 According to Mailer, the audience's senses are distracted by the presence of the medium, whether film, literature or painting, which serves as a disrupting and distancing effect for the witness, minimising realism, impact and imprint. Before *The Executioner's Song* went to print, its author admitted his purpose in adopting a markedly lean style, reminiscent of reported speech: "The aesthetic imperative, if there was one, finally came down to: let the book be lifelike," Mailer told John Aldridge, "let it be more like American life than anything that's been done in a long, long time" (182). Not everything is completely suited to description. Violent acts, for instance gunfire, require the writer to replicate in words an auditory and visual, rather than verbal, act. If Mailer thought to reproduce realistically Gilmore's violence, the written word, any word as a sign, would prove a barrier. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer does recognise certain limits. There is a dual operation in the novel: (1) simple language as the world (the realism he aspires to) and (2) the word irrevocably estranged from the world (the reader cannot hear or sense the gunfire). His description of the murder of the gas station attendant is so understated he could be writing about a minor, everyday event:

Gilmore brought the Automatic to Jensen's head.

'This one is for me,' he said, and fired.

'This one is for Nicole,' he said and fired again.

The body reacted each time.

He stood up. There was a lot of blood. It spread across the floor at a surprising rate.

Some of it got onto the bottom of his pants (224).

- 37 The pivotal act of the first book is reduced to eight, single clause sentences, without adjectival statement or interiority. The account of the execution is slightly more developed. The final moments of Gilmore's life are seen through the eyes of eight witnesses. The execution itself is relayed through three viewpoints:

Right through the cotton, Ron heard these whispers, 'One,' 'Two,' and they never got to 'Three' before the guns went, 'Bam. Bam. Bam.' So loud it was terrifying. A muscle contracted from Ron's shoulder down to his lower back. Some entire school of muscles in a spasm.

Schiller heard three shots, expecting four. [...]

Vern just heard a great big WHAM! When it happened, Gary never raised a finger (986).

- 38 What words convey sufficiently the auditory resonance of gunshots? “Bam. Bam. Bam.” “WHAM!” There are no words commensurate to the sound of gunfire. Although *The Executioner's Song* exhibits cinematic techniques, as a text of printed words it cannot render or begin to recreate, unlike documentary film, gunfire. Mailer's realistic intentions could be found elsewhere. Realism would be measured by the reader's belief, or disbelief, and absorption, or distance, in the narration. When the novel was published in 1979, reviewers took notice of the boundaries between fact and fiction. In his review for *The Common Weal*, John Garvey felt Mailer's depiction of real lives to be intrusive: “how will they feel about seeing themselves revealed this way?” he asked (141). Mailer responded in a lecture at Yale by saying he had intended to present an illusion of reality, which would encourage the reader, on reflection, to question the veracity of the delineated incidents:

The stuff on April, the sister of Nicole, is probably three-quarters fanciful...I'd say it was ninety-five percent fictional, in fact, with April. [...] Always as one's reading that book, one's saying, how real is it? Is he telling the truth? (Fishkin 208).

- 39 Several references to escapologist Harry Houdini appear in *The Executioner's Song* and Mailer's aesthetic priority is similar to the illusionist's design: art as a deception of an audience's senses; a fiction, or representation, is projected onto the eye as a reality. Any doubt the reader has over Mailer's sincerity as a storyteller corresponds to the caution of the characters themselves:

The moment he heard the news of the double suicide attempt, Schiller said to himself, there is a story and it's real. Since it's real, it has, in this case, to be fantastic (598).

- 40 Mailer said he intended *The Executioner's Song* to be more realistic than earlier American fiction, but he also refers to the fantastical attributes of the American reality described. He simulates realities to astound and raise suspicion among readers. Schiller's response to the double suicide development corresponds to the response of many readers to the revelation, for instance, of Gilmore's relation to Harry Houdini.

- 41 In *The Executioner's Song*, readers are also witnesses to the execution, autopsy and burial of Gary Gilmore. The entire body of the work serves to strengthen the reader's participation in the capital punishment process. Mailer means to cut through the veil of fiction and distance to create an impression of reality. Gilmore's lawyer's perception of the case moves beyond a mood of fiction to a sense of reality as his client is seated before a firing squad:

He had never felt any moral dilemma in carrying out Gary's desire. In fact, he couldn't have represented him if he really believed the State would go through with it all. It had been a play. He had seen himself as no more important than one more person on the stage (974).

- 42 Similarly, Mailer's references to the grain of the narrator's voice tie in with his realist aims. Very soon after his arrival in Utah, Brenda noticed, “there was something so real about the way” Gary said things (14). In his commitment to the storyteller's diction and rhythms, Mailer's characters' speech consists of basic American slang of the 1970s: “supernice”, “pretty neat”, “a real bad four year old”, “Just yuck, she described it” (52, 99, 74, 28). In this form of everyday realism, *The Executioner's Song* drove near to minimalist tendencies in the use of language in the United States.

- 43 *The Executioner's Song* consists, to a large extent, of simple clause and double clause sentences; rarely do sentences possess more than three clauses. Adjectives and adverbs

are also used sparingly. In the first part of the first chapter, only one sentence contains more than three clauses, in a deliberate delineation of the historical Mormon backdrop to life in Utah:

With all the excitement, Brenda was hardly taking into account that it was practically the same route their Mormon great-grandfather took when he jumped off from Missouri with a handcart near to a hundred years ago, and pushed west with all he owned over the prairies, and the passes of the Rockies, to come to rest at Provo in the Mormon Kingdom of Deseret just fifty miles below Salt Lake (14).

44 The long sentence, with its jolts and turns, represents a journey, but also depth and detail. Mailer reverts to the simple sentence to represent bareness in the modern western landscape, the loss of a mythical, historical backdrop. *The Executioner's Song* inhabits a milieu of deserts and mountains, motels and used car lots, a world where the borders between civilisation and wilderness disappear. Civilisation, and therefore language, is less refined; dialogues drift into the wastes of the barren spaces surrounding their settlements.

45 Mailer's minimalist style in *The Executioner's Song* sways under the influence of Ernest Hemingway's lean prose idiom, although his debt to the author of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) and *For Whom the Bells Tolls* (1940) has been overestimated. Hemingway's aesthetic has no overriding influence on Mailer's writing before *The Executioner's Song*. In *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Mailer wrote:

I was one of the few writers of my generation who was concerned with living in Hemingway's discipline, by which I do not mean I was interested in trying for some second-rate imitation of his style (265).

46 A short story, which appears in Hemingway's *Men Without Women* (1929), has parallels to Mailer's true-life story. "The Killers" describes two men waiting at Henry's lunchroom for Old Andreson. Nick Adams, the diner whom the killers of the title force into the kitchen, along with the owner and cook, finds Andreson at his lodgings and advises him to leave. Andreson, who has been pursued for some time, accepts his fate: "I'm through with all that running around," he goes on to say, "there ain't anything to do. After a while I'll make up my mind to go out" (427). Andreson's resignation is restored in Gilmore's decision not to prolong his incarcerated existence: "you cannot escape yourself" he says of his approaching death (889). Another similarity between the two texts is the subject of stoic endurance. "The Killers" concludes with Nick returning to the lunchroom and receiving the Hemingway creed by way of the owner: "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful." "Well," said George, "you better not think about it" (429). Hemingway's brevity stood for, among other things, his intention to present and advocate, in literature, quiet dignity: 'better not think about' or speak in fear, anger or pain, as Hemingway repeatedly intimates in his second novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): "Let's not talk. Talking's all bilge," Brett Ashley says with stoical resignation (46).

47 In contrast to Hemingway's depiction of the dignity of male veterans, in *The Executioner's Song*, women, more than men, endure. Mailer repeats Andreson's message in the final sentence of the book. Gilmore's mother, hearing the sound of cars stopping outside her trailer park, would "say to herself, 'If they want to shoot me, I have the same kind of guts Gary has. Let them come'" (1049). In her review "Let's go ahead and do it," Joan Didion foregrounds the position of the stronger, enduring voices of women in Mailer's narrative. Alongside women's voices are the unworldly tones of children's voices in *The Executioner's Song*. Often the prose, as in the case of Hemingway's stories

dealing with the young Nick Adams, takes on the features and sounds of children's stories: "She remembered liking Gary so well she would not bother to see who else was there – Hi Grandma, can I have a cookie? – come on, Gary, let's go" (5).

48 Hemingway's and Mailer's characters' speech is governed by a shared principle; everything is stripped bare to an ideal and pure state. To puritans, purity is simplicity, excess is impurity: the language is clean, washed of the excesses of a baroque style. Mailer and Hemingway belong to a tradition in American literature which severed ties with previous rhetorical traditions and reduced language to the bare and present circumstance, very often representing in their narratives the immediacy of a child's perception of, and verbal response to, experience.

49 The fractured layout of the prose also testifies to the silences surrounding life in the West. The gaps are the pauses, the empty spaces in speech. The silent country is at the centre of the protagonist's troubles. Brenda remembers "Gary was kind of quiet" as a child (6). After telephoning her on his arrival in Utah, she found, "this was one guy who wouldn't talk your ear off for a dime" (13). As they drove from the airport, "the first silence came in". In a café, a short while later, "the conversation died. Gary had no clue what to ask Johnny next" (14). The same idea is pursued later:

In fact, if he did tell a story it was usually about when he was a kid. Then she would enjoy the way he talked. It was like his drawing. Very definite. He gave it in a few words. A happened, then B and C. Conclusion had to be D (105).

50 Nicole's recollection of Gary's style of storytelling is playfulness on Mailer's part. He would imitate Gilmore's speech in *The Executioner's Song*. Like Gilmore, his narrator is also "very definite. He gave it in a few words". Didn't bother having a subject at the start of a sentence. Mailer's lean prose is a representation of the minimalist, purifying tendencies in American society, and a means of returning to the "thing" rather than describing the "thing" – an aspiration shared also by Hemingway and Stein.

ABSTRACTS

This paper identifies and discusses the western vernacular and minimalist tendencies in Norman Mailer's 1980 Pulitzer Prize winning "true-life story" *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer's use of a lean, often flat style of narration is read in relation to Truman Capote's "non-fiction novel" *In Cold Blood* to measure the extent to which Mailer moved beyond a conventional novelistic approach. The article positions *The Executioner's Song* alongside earlier minimalist styles in American Literature and takes stock of Mailer's use of oral storytelling techniques and panoramic perspectives. Mailer's minimal presence in the narrative and the original capital punishment proceedings is established, with support from early reviews, debates surrounding the genre of *The Executioner's Song* and interviews given by the author since its publication in 1979.

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