

a CIA officer named Carmel Offie, and the man was fired from the CIA as a bad security risk. McCarthy made his cases "from FBI reports, the right-wing press, Washington rumor, the leaks of disappointed men, and pure innuendo." Even such a sedate statement would have been improbable in a book published in New York a few years ago. But in the very next paragraph Powers tells a good true story: that Carmel Offie got the "finest furs available," courtesy of the Soviet rulers, "by the *bale*" (the italics are Powers's). Does this mean that the Soviets love the CIA even more than the *New York Times*, and thus supply its officers with the finest furs available—by the *bale*? Surely by selling a *bale* of such furs the recipient can make hundreds of thousands of dollars. Even if Offie were not a bad security risk, all the same, is it proper for an American official to accept the finest furs—by the *bale*—from a powerful totalitarian, military, aggressive regime? Or does Powers imply that McCarthy was naive and unsuspecting when he merely *alluded* to Offie as a bad security risk? If only poor, simple-minded Joe had known this good true story as retold by Tom Powers in 1979!

The explanation is that New York fashion is changing. The book conforms. And no one can tell whether McCarthy is, according to Powers, a demon of persecution or an unsuspecting simpleton whose hair Powers could have raised with a good true story.

Otherwise, except for some irrelevant trivia about Helms, Powers's effort is merely a rehash of hundreds of previous books of the same kind. Richard Helms is simply a pretext for the author and the publisher to grind out another "CIA book" without communicating a single new fact, not to mention a concept.

Powers announces that the CIA file can "pop out the 1934 graduating class of Sverdlovsk High School at a moment's notice." Those who have read many "CIA books" will immediately realize that the sentence has been cop-

ied, word for word, from a previous "CIA book," and the author of that book had copied it from his predecessor. The CIA and "CIA books" have been stewing smugly in their own parochial juices for decades—wrapped in their own world of their own fictions copied from each other.

The CIA never knew that Egypt was preparing the Yom Kippur War until the newspapers reported the war itself, and the CIA assured the U.S. government that there was no movement capable of overthrowing the Shah in Iran—

when the movement had already come out into the open, and the Shah was all but overthrown. And some smart newsman once invented the "fact" that the CIA knows who was graduated from what high school in Sverdlovsk, and a succession of "CIA authors" have been copying this musty nonsense ever since.

What an insulated, stale, provincial world. Will Americans break out of it, or will the mass media keep them in until the D-day of American surrender? □

## The Scavenger's Novel

Norman Mailer: *The Executioner's Song*; Little, Brown & Co.; New York.

by Edward J. Walsh

On April 1976, Gary Gilmore was released from prison in Marion, Illinois. Nine months later, he was executed at the Utah State Prison, having chosen not to appeal the death sentence imposed for the murders of two men he had never met. Of his thirty-five years, more than half were spent behind bars. His life, had he never committed murder, could most gently be described as subhuman. Yet he is chosen for near-sainthood by Norman Mailer.

Mailer's latest reinforces his standing in the world of contemporary culture in the eyes of two groups: those who are fascinated by people like Gary Gilmore, and those who are not. To the former, Mailer's work is an occasion for celebration: *The Executioner's Song* has been hailed by everyone from *Time* to the *New York Times* reviewer, to Joan Didion. But to the second group, which presumably includes the 71 percent of the American people who believed Gilmore deserved to be executed,

*Mr. Walsh is a frequent contributor to these pages.*

Mailer's book is a sordid echo of endless tape recordings, newspaper clips and half-literate third-hand recollections; juxtaposed with leachings of Mailer's imagination at its most prurient, and his taste at its crudest, for nearly 1100 pages.

Now, Mailer has been around a long time, and *The Executioner's Song* offers little that has not been seen in his past productions. But this book will stand for a long time as a case study in pseudo-journalistic pornography. Technically, it is just that; even reviewers who coughed up the adulation that is added automatically, like salad dressing, to anything from Mailer's cultural ghetto fussed a bit about the tape recorder as Primary Source. For this book is the product of a lazy man with a dirty mind, who now relies solely on crudity and contacts with others like himself to get his books written. "I'm all diarrhea," says main source Larry Schiller, the seeker after epitaphs of such notables as Susan Atkins, Jack Ruby and Mrs. Lenny Bruce.

Mailer begins with the assumption that the thoughts and writings of a minor criminal are touchstones of contemporary American life. To give us the epic scope he feels is called for, he tells the story of Gilmore's entire life, and the lives of dozens of people who came

in contact with him after his release from prison until his death: family, a girl friend, his two victims, lawyers, policemen, public defenders, fellow prisoners, and of course reporters and hucksters of book and movie contracts. It is all there, unedited, we know, because the legend on the dust cover tells us that:

"Norman Mailer has not predigested his material and imposed a point of view. The effect is astonishing: the work avoids the set and settled quality of history; it has instead the vitality of imagination, evoking from the reader a sense of participation and the excitement and dread of the events in a wonderful narrative that one cannot stop reading . . ."

We suspect instead that Mailer was very close to his deadline for a very fat book. So rather than "predigesting" the con-

"A masterpiece, the perfect and awesomely executed parable . . . a narrative technique of real genius . . . a brilliant, maybe a great, novel . . ."

— *The New Republic*

tent of the tapes and newspaper clippings, he hurls it all at the reader, spliced together with his own sentences:

"She sat there with her anger pushed in like a spring. Dead and wet, he was going to give it a go. Don't start what you can't finish, she told him. Be straight."

How does one "push" anger? But let that pass, it is but a tiny gleaning of the semiliterate prose that Mailer considers sufficient to tell the story of how Gary Gilmore shot two men to death, was himself condemned to die, and was then purified by the process. *The Executioner's Song* is not only a ghoulish peek at a legal execution; it is the text of how a murderer metamorphosed into a martyr, beatified, almost, in the eyes of media groupies like Mailer, for his willingness to sell his sleazy story to whichever of them promised to pay off his family and creditors.

It cannot be denied that the Gilmore case raised important questions for jurists. How seriously can a condemned man's refusal to appeal the death sentence be taken, particularly when statutes provide for automatic appeal in capital cases? The death penalty ought not to be administered too readily. Some of those who protested Gilmore's execution did so with such questions in mind. But they were joined by many who nursed an ideology that demands compassion for unrepentant killers, but is indifferent to the families of the victims. Both of Gilmore's victims were young men with wives and children. As soon as his deeds are done, the families practically disappear from the book.

*The Executioner's Song* is not so much about criminal law or even Gary Gilmore; Norman Mailer does not deal in such banalities. It is about inverted

values and tastes, by which a murderer is argued to be "strong," "cool," "tough" and at the same time a sensitive artist. The "love story" of Gilmore and his severely disturbed girl friend, we're told, survives.

These were things casually observed by reasonable people: the strict Mormon attorneys who took Gilmore's case, prison personnel and the district attorney who prosecuted him. As such they were asides, incidental to the real Gary Gilmore, a savage, remorseless killer. But these irrelevancies are what Norman Mailer fixes on in his search for "human interest" in Gilmore, a man we come to know, as the dust cover suggests, "intimately."

Such a search as Mailer's was undertaken by scores of newspaper and television reporters, book publishers and movie producers. Mailer's book is but another product of Gilmore's contrived media appeal. The principal character is not really Gilmore, but Larry Schiller,

obsessed with excrement, who appears in the book somewhere near the chapter entitled "Exclusive Rights," and records the interminable conversations that he eventually sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars to the likes of Mailer, who in turn sells them as *The Executioner's Song*. The unfailing availability of Schiller's tape recorder near his cell awakened in Gilmore the urge to hold forth on the not-very-interesting subjects of his psyche and his philosophy of life, which Schiller is convinced the world awaits.

Mailer's intent in his exhaustive cataloguing of the minutiae of every life touched by Gilmore is to persuade us that his crimes were the result of a coherent chain of circumstances over which he had no power: that Nicole Baker's nymphomania drove him into a frenzy of jealousy; or because Provo, Utah is a dreary, windswept nowhere, crime was the only outlet for his brooding, volcanic personality. In short, that there were *reasons* Gary Gilmore killed. The very ordinary people who surrounded him formed a stultifying little world, ". . . a view of America that is seldom seen—the moneyless side of the modern West, with its pickup trucks, its trailer camps, its petty crime, and its county jails." This is what Mailer finds in Utah—a long way from Manhattan, where one can surely understand how an intelligent, artistic soul like Gilmore would be driven to murder. It is the same old argument—actually more of a subtle hint, limned with liberal regret—that one's environment is responsible for one's actions, and, therefore, Gary Gilmore should not be punished but *understood*. His demand to die added the final titillating aspect to the voyeuristic attraction of Gilmore, a man who trampled on society's most sacred norms, for Mailer and Schiller, who express no allegiance to those norms themselves.

What, then, are the impressions one retains of *The Executioner's Song*? First and foremost, that civilized values

are secondary, no, unimportant, even meaningless, in the process of creating a media superstar. Gary Gilmore was good "copy"; he was not some deranged hillbilly or ghetto hit man, but a calculating, reasonably intelligent man who turned his life consciously to the pursuit of evil: "I walked in on Benny Bushnell and I said to that fat son of a bitch, 'Your money, son, *and* your life.'" That he was a killer rather than a rock-music idol or a producer of pornographic films was only a difference of style. He had done things no other media star of Larry Schiller's and Mailer's pedigree had. He belonged to a world of brutal violence and animal cunning, but he was at the same time totally at ease in *their* world: cool, chatty, well-read, and most of all, contemptuous of the stodgy, unfashionable civil authorities, as personified by Warden Sam Smith and the stiff-lipped Mormon community. In a sense, then, Gilmore was like *them*, and much was said and done in the name of journalism to bring him closer into the fold of raffish bizzaros who roost in New York, like Mailer, and Los Angeles, like Schiller.

Second, that Norman Mailer, a writer of dubious gifts, can find a publisher even today, when the industry is tight, for a volume of boring paragraphs separated by big white spaces intended to make it longer. There seems to be an intractable audience for such slipping writers on both coasts of the United States, who care not a whit about the quotations or the fate of Gary Gilmore, but yearn to protect their standing in the claue of literati who still think of Mailer as the relentless exposé of the quaintness of American institutions.

*The Executioner's Song*, then, is both witness and exhibit. Mailer, through his tapes and clippings, details the press's disgusting pursuit of every pointless fact, every tasteless anecdote, in the progression towards Gilmore's end. The night before the execution, while attorneys of the American Civil Liberties Union fought a last losing

battle in the U.S. Supreme Court for a stay of execution (denied even by Justices Marshall and Brennan), the press were getting drunk in their cars and radio vans outside the prison. The beneficiary of all this vulturelike circling of the corpse, with Geraldo Rivera of ABC screaming at the producers of *Good Morning America* to cut the Rona Barrett segment, was Norman Mailer, bailed out again, presumably at the last

moment, from another lawsuit or overdue alimony payment. Because his view of the writer as voyeur and his aberrant regard for the ethical guideposts of American life are intrinsic to his treatment of the life and crimes of Gary Gilmore, the book is an indictment of both Mailer and his publisher—and will, one fondly hopes, serve to isolate him and his avid readers from the genuinely critical literary currents of America. □

## Rethinking Linguistics and Liberalism

Geoffrey Sampson: *Liberty and Language*; Oxford University Press; New York.

by Gordon M. Pradl

That government which governs *best*, governs *least*, because paradoxically it allows its citizens the *most* opportunity to govern their own economic affairs and thus to reap the ensuing benefits. Such heterodoxy is seldom voiced today, especially in academic circles, ruled as we are by the arrogant authority of the "expert" who would increasingly plan our lives away. In light of this it is particularly refreshing to come across a book that makes a strong case for the old-style liberalism that we will need to reassert if all our freedom is not to trickle away to Washington.

Geoffrey Sampson's argument is based on his reassessment of the work of Noam Chomsky, the MIT linguist whose insights regarding the nature of language have led him to attack American foreign and domestic policy from the philosophical vantage point of his own particular brand of socialism. Focusing on Chomsky's misappropriation of the terms *creativity* and *free-*

*dom*, Sampson traces the roots of the empiricist-rationalist quarrel in order to demonstrate that liberalism, not socialism, is the best political arrangement for guaranteeing our continued economic and social progress. Yet although he is dealing with weighty and abstract concepts, Sampson, himself a professor of linguistics at the University of Lancaster in Great Britain, has consciously written with the layman in mind. Thus he has kept technical jargon, both linguistic and political, to a minimum, making the material entirely accessible. And what a pleasure to find a linguist with a sense of style: fluent, forceful and concrete, yet spiced with irony and wit.

Sampson begins by giving due recognition to Chomsky's intellectual achievement, one which has revolutionized the way we now describe human language. Chomsky's claim is that actual human languages are clearly less diverse than one would logically expect. In other words what is surprising about natural languages is *not* how different they are, but how similar they turn out to be on closer inspection. This similarity across languages has been expressed through the concept of linguistic universals, namely those principles that operate at the level of syntax to strictly govern how many words may be combined in order to form acceptable or

*Dr. Pradl is Professor of English at New York University.*