A PHILOSOPHICAL LAUNCH *OF A FIRE ON THE MOON* IGNITES INTO *MOONFIRE*

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IN 1961, PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, IN A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, threw down the gauntlet: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth . . . this is a new ocean, and I believe the United States must sail upon it" (qtd. in Mailer, *MoonFire* 12). By 1969, Kennedy's words had become a reality he hadn't lived to witness. But for the first time since his assassination in 1963, America was electrified by an epic charge of hope, like one last pulse of the promise that Kennedy had represented in life, and embodied in death.

In June of 1969, Norman Mailer was chosen by the editors of *Life* magazine to cover the moonshot. The result was a series of three long articles published by *Life* in August and November of 1969, and in January of 1970. That same year, the serial was combined to create one substantial volume published by Little, Brown and Company: *Of A Fire on the Moon.* In its time, *Of a Fire on the Moon* was called the *Moby-Dick* of space (Baumgold 50). However, the white whale was not the moon "herself" (as Mailer called her), but rather the complex series of personal, social, and planetary upheavals that Mailer sought to fathom within the depths of Kennedy's new ocean.

In 2009, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, Taschen Books produced an abridged edition of *Of a Fire on the Moon* redubbed as *MoonFire.* The hefty volume was first released as a limited edition of 1,969 numbered copies, each packaged with a framed archival print signed by astronaut Buzz Aldrin. Twelve of those copies, known as the Lunar Rock

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Edition, came in an aluminum case designed by Marc Newson and included a unique fragment of lunar meteorite. While the limited editions of *MoonFire* drew thousands of dollars, are sold out, and continue to appreciate, an affordable hardcover edition was also released and remains available. Mailer's abridged *Of A Fire on the Moon* text is—in *MoonFire*—outfitted with captioned photographs drawn from the archives of NASA, *Life* magazine, and contemporary publications that featured NASA's space program. These images, in tandem with Mailer's text, allow the reader to experience the Apollo 11 mission as both a voyage to the moon and a journey back in time.

The project was conceived and produced by Lawrence Schiller, published by Benedikt Taschen, and edited by J. Michael Lennon with a foreword by Colum McCann. In a series of interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012, Schiller, Lennon, and Taschen's chief editor, Nina Wiener, provided a behind-the-scenes look at the making of *MoonFire*. What was revealed was an intense collaboration among a range of experts who married the traditions of literature, journalism, and aeronautical engineering—a combination that embodies Mailer himself. In *Of a Fire on the Moon,* and now again in *MoonFire,* Norman Mailer the journalist records history in the making, Mailer the scientist describes the technologies of the Apollo 11 mission, and Mailer the novelist expresses his concerns about the impact of the moon landing on the American psyche and on his own lunar metaphysics.

> When it came to transforming *Of a Fire on the Moon* into *MoonFire,* Schiller drew on his past experiences with Mailer. "The concept of a part of a larger of body of work was not foreign to him and not foreign to me," he explained. "As an example, we made a film together called *The Executioner's Song;* we made a four-part miniseries, but we always had a theatrical version of the film in mind which was shorter. The best version of that film is the excerpt, the shorter version. If you look at *The Fight,* originally written for *Playboy* magazine, it's much shorter in *Playboy,* and then the book was longer. So what Norman passed on, I discussed with Norris [Church Mailer]—taking these works that had originally started in shorter versions or that became shorter versions, and combining them with photography, just like I had done with Norman's *Marilyn* text in 1973. And then again, Norman and I had done the same thing with *The Faith of Graffiti,* in which we took a

> short text and combined it with extraordinary photography. So Norris said she had no problem with it. It was in keeping with what she felt Norman would have done if he was alive, and I went out and made a four book deal with Taschen Books" (Schiller).

For Taschen, *The Fight* had provided the initial spark for *MoonFire* and for the 2012 publication of *Norman Mailer/Bert Stern: Marilyn Monroe,* another Schiller production which features Stern's exclusive photographs for *Vogue* magazine, taken shortly before the icon's death in 1962. While *The Fight* is soon to be reimagined as the third in the Taschen series of Mailer books (the fourth has yet to be decided), it was an earlier, related publication that engaged Benedikt Taschen in the refashioning of Mailer's works.

"Benedikt has been a fan of Mailer's work for many years," said Nina Wiener. "When he edited *GOAT: Greatest of All Time,* our tribute to Mohammed Ali which came out in 2004, we heavily excerpted *The Fight* and other Mailer writings on Ali. I think that's where Benedikt truly fell in love with Mailer's writing" (Wiener). Mailer's works were both a perfect fit for Taschen's existing aesthetic and the inspiration for a deeper exploration of historical journalism. Significantly, *Of a Fire on the Moon* was the first extensive text that was abridged to form the basis of a Taschen edition. As Wiener explained, "We've certainly done photographic books on important subjects in terms of history . . . but I think this is the first real literary and visual collaboration that gets at a very significant historical event, so it was really something new for us, and it's a direction that we're looking to continue to explore going into the future" (Wiener).

The form of *MoonFire* remains true to the dynamic that Schiller and Mailer shared during previous collaborations. Schiller said, "My relationship with Mailer has always been—Mailer did his thing, I did my thing side by side. So I think the relationship is now in a way continued, in essence, with this *MoonFire* because Mailer did the text, he did his thing, and now I've taken it into a kind of different way of looking at it—bringing his text side by side" (Schiller). *MoonFire* features rectos and versos of Mailer's copy tailored by Lennon and sewn through with pristine photographic reproductions that adorn entire pages, full spreads, and ample foldouts. When read in tandem with Mailer's condensed prose, the captioned images act as marginal glosses, annotations, and a bridge back to the kind journalistic photography originally featured in *Life* magazine.

Along these lines, the textual and visual elements of *MoonFire* are combined with vigilant attention to historical and technological accuracy, and to the integrity of the abridgement. Lennon described the process of paring down *Of a Fire on the Moon* while maintaining the arc of Mailer's narrative journey.

> The text is three parts. The first part is going to the moon and being on the moon. The last part is returning from the moon and afterwards . . . his later reflections in Provincetown for his conclusion . . . The middle was Mailer's explications of basic physics, weightlessness, gravity, thrust, and so forth, and the mysteries of the moon, the dark side of the moon, the surface of the moon, what it looked like, the pockmarks and so on . . . I cut out some of the stuff that's in the middle—that Mailer believed in and I loved—but I think it was the part of the book that a lot of readers had trouble getting through—like the cetology chapters in *Moby-Dick* . . . You know, he had that engineering degree at Harvard. He knew what thrust was, he knew what inertia was, he knew what lift was, he knew how rockets worked. (Lennon)

Lennon strove to cut the surrounding text evenly, maintaining the narrative devices Mailer used, as he had in *The Armies of the Night,* to create another epic novel as history. Again, Mailer spoke of himself in the third person, this time appearing as both Norman Mailer the journalist and Aquarius the novelistic narrator. "I wanted to retain his figure as Aquarius," said Lennon. "Aquarius had to be established as the spokesperson, as the one who was going to be our guide . . . our Theseus taking us through the maze . . . the narrative of the quest to get to the moon and return was really a voyage out and a voyage back. It's like *Jason and the Argonauts* in a way, or *The Odyssey*" (Lennon).

> At the forefront of Lennon's abridgement, Mailer wonders, "Are we poised for a philosophical launch? If we approach our subject via Aquarius, it is because he is a detective of sorts . . . Of course, as always, he has little to do with the immediate spirit of the time. Which is why Norman wonders on this occasion if he may call himself Aquarius. Born January 31, he is entitled to the name, but he thinks it a fine irony that we now enter the Age of Aquarius

> since he has never had less sense of possessing the age. He feels in fact little more than a decent spirit, somewhat shunted to the side. It is the best possible position for detective work" (*MoonFire* 20).

It was a similar guise to the one Mailer had donned for *The Faith of Graffiti,* dubbing himself A-I—the Aesthetic Investigator—a detective decoding pictographic spray paint tags, pseudonyms for a faction of renegade street artists who had hijacked, as their canvas, the abundant walls of New York City. While the text of *The Faith of Graffiti* was created to contain and reflect the photography of Jon Narr, *Of a Fire on the Moon* required a tightening of focus in order to reintegrate it with the pictures that had stood alongside in *Life* magazine as well as those that had saturated the consciousness of the public, and Aquarius, at the time.

"The idea of cutting Mailer was pretty strange to me," said Lennon,

> "but given what we were trying to do, making Mailer accessible to a new audience and bring his prose out there, it's great. Norman wasn't a person who anybody could edit in those days. Now he can be edited. And people can always say, 'Look, this isn't the original thing, it's been cut,' but we didn't add anything. We indicated where all the cuts were made. This was done very precisely, and people can make up their mind whether this version reads better than the other version. So nothing was hidden. It's all there . . . I think that it does read very well, and I'm a real stickler for doing things right as far as Mailer's text is concerned."

Reflecting on the moonshot, he observed, "It was a tremendously photographic event . . . and one of the problems with the original text is that there were no photos. Taschen solved that brilliantly" (Lennon).

By constructing a visual narrative within the hierarchy of the book's design, Taschen appealed to the image-based sensibilities of a contemporary audience. "Mailer's narrative is so sweeping," said Wiener, "and spends so much time on subjects where we didn't necessarily have a specific image that could match what he was talking about on a page by page kind of breakdown, that we decided to look at the book in different sections and tell a visual story in each section of the book" (Wiener). Taschen selected and reconfigured original chapter headings from *Of a Fire on the Moon* to create

thematic subdivisions within the picture story, such as The Psychology of Astronauts, A Trajectory to the Moon, and A Dream of the Future's Face. A fourth division of the text was broken out in order to enhance its retrospective quality, comprising three sections entitled The Age of Aquarius, The World is Bigger Infinitely, and A Burial by the Sea. "As visual publishers," Wiener explained, "we're aware of the fact that people don't usually sit down and read our books cover to cover. They usually flip around, stop, and read in the sections they're most interested in. Our feeling was that if any book we were publishing had a chance of people reading cover to cover, it would be this one, but we wanted to make it an accessible and satisfying experience for people who weren't necessarily going to read every word. And some of the image selections, I have to say, don't tie into the text at all, I mean, no connection at all, it's just part of a visual narrative we found that worked well to compliment the text even if it wasn't directly discussed in the text" (Wiener).

Approaching a book first as a textual adaptation and then compiling the best images to inform that text resulted in a reversal of Taschen's standard production process. "The typical way a Taschen book is made," said Wiener, "is we have a visual story we want to tell, whether it's one artist's work or a specific subject like the history of a particular city with photographs and a particular chronology. Then we write text to explain the pictures, more or less. We hire writers to explain them. This is our standard. So for this book, it was a bit of a different challenge because we were working in the other direction" (Wiener).

Using Mailer's text as a springboard, Wiener worked directly with Taschen himself to select and coordinate the visual components of the book. "While I did all the visual research," Wiener explained, "and I got the material organized . . . when it came to the initial image selection, the two key people who were involved were really Benedikt Taschen personally—he's involved in many of our books—and Josh Baker, the art director of the book. I worked with Josh directly on all the refinements, but in terms of the sort of visual guts of the book and where the focus of that story was going, it was really through Benedikt and Josh's eyes" (Wiener).

> To gather the photographs that would be vetted by Taschen and Baker, Wiener worked directly with NASA and *Life* magazine personnel, who, she said, "gave me, basically, carte blanche . . . They just pulled everything and I spent a couple weeks going through

all the material and then supplementing that with different research remotely. The majority of the NASA research was done at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, and NASA headquarters in Washington, DC. The *Life* magazine research, some of it was done through their existing digital archive, and some of it was done with them pulling backfiles from their storage in New Jersey and bringing them to the Time-Life offices in New York, and just allowing me to go through boxes and boxes of material and document what seemed interesting to include in the book" (Wiener).

Wiener also drew from online resources. "The NASA material is so well documented on the Internet with such incredible quality work," she said. "I mean, there are so many people who are so passionate about space exploration. It's really an incredible community of people—not just the official NASA community, but people who have worked for NASA in the past that stayed involved, people who are historians, people who are just enthusiasts, and it's really quite an incredible community of people, many of whom are so passionate about the material that they dedicate most of their time just to research" (Wiener). One online resource that proved particularly valuable was the *Project Apollo Archive*, compiled by enthusiast Kipp Teague courtesy of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "He brought this fifty-thousand-dollar scanner with him," said Wiener, "and got access to make new scans of all the inflight photography that was done by the crew, and it's far superior to anything that existed already in NASA's archives. He just spent years putting this collection of images together. They're all up online, high-res for anybody to download. All of the inflight space photography that we included in the book, towards the latter part of the book, pretty much came from this one source" (Wiener).

To coordinate the final selection of images with Mailer's text, Wiener directed and participated in the authorship of accompanying captions along with Lennon, three NASA experts, and Mailer himself. "The first phase of the captions was pulling from Mailer's text," Wiener explained, "and I would say at least half of

the pictures in the book have a Mailer quote." The next major source of captions was from Wiener's initial preparations for *MoonFire,* before her work with the Time-Life and NASA archives. Wiener had purchased "every possible publication" she could find that was contemporary to the moonshot. "*Life* magazine, of course, had the NASA exclusive during this phase of the space program, and many, many issues, starting in the sixties, were major stories, if not cover stories, devoted to some aspect of the space program . . . One of the upsides when it came to the caption portion writing of things was that a lot of pictures we selected already had a caption . . . and we were able to quote extensively from those publications as well, which I think really puts the reader back in the moment in a way—we know how we perceive this moment fifty years later—but to really get a sense of how the moment was perceived at the time from a lot of different perspectives" (Wiener).

From Lennon's initial point of view, there were no images. Wiener directed him, he said, "to go through the entire Mailer book, including the parts you cut out, especially them, and give us one sentence, two sentence, three sentence clips that are descriptive or evocative in some way that we can then match up with the thousands of photographs we have . . . So I hadn't matched any quote, initially, to any photograph, but I selected from the original text, from the reduced text, from Mailer's interviews when he was quoted on *Of a Fire on the Moon* . . . I was tapping into everything I knew about Mailer, and I picked captions that I guessed they could find a photograph for . . . Some of it was common sense. You knew there were going to be pictures of all the major aspects of the flight, and so I was looking for captions that were particularly pungent, evocative captions that I knew they would be able to find photographs for . . . There were a lot of other things like . . . the astronauts, their wives, major players—Wernher von Braun and so on—all the major figures. So I wasn't working in the dark, I wasn't just picking good prose, I was picking things I knew were going to be there" (Lennon).

One of the crucial elements Lennon had to address was Mailer's scientific explications of the rocket and the physics upon which it

relied. To this end, he selected the most succinct, technological explanations that had been cut from *Of a Fire on the Moon.* In order to reinforce these explanations, Taschen enlisted the aid of former NASA scientists Ken Glover, Eric Jones, and Dave Woods of the *Apollo Lunar Surface Journal.* The three men, Wiener explained, "are considered to be some of the world's foremost experts on the mission ranging from the preflight to the top lunar surface expert . . . They really wrote brilliant scientific captions explaining everything that was going on in the pictures, and then I turned them into English. So, a lot of captions, if you look at them, they start with a quote, and the quote either comes from Mailer or comes from one of these publications from the time—occasionally from other great writers who have written on the subject when we just found a quote that was too irresistible—and then oftentimes they'll then go into a scientific explanation or an historical explanation that wasn't necessarily available from the two initial caption sources. So, the captions were a real puzzle. They were, of course, written on an impossible deadline" (Wiener).

To bring it all together, Wiener said, "I started placing captions that Mike [Lennon] had selected, finding the right quote to go with the right picture, and of course Mike had a lot of great suggestions for refinements once we got the quotes into layout." While collaborating with Glover, Jones, and Woods, she explained, "We were all in different time zones, and we had this Google Doc spreadsheet that sometimes all four of us would be working on simultaneously, which was really kind of a hilarious experience. You know, you see someone typing in some other cell of the spreadsheet—they're working on caption twenty-seven and you're working on caption forty-two—and in some cases editing each other while the caption writing is going on. It was really kind of this incredible, frenzied collaboration . . . They're really brilliant guys who were such a pleasure to work with. I mean, it was almost like a jam session. I'm not a musician, but it's what I imagine—it's the caption writing equivalent of a jam session" (Wiener).

The remixing of information that is both contemporary and retrospective underscores Mailer's ability not just to reveal the

> impact of an historical event in the making, but also to prognosticate its ripples through the human psyche. Today, *Of a Fire on the Moon* may not be recalled as immediately as the image of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin planting the first American flag on the moon, but the impression of Mailer's text on the consciousness of the time remains embedded in our historical memory. "Well now it's in the fiber of the American public," said Schiller. "In essence the impression, the feeling, that's what it's all about. At the time, I think it gave meaning and understanding in a manner that the moonshot had not . . . You know, you have to remember the moonshot had really been broadcast on television. It was the first real big experience America had on television. They were seeing it more than reading about it. And there were commentators like Walter Cronkite and people like that" (Schiller).
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> Lennon described the media coverage of the time as "a kind of a sanitized version of what was going on. You never really felt that you were in touch with the ardors and anxieties of the astronauts. I mean, it was okay—it was very exciting because it built up and built up—but I just felt I was waiting for somebody to really tell us what happened, and Mailer finally did" (Lennon).

In *Of a Fire on the Moon,* Mailer expressed his fear for a nation under the influence of that American "cool" that he said was "becoming a narcotic. The horror of the Twentieth Century was the size of each new event, and the paucity of its reverberation" (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 34). For *Life*, Mailer's mission had been to follow the astronauts on their journey to and from the moon—a homecoming that was hardly assured at the time. Mailer made it his *own* mission to investigate the far reaches of the human spirit and the synthesis of lunar tides into the primordial essence of terrestrial life. He dared to explore the idea that human's violation of the moon might unravel the pith of Earth. After all, the frontiers of death and dread and lunar magic formed the landscape of his own authorial themes.

> At the initial, NASA hosted press conference on the arid planes of Texas, Mailer reported that Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, and Michael Collins sat behind "a plate-glass partition hermetically sealed from floor to ceiling." They were asked, "Do you see any

philosophical reason why we might be going?" Armstrong said, "I think we're going to the moon because it's in the nature of the human being to face challenges . . . It's by the nature of his *deep inner soul* . . . We're required to do these things just as salmon swim upstream" (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 42).

Mailer was uneasy about the fate of those deep inner souls. He wondered, "Was the thought of expiring on the moon an abyss of unpleasantness because the soul must rest in the tombless vacuums of a torso dead on the moon and therefore not able to voyage toward its star?"(*Of a Fire on the Moon* 35). Lennon offered a deeper insight into Mailer's metaphysical concerns, "He had this notion when people die, where do their souls go? He said that he thought maybe their souls revolve around the moon, waiting to be reincarnated, and he wondered how that process was going to be affected. He called it the Thanatos Theory—Thanatos, Thanatosphere—and he wondered how our incursion into the moon changed that psychic place for us. Would it be affected by technology coming into it? That was kind of a speculation . . . so he had that reservation about it . . . wondering if was that a good thing or not" (Lennon).

Mailer also wondered if "the iron of the astronauts" might serve as a filament to reconnect humanity with the universe from which it had originated. He reported that at the 1970 Lunar Science Press Conference in Houston, Dr. Edward Anders stated that "any piece of iron you pick up on earth is likely to be older than four and a half billion years because it's made out of the interior of some star" (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 315). If the astronauts, Mailer wrote, "were finally the men of all the men on earth to take the first step on the way to the stars, who was to say it was not the first step back to the stars, first step to joining that mysterious interior material of the stars, that iron of communion with cosmic origins? Indeed, who could be absolutely certain that the astronauts were not men finally forged out of some powerful equivalent in their blood of the stars' iron—but in fact there is iron in the compounds of the blood—men created

out of some impulse so deep that the metaphor of iron is re-engaged . . . ?"(*Of a Fire on the Moon* 316).

Standing before a moon rock that was housed "in the plastic vaults and warehouses of the Manned Spacecraft Center at Houston," Aquarius found answers. "[H]e had come to believe by the end of this long summer that probably we had to explore into outer space, for technology had penetrated the modern mind to such a depth that voyages in space might have become the last way to discover the metaphysical pits of that world of technique which choked the pores of modern consciousness—yes, we might have to go out into space until the mystery of new discovery would force us to regard the world once again as poets, behold it as savages who knew that if the universe was a lock, its key was metaphor rather than measure" (*Of a Fire on the Moon* 471).

Schiller said, "I think that what you have [with *Of a Fire on the Moon*] is now a great, great writer using the depth of his entire life to illustrate and to explain the deeper meaning . . . and that's what I think Mailer brought . . . a lot of thinking, a lot of historical perspective, he brought analogies. He brought this experience into America's history, not only visually, but he brought it into America's mind from a literary point of view, and he was the first to do it, and *Life* was wise enough to bring him aboard to do it" (Schiller).

Forty years later, Taschen, Schiller, and Lennon had the wisdom to compile *MoonFire* as a celebration not only of the anniversary of the moonshot, but also as the kind of literary and imagistic union the original *Life* series represented. Through the project, not only was Mailer's text revitalized, but so was the sense of his collaborative spirit. "I have to tell you," said Wiener, "that the absolute most fun aspect of working on this book, and I don't know if you're aware of this, was getting to work with and know Larry Schiller, who is now my husband. Benedikt Taschen always likes to say that Norman Mailer brought me and Larry together, even a couple years after his death, he was the one who brought me

> and Larry together. So that was kind of the happiest accident of the whole project" (Wiener).

> "So," Lennon summarized, "it was a nice collaboration . . . and I think we produced a book that revives Mailer's text, puts it in a different format, mantles it in a lot of wonderful photographs and a lot of captions that draw it out and extrude more meaning from it. I'm proud of my participation. I think that Norman might even say, 'Okay, you know, you cut me back, but you kept the best part.' . . . Mailer, of course, was always bending the rules and doing things like this, and I don't feel like he's shaking his finger at me from the other side" (Lennon).

For a generation too young to have experienced the Apollo 11 mission firsthand, *MoonFire* provides a rare opportunity to witness an extraordinary moment in history not just visually, but with a deeper understanding of the immense, global impact of the fist human footsteps on the moon. In his foreword to *MoonFire,* Colum McCann admits that he does not remember the moonshot, having been too young at the time for it to have made a lasting impression. The guiding force behind Apollo 11, however, is inextricably tied to his image of the moon. "In Ireland, where I was born, we associated the moon with John F. Kennedy," writes McCann. "That's whose face we saw up there" (Mailer, *MoonFire* 16). But in the days and weeks surrounding moon landing, it was Mailer's voice that was heard. *MoonFire* makes that voice audible again today.

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