EXPLORING THE MYSTERY OF MARILYN

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Marilyn Monroe
By Norman Mailer/Burt Stern.
Words edited by J. Michael Lennon
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IN 1973, NORMAN MAILER PUBLISHED *MARILYN,* a biographical profile meant to be a twenty-thousand word piece, but which Mailer expanded to over one-hundred-thousand words after becoming deeply fascinated with Monroe during the writing process. The book, a bestseller that was released to a series of rave reviews, also featured a collection of pictures of Marilyn taken by a number of notable photographers, including Eve Arnold, Milton Greene, George Barris, and Bert Stern. *Marilyn Monroe*, an edited re-issue of *Marilyn*, might seem on the surface to be a pared down version of this initial publication, as it features an abridged version of Mailer's previous book (J. Michael Lennon, who edited Mailer's text, notes that he cut approximately twenty-thousand words from the earlier work) and includes only those photos shot by Stern in his now famous 1962 sitting with Monroe. The effect, however, is quite the opposite, with the final result invoking the sense that one is holding an enhanced rather than abbreviated version of the original.

Such an effect largely occurs as a result of the ways in which Mailer's text amplifies the narrative suggested by Stern's photos. In his introduction to this new edition, Larry Schiller (who conceived the idea for the reissue), claims that Stern's are now the "only" photographs that can illuminate Mailer's text (19). While this may be overstating the case to some degree, the

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expansive collection of Stern's photographs does serve to complement Mailer's text in a unique way, achieving a unified effect that a varied collection of pictures by different photographers with different visions in different locations simply cannot match. Moreover, Stern's photos present an image of Marilyn seemingly more consistent with that fashioned by Mailer. That is, while many of Eve Arnold and Milton Green's photos in the original 1973 publication depict a more youthful and buoyant Marilyn, Stern's offer us something else—an older and more subdued Marilyn, beginning to show her age and signs of stress that the un-retouched photos are unable to hide. Likewise, while the chronological structure of Mailer's book suggests that he will trace Marilyn's gradual decline, Mailer's Marilyn always already seems on the verge of implosion—vulnerable, insecure, and struggling. In this way, the image of Marilyn that comes through in Stern's photographs seems to invoke that sense of fragile poise masking an inner turbulence that Mailer's text also suggests.

This symbiotic relationship between Mailer's text and Stern's photographs also has much to do with each man's mission to find the essence of Marilyn, and their respective abilities to capture the complexity and nuance of character that often went overlooked during her lifetime. At the center of Mailer's work, specifically, is an obsession with the mystery surrounding Marilyn, from the strange coincidences that "spring underfoot like toadstools" throughout the duration of her life to the constant string of contradictions that define her personality (50). Part of this fascination likely arises from the various ways in which aspects of Mailer and Marilyn's lives overlapped. Like Marilyn, Mailer struggled with a controversial public image that threatened to overshadow his craft and at times led to misunderstandings and reductive assumptions about his personal character. It was, in fact, an awareness of this potential connection that led Larry Schiller to handpick Mailer to pen the original profile of Marilyn forty years ago, his rationale being that "if you could get a writer who has been run over by a lot of trucks, like Marilyn was, and found a way to survive each time, like Marilyn did, it might reveal the key to this deeply mysterious woman" (16).

Yet as Mailer himself notes in his biography, the problem was not just that the "real" Marilyn became overshadowed by the public's perception of her, but that, perhaps, there never was a real Marilyn to begin with. Even Marilyn seemed to acknowledge this, noting in what is now one of her most oft-cited quotes that she "belonged to the public and to the world" and "had

never belonged to anything or anyone else." Because of this conflation between a performed and authentic identity (however one chooses to separate those categories) both Mailer and Stern are left to constantly chase the "real" Marilyn. The difficulty in doing this, as Mailer writes, is that "the question of her sincerity is almost insurmountable" (86), for her life has become a "mat of factoids" generated by everyone surrounding Marilyn, and even by Marilyn herself (89). Interestingly, as an attempt to move away from such a reliance on hearsay, Mailer opted not to create a purely factual biography but instead chose to write what he called a "novel in the form of a biography," blending both fact and factoid with fiction and speculation, with the idea that such an approach might "possibly be more accurate than a fiction" as it provides more space to truly examine "the interior of many a closed and silent life" (8).

Though both Mailer and Stern are fascinated by the mystery that shrouds Marilyn's "closed and silent" life, however, Mailer's adoration of her seems different from that which comes through in Stern's photographs. Mailer's feelings toward Marilyn are more fraught, and at times ambivalent. On one hand, she is his "angel of sex;" she is "gorgeous, forgiving, humorous, compliant and tender" (25). She is also an "angel of cinema" and a "presence" onscreen: Mailer praises Marilyn's performance in nearly every one of her movies, noting that she stands out as the sole redeeming factor in even the most abysmal films (26). Yet Mailer's view of Marilyn is not myopic, and he does not mince words when it comes to imparting the details of her less appealing qualities. He draws attention, for example, to the many stories Marilyn told about her own life that seem sure to be either blatant lies at worst or stretched truths at best. Moreover, where she is "a female spurt of wit and sensitive energy," she could also "hang like a sloth for days in a muddy-mooded coma;" she can be both "a fountain of charm" and "a dreary bore," "a lover of life" and "a cowardly hyena of death" (29).

Still, the deeper one delves into Mailer's text, the more apparent it becomes that he loves Marilyn precisely because her life is messy and filled with these contradictions. In a sentence somewhat oddly reminiscent of his description of the hipster in "The White Negro," Mailer reminds us that "exceptional people . . . had a way of living with opposites in themselves that could only be called schizophrenic" (30). Marilyn, in his mind, was one of those people, unable to be completely understood because her opposites seem always to be at war with one another. For better or worse, the public

often tried to confine Marilyn to a single role: as the sexpot, the naïf, the ditzy blonde, and at times the home-wrecker, but to Mailer she is all of these and more. That embodiment of contradiction and multiplicity of character is what intrigues him, for it makes her "a woman with two personalities, each as complex and inconsistent as an individual" and "both are true, and always both, she is the whole and double soul of every human alive" (125). This complexity may have contributed to the alluring enigma that came to define Marilyn's persona, but also fashioned her into a conundrum that even she herself could not wholly decipher.

Many of Mailer's anecdotes punctuate the ways in which Marilyn was misunderstood as well as the ways she did not understand herself. For example, in 1960, shortly after hearing that Kay Gable accused her of being the cause of Clark Gable's fatal heart attack, Marilyn reportedly informed friends that she considered suicide—specifically, that she wanted to jump from the window of her high-rise apartment. "When next day she confesses how close she had come to jumping," Mailer writes, "her friends are certain she must move to Hollywood, and get a rented ranch house. With a single floor. She decides they are right" (235). The story of this bizarre misplacement of goodwill and wholly misguided advice offered by Marilyn's "friends," accepted without question by Marilyn and presented without comment by Mailer, speaks directly to the isolation in which she must have suffered.

Marilyn herself famously lamented that she "was always alone, no matter what," and just as Mailer's text acknowledges this aching loneliness, Stern's photos also punctuate this sense of solitude amidst a frenzy of public attention: in his photos, it is just Marilyn, against a simple and stark white background, with no props and no people. In stripping the set (and the subject) bare during his 1962 sitting, Stern anticipates Mailer's quest to reveal some idea of an authentic Marilyn amidst all of the publicity and mystery. As he says, "Pure Marilyn was what I wanted, and I didn't see what clothes had to do with it. Somehow getting her clothes off made the same kind of sense to me as going to Egypt to turn a pyramid upside down in a martini glass" (230). Yet in articulating his search for a "pure" Marilyn this way, Stern seems to unwittingly capture the very tragedy of Marilyn instead—her "pure" value lies only in her body, the answer to her appeal existing within her external presence rather than her internal character. This physicality is, of course, something she herself relished and on which she capitalized, but she also felt

its limitations—her body, in other words, was everything that built her up and brought her down.

Early in his profile, Mailer expresses a hope that his literary treatment of Marilyn might better interrogate her interiority, for as he suggests, "It is possible that there is no instrument more ready to capture the elusive quality of her nature than a novel" (8). In the end, Mailer's exploration of her contradictions, coupled with Stern's attempt to discover the essence of her allure, effectively *represent* this elusiveness—but Marilyn's mystery defies capture. Ultimately, the difficulty in unraveling the ambiguities and obscurities that mark Marilyn's personality seems to be that she herself was never quite sure who she was. Of her early professional successes, for instance, Mailer says that "the likelihood and the tragedy is that these are the years when she is giving more of herself than she will get back, and for too little, so that later when she is in love she will be able to offer less and must demand more—at the least we know that she cultivates her sexual sweetmeats in the sexlands of swamp and plague" (101). Such a sentence seems to comprise the central thrust of both Mailer's book and, to an extent, Stern's photographs: insightful, bittersweet, and even poetic, but also necessarily vague, so that the "elusive quality" of Marilyn remains as such.