

EXISTENTIAL AFFINITIES: MAILER ON MONROE

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NORMAN MAILER RARELY WROTE ABOUT ANYONE that he was not fascinated by or attracted to. A mega-celebrity who riveted the nation and ushered in her own sexual revolution, Marilyn Monroe offers the perfect subject for dissection. Monroe's life and career and certainly her death have caused much ink to flow, but Mailer's obsession with her ran deeper than the tabloid surface and explains, in part, how *Marilyn: A Biography* (1973) originally intended as an essay to accompany a photographic depiction of the star's life became a *new species* of novel that overwhelms its primary goal. Mailer employs his powers of observation, character development, and the dynamics of tension in the plot to such a degree that the photographs take second place.

Mailer's encounter with Monroe existed only on paper. Despite their contemporaneity, and much to his chagrin, they never met. While to some critics, Mailer's involvement in the project seemed self-serving and financially motivated, it is clear from examination of the text that Mailer's attraction to Monroe was both visceral and existential. Not having met Marilyn in the flesh provided a stimulus to the flow of the author's imaginative juices and unleashed his powers of creativity: her beauty, ambition, sexuality, celebrity, and recklessness seduced him. Their individual celebrity bordered on notoriety and made them both dangerous in the public mind. Above all, Mailer could identify with the loneliness and emptiness that result from this type of celebrity. He recognized himself in many of Marilyn's traits: the extreme riskiness Monroe displayed in her actions, the voraciousness for success, and the overarching ambition. Existential anxiety marked Monroe's life and

Mailer responded to her deepest fears. There are numerous areas in which they share traits but, since Norman is the author, it is important to *see* what he sees in his creation.

First, there is the search for identity that Marilyn pursued for most of her life. In existential philosophy, existence in and of itself is nothing, a zero; it precedes essence, and it is only through actions and choices that one creates an identity, a self. To a large extent, Norman had created himself and knew the struggle that such a feat entailed. Michael Lennon reminds us that any number of critics conceded that Norman Mailer was his own “most intriguing creation” (Lennon 704). Monroe’s constant search for her true self through her art and outside of it, eluded her. She failed to realize that she was creating an identity, authentic and inauthentic, throughout her life. According to reports from those close to her, Marilyn had a rich fantasy life; she played roles that were unseen by others and often seemed detached in social situations.

Norman recreates Marilyn in the structure itself of the book: the eight chapters begin with an apotheosis of her and proceed to her childhood, being Norma Jean, then Marilyn, Ms Monroe, the Jewish Princess and so forth. Mailer traces her metamorphosis from orphan to attractive but rather ordinary young woman, to model, then starlet, then luminous star of the silver screen. He takes us through her many incarnations—roles and husbands—and while he is seduced by her, he is never fooled by her.

Anna Magnani once referred to her rival, Sophia Loren, as “an avalanche of sex”; yet Loren was also a formidable actress. Marilyn, Loren’s American counterpart, might be better described as a slow lava flow of sexuality, whose burn cannot be escaped. Mailer, on the other hand, chose to contrast her with “those passionate brunette depths that speak of blood, vows taken for life if you are untrue” (Mailer 15). He sees Monroe as an “angel” who suggests that “sex might be difficult and dangerous with others but ice cream with her” (15). He calls her “deliverance” and “the Stradivarius of sex” and compares her face to “a sweet peach”; she seems to have “stepped fully clothed out of a chocolate box for Valentine’s Day”; she’s “desirable” (15). This description and similar passages in his text reveal to what extent Norman fell under Marilyn’s spell.¹

For the believer in reincarnation, Mailer notes that Marilyn was born the same year that Valentino died: one myth replacing another. Then the author

brings the reader up short when he abruptly exclaims: "What a joke to the dream life of the nation that the angel died of an overdose" (Mailer 15). Life and death go hand in hand.

These juxtapositions between lyric flourishes and brutal realities persist throughout the book and underscore Mailer's determination to undress Monroe in his role of novelist/biographer to reveal both her flaws and attributes. He understands her and cites Virginia Wolff on the multiple personalities an individual can have: not just six or seven but thousands. Just as Norman had fashioned himself, so too, Norma Jean created herself (Mailer 18).

A major tenet of Existentialism is the notion of revolt. Mailer remains a prime example of how an individual can achieve freedom by flaunting the rules of society, religion, and both sexual and literary taboos. From an early age, Norma Jean did not follow the group. Married at sixteen, she had no qualms about refusing to live with her in-laws when Jim Dougherty, her first husband, went to sea, or divorcing him to further her modeling career. That was only the beginning and she left a lot of wreckage in her wake.

In his novel, *The Counterfeiters*, André Gide explores the advantages that the bastard holds over most other individuals in society: the lack of usual ties to family, society, religion, and institutions allows the bastard access from the start to a freedom that others struggle to attain. Norma Jean was a bastard, so she was already free from many of the constraints that bind others. While her case is not so simple, it does reveal a lack of rootedness to any individual or place or belief. However, she did not profit enough from this elemental freedom that Gide describes. She was obsessed with the insanity of her grandmother and her mother and feared a similar fate for herself. Mailer states that illegitimacy and insanity are elements in the making of great actors. He fails to provide other examples, but the figure of Sarah Bernhardt comes to mind. Norma Jean was not just illegitimate, she was abandoned by both her mother and her father. As a result, the longing for both never left her and can be viewed as the root cause of her most self-destructive characteristics. She searched for surrogate mothers all her life and her insistence that her drama coaches be present on the set, first Natasha Lytess and then Paula Strasberg, did much to erode her relationship with directors, other actors, and the crew on her films. She also undercut her own talent by insisting on their presence. Without the surrogate mother/coach, she became

paralyzed and unable to perform. These negative elements served to exacerbate her insecurities.

Similarly, the search for a father figure—a man to protect and shelter her from the many cruelties she experienced in her life before and after stardom—never materialized. One of Monroe’s fantasies that she often shared with her fellow inmates at the orphanage, where she spent some of her teenage years, was that Clark Gable was her “secret” father. The lack of a father in her life contributed enormously to her “child-woman” persona that constantly reached out to men for protection. This aspect of her personality usually backfired and caused her to avenge herself on anyone on her radar screen: directors, fellow actors, husbands, lovers, and would-be lovers—no one escaped. Without being aware of it, she clearly was determined to seek revenge on men in general. She felt unloved and conceived of herself as unlovable, thus the multiple problems, delays, illnesses, depression, and dependence on drugs and alcohol to calm her down and get her to sleep. She was a complete insomniac. Some of the greatest directors in film history, John Huston, Billy Wilder, Laurence Olivier, Otto Preminger, were kept waiting for hours, days, and weeks. Even her idol, Clark Gable, was not exempt. To reassure herself of her powers to obtain love, she needed to seduce the entire world. In this regard, Mailer and Monroe part company. He was loved and even cherished by his family. His revolt was no less sincere but the confidence that the original love of his family provided never left him and helped him to rise above obstacles, often of his own creation, both interior and exterior. Mailer, as subject, accepted responsibility for his own creation, whereas, Monroe, so often casting herself as object, becomes far less authentic than he.

Seduction remains a key word in Monroe’s lexicon. Seducing the nation and most of the globe is no easy feat, and this is where Mailer stresses her basic narcissism. From a young age, she sought reassurance in the mirror. She had a love affair with the still camera and then with the moving-picture camera. She analyzed herself and how she photographed, and developed many tricks to enhance her good features and conceal any flaws. She *became* beautiful. She *willed* herself to be beautiful. Cameras became her alter ego and she made certain that they projected what *she* wanted to *be*. So, she created herself, much as Norman had done, albeit with different motivations.

Two of Marilyn’s costars from *Some Like It Hot* address her relationship

with the camera in different ways. Jack Lemmon observed: "Something happens when she's in front of the camera. It's something between her and the lens . . . a magnetism. A magic" (Curtis 124). Her other costar in the film, Tony Curtis, puts an even sharper point on the comment: "Marilyn loved being photographed by a man. For her, this was the ultimate aphrodisiac. It was more than that. It was a way to control someone. She needed to control everyone in her sphere" (Curtis 160). The control mentioned by Curtis became a constant in her life and career. Despite her efforts to control her father, the camera, and her mother, the coach, she did not feel secure. In many ways, she was already too damaged for the "control" she sought to make a difference. The camera as mirror eventually shattered.

Mailer labels her bargains with the Hollywood establishment, the Studios (even in her revolt against them) as "Faustian" (Mailer 17, 81) and he sees the self-destructive side of her behavior, much as he understood the aspects of his own often negative behavior to taunt the establishment. He "foresees" the soul-destroying aspect of her actions. When she forms her own production company, she still sabotages herself with negative behavior and expensive budget overruns. To add to the enormity of Monroe's bad faith bargains, Norman describes her as "Napoleonic" (Mailer 203, 210). She is out to conquer the world and she will come a cropper much as the Corsican outsider, who became Emperor of France, had. No better image than Napoleon could be used to describe Mailer's ambitions. Once again dominance in a field is projected and reflects both on the subject and the object—the man of letters and the sex goddess.

Marilyn's choice of husbands is central to comprehending her Napoleonic ambitions: after Dougherty, who can be viewed primarily as a jail-break marriage, she chose the legendary American athlete, Joe DiMaggio. Mailer is quick to note that she did not realize at first that DiMaggio was more idolized than she was. Except for their powerful physical attraction, there was little they shared. They did not have common goals and as soon as he attempted to alter her career plans, she divorced him. The marriage lasted only nine months. He never recovered. The photograph of DiMaggio at Marilyn's funeral (260) bears poignant witness to this and it is perhaps the most authentic photograph in the collection.

Continuing her sweep of the battlefield, Monroe actively pursued Arthur Miller, the consummate American intellectual: Jewish and eastern with con-

siderable success and even glory heaped upon him in their shared field. It is worth noting that Monroe's second and third marriages were accompanied by an orgy of publicity—all of which enhanced her image of desirability. Not unlike DiMaggio, Miller nourished her, protected her, loved her, and saved her during much of their relationship, which lasted ten years. He provided her with the final vehicle in her own march to glory, *The Misfits*. However, she humiliated him, betrayed him, and finally divorced him. He, too, never recovered, but at least could breathe easier after having escaped the no-exit situation in which he found himself with Marilyn.

Monroe's final target of heroic men was the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States. She ran many risks in this regard and the relationship turned out to be her personal Waterloo. She was not so much the victim, a role she played throughout her life, but more the reckless pursuer. Throwing caution to the wind, she lost the battle tragically and that loss has caused Marilyn to live on in a gruesome, voyeuristic fashion. Untold numbers of words have been written about the sex goddess who charmed the world; articles, essays, books, documentaries, dramatized chronologies are all available to anyone wishing to follow her desperate pursuit of happiness. A happiness that for the most part eluded a woman that so many wanted to please, court, and coddle.

Albert Camus had stated that there is only one true philosophical question: Is life worth living? As each individual replies to this most existential of questions, other choices become evident: the primary choice having been made. Marilyn Monroe responded to that question in the negative on August 4, 1962. The reigning sex goddess of America and the world died at home—alone on a Saturday night. The Sunday morning news stunned everyone, Norman Mailer not excepted.

NOTE

1. Curiously, Barbara Davis Norris read this passage in the Book-of-the-Month Club selection before she met Mailer and was impressed by his sensitivity and understanding of women. She notes, "This didn't sound like a rowdy war novelist at all" (83). She reread the passage several times "just to feel the words" (83).

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