

Texans, War Fever, and the Absence of the Female

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Abstract:

Developments since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, including the recent war in Iraq and its aftermath, have reminded us again that the U.S. are a large and very diverse country - in its geographical as well as social, cultural, and political dimensions; and yet the diversity tends to fold into almost unified action and opinion in times of crises. [...] In particular, in times of real or proclaimed national crises, one can observe upsurges of a male warrior attitude in public discourse whose declared goal is to destroy an - at least rhetorically - identified external enemy. [...] Women, though generally the majority of the U. S. population, are virtually absent in this discourse emphasizing the (male) body as weapon and the brotherhood of watchful men on whose technology-supported skills depends the welfare of the nation.

1 Developments since the terrorist attacks of 9-11, including the recent war in Iraq and its aftermath, have reminded us again that the U.S. are a large and very diverse country - in its geographical as well as social, cultural, and political dimensions; and yet the diversity tends to fold into almost unified action and opinion in times of crises. Attempts to give shape to this sometimes puzzling phenomenon have been numerous, from Tocqueville and Crèvecoeur to Thorstein Veblen and Max Weber, and on to Marshall MacLuhan, Umberto Eco, and Baudrillard. In literature, one might begin with Charles Brockden Brown and J. F. Cooper and continue with Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman to Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Mailer, Pynchon, Didion, Morrison, and John DeLillo. In particular, in times of real or proclaimed national crises, one can observe upsurges of a male warrior attitude in public discourse whose declared goal is to destroy an - at least rhetorically - identified external enemy. This discourse resembles the biblical ritual of the scapegoat whose just punishment guarantees the reestablishment of cosmic order:

As a rule, in Judaism, Islam, and Protestantism, responsibility for the world's sin is projected onto minority populations, strangers, and foreigners; those with tongues, customs, and pantheons alien to God's faithful. In collectively objectifying evil and positing it upon this external enemy, a sense of cleanliness of His "remnant" is created symbolically. Analogous to the Levitical rite of the scapegoat (Lev. 16:20-12), the projectors can "escape" from acknowledging the possibility of their own blemish. [...] Thus, mythologically, the holy war will be fought between the absolutely righteous and the equally absolute incarnation of Evil. Insofar as it exorcises the objectified evil, the ferocity of the violence in the war must reflect the enormity of the crime against God and man. [...] The Hebraic, the Muslim and Christian holy wars, both in myth and enactment, are among the most ruthless in human experience. (Aho 151)

Women, though generally the majority of the U. S. population, are virtually absent in this discourse emphasizing the (male) body as weapon and the brotherhood of watchful men on whose technology-supported skills depends the welfare of the nation. In the media society of



our time, symbolic visual actions and image bites go around the globe and achieve considerable signifying power. When Hollywood Star Leonardo Di Caprio outs himself as an environmentalist¹, he makes a clear statement to the world, and only hypercritical readers would argue that the fact that he prefers American hamburgers to organically grown food substantially diminishes his environmental stance. When U. S. President George W. Bush, early on in his "State of the Union" address of January 29, 2002, lists the liberation of Afghanistan women from the oppressive Taliban regime as a major achievement of his administration, he sends a powerful message to the women of the world that suffers little from the fact that two weeks later his Attorney General, John Ashcroft, uses US-\$ 8,000 of American taxpayers' money to drape the scantily clad classicist statues of The Spirit of Justice (female) and The Majesty of Law (male), because they make him "feel uncomfortable" (*Time*, Feb. 11 2002, 5.). In both cases, the "small print," even if it is parallel or close in time with the headline message, goes widely unnoticed by the global public. John Ashcroft's deed, however, not only brought forth a variety of critical responses; it also re-focuses attention on what are often considered particularly ambiguous "American" attitudes toward the human body, ranging from repression to admiration to commodification, especially toward its sensory/sensuous potential.

2 What I would like to do in this essay is read a not so frequently discussed novel of the late 1960s with regard to its possible significance for recent events and discourses, displayed in public statements of G. W. Bush and critical responses to them. The novel is Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), the primary public statements are G. W. Bush's "State of the Union" address of January 29, 2002, his national radio address of June 8, and several critical responses to them as well as to other acts of the current administration. What they have in common is that they respond to a situation of national crisis; their positions and their messages, though, could not be further apart. Yet I hope to be able to point out some interesting relations between them in my reading.

3 Mailer's answer to his title question in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a kind of fictional psychoanalysis of the collective American unconscious, and he employs striking metaphorical imagery to establish a complex network of popular myths and familiar American concepts of a patriarchal self. The voice of his adolescent protean narrator figure, D. J. ("Dr. Jekyll," "a Harlem spade," "Disc Jockey to America," etc.), sends his pre-recorded audio-tape message on the evening before he leaves for Vietnam. D. J.'s discourse combines Mailer's genital-scatological symbolism of the body including traces of Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and

¹ *Time*, Feb. 28, 2000; *Time* Earth Day 2000 Special Edition, April/May 2000, 80ff.

Norman O. Brown with elements of Marshall McLuhan's media theory and constitutes a kind of "electronic stream-of-consciousness." It uses a stylized hipster idiom of the '60s that dazzles the reader with images of a mindscape unfiltered by a rational and repressive consciousness. Interwoven in this lingo, and frequently disrupted by comments and asides, are D. J.'s memories of a hunting trip of well-to-do Texan corporate executives in Alaska two years before. In addition to D. J. and his buddy Tex Hyde (who is designed as D. J.'s alter ego), the participants are D. J.'s father Rusty Jethroe, a leading executive (= "High Grade Asshole") in the multinational corporation Central Consolidated Combined Chemical and Plastic (= "four C & P"), and two of his subordinates (WWV 34ff). The leader of the hunting party is Big Luke Fellinka, owner of the Moe Henry and Obungekat Safari Group, whose legendary reputation as successful big-game hunter has already been tarnished somewhat by too many years of profitable hunting trips with America's very rich. Under his guidance, the hunt becomes professionally organized slaughter. The use of helicopters and a formidable array of high-tech weaponry guarantees an enormous daily harvest of trophies, the quantifiable yardstick of social success among the members of the group; it also invites comparisons with the equally "performance oriented" parameter of the U.S. troops in Vietnam, the notorious "*body count*."

4 But Mailer goes far beyond suggesting superficial analogies between the hunting trip and Vietnam; he is looking for the roots of this unbridled joy of killing, of the fascination with high-tech overkill in the collective patriarchal American psyche. He articulates his belief that eventually all boils down to the accumulative and mutually reinforcing effects of repressive sexual norms, secularized versions of the Puritan work ethic, business interests and the military-industrial complex, American imperialism backed by an unbroken sense of mission, the belief in "manifest destiny," and a holy fear of everything that does not conform to the WASP way of life - including the notorious suppression and commodification of the body, human or animal. Mailer's discourse is one of continuous deferral of fixed meanings - intertextual references abound, often masked as informal inserts in stream-of-consciousness passages, evoking ephemeral poetical images that are continuously modified and expanded, suggesting new horizons of meaning. The very first paragraph of the novel may serve as a good example:

Hip hole and hupmobile, Braunschweiger, you didn't invite Geiger and his counter for nothing, here is D. J. the friendLee voice at your service - hold tight young America - introductions come. Let go of my dong, Shakespeare, I have gone too long, it is too late to tell my tale, may Batman tell it, let him declare there's blood on my dick and D. J. Dicktor Doc Dick and Jek has got the bloods, and has done animal murder, out out damn fart, and murder of the soldierest sort, cold was my hand and hot. (WWV 7)

The alliterative punning following the "hip" at the beginning of the quote signals language register as well as target audience of the narrator, reinforced by one of several allusions to William Burrough's *Naked Lunch* in "friendLee," and further specified by "young America." The reference to *Naked Lunch* is more than just a nod to the author's literary mentor and also suggests other affinities with Burrough's novel, e.g. D. J.'s "grassed out" state, but most of all the attempt of both authors to cast a critical eye on power games in U. S. society. The rhyming connection between "Braunschweiger" and "Geiger" at first seems a bit forced, at best justified by their common origin in the German language. However, by separating the traditional connection of *Geiger* and *counter*, *counter* - referring back to *Braunschweiger* - also suggests the meaning of the store counter over which both objects - resembling each other in their oblong shape - are being sold. The semantic tension of *sausage* and *radio-active detecting device*, together with *service*, evokes the theme of commodities and consumerism in a technologically highly advanced society. In addition, the function of the Geiger counter introduces modern physics, which plays an important role in this novel: the invisible field of electro-magnetic forces is a central metaphor for Mailer's metaphysics and its images of the analogies of cosmic energy and the human unconscious.

5 With "dong" the second sentence of the quotation adds a sexual dimension to the range of possible meanings of cylindrical objects and thus also lends new connotations to other phrases of the previous sentence, like "hold tight young America" and "introductions come." The juxtaposition of Shakespeare and Batman, of canonized classical author and cartoon hero, together with repeated allusions to the potential phallic element in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, places the events to come in a postmodern frame. "Doc Dick and Jek" remind us of Walt Disney's *Tick, Trick and Track*, encompassing the children's world of popular comics as well as the phantastic male ideal of Batman, while foreshadowing the schizophrenic world of Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hide. The second part of the second sentence specifies the references to Shakespeare with idiosyncratic variations of passages from *Macbeth*, which in themselves evoke the genital-scatological character of Mailer's manichean cosmology as we know it from his writings like "The Metaphysics of the Belly," "The Economy of Time," "The White Negro," and as it is explored almost *ad nauseam* in his later novel, *Ancient Evenings*.

6 The contamination, as one might call it, of "out, damn'd spot" (*Macbeth* 5.01.35) and "out, out, brief candle" (*Macbeth* 5.05.23) into "out out damn fart," relates the murder of the king in Shakespeare's play, an expression of a ruthless competition for power, to the excremental realm of Mailer's private symbolism. Derived from Norman O. Brown's psychoanalytical version of Max Weber's theory of protestant ethics, this power struggle is for

Mailer the expression of a perverted Eros whose creative potential turns to (body) "waste" because it is obsessed with the domination of others as the only available means of self-affirmation. "Animal murder" emphasizes the fact that murder belongs to the irrational side of humans, while also pointing to the concrete plot of the novel, the slaughtering of Alaska's animal world, and especially of its "king," the Grizzly Bear. "Murder of the soldierest sort" establishes the link between Macbeth's deed - as one of the king's soldiers and loyals - and the title of the novel, and thus completes the analogy between the high-tech bear hunt in the wilderness of the US North and the US engagement in Vietnam.

7 The final phrase of this passage, "cold was my hand and hot," re-connects with the initial connotations of hipsters and drugs: whereas cold means "bad, unfeeling, insensitive," *hot* has the special connotation of "sexually aroused," once more locating the roots of murderous aggression in a perversion of our erotic/sexual drives. Additional connotations of *cold* and *hot*, which in the drug scene suggest the depressive effects of heroin and the arousing effects of cocaine, respectively, place the murderer's state into yet another context; at the same time, they also foreshadow the theme of the following paragraph, which discusses Marshall McLuhan's differentiation of "hot" and "cool" media (cf. McLuhan esp. 22-32).

8 Alliteration and internal rhyme, atypical syntax and transformative word play surround the readers in a cloud of sounds that not incidentally evokes McLuhan's commentaries on acoustic perception: "The ear favors no particular 'point of view'. We are *enveloped* by sound. [...] We hear sounds from everywhere, without ever having to focus" (McLuhan/Fiori 111). Here, the rhetorical/acoustic redundancy corresponds to the semantic one - a case of Roland Barthes' "plurality of stereophonic voices," (Barthes 159f) or maybe Mikhail Bakhtin's "polyphony" and "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin 368-69): connecting common knowledge, transmogrified Shakespeare quotes and popular myths, already the first ten lines of Mailer's novel establish the kind of kaleidoscopic indeterminacy that characterizes the whole text, a discourse which constantly changes the frequency of its quasi-electronic stream-of-consciousness and thus, ultimately, creates strings of meanings that compete with each other for validity.

9 While McLuhan sees electronic media as "extensions of our senses," for Mailer they are even more powerful instruments to further *reduce* what little space is left for the irrational, creative and vital part of ourselves: by quantifying them as units of electrical energy, they operationalize basic human moods, emotions, desires, and feelings caused by sensory perceptions, thus making them accessible for - and subject to - scientific models of thought. The body and all its primary functions have become objects of high-tech manipulation. At the

end of the novel, it is because of their understanding of man and world in terms of bio-electric currents and electro-magnetic fields that the two adolescents, D. J. and Tex, fail in their attempt to achieve a state of harmony with nature, even though they sneak away from the adults and walk into the Alaskan wilderness unarmed. Their initiation under the cold light of the *aurora borealis* comes in the telepathic message of an archetypal animal godhead who shows no human qualities:

[...] yea God was here, and He was real and no man was He, but a beast, some beast of giant jaws and cavernous mouth with a full cave's breath and fangs [...] and God said "Go out and kill - fulfill my will, go and kill," and they hung there each of them on the knife of the divide in all conflict of lust to own the other yet in fear of being killed by the other and as [...] the lights shifted, something in the radiance of the North went into them [...] and they were twins, never to be near as lovers again, but killer brothers, owned by something, prince of darkness, lord of light, they did not know. (WWV 202-204)

In view of Mailer's sometimes rather misogynist life and work, it may come as a bit of a surprise to recognize that what is missing in this archetypal and homoerotically charged initiation scene is the *female principle*; different from most hunter myths (cf. J. Campbell, R. Slotkin, Daniel-Boone myth, etc.), all representatives of nature in Mailer's Alaskan world are male. The animal godhead revealing himself can be seen as allegorical apotheosis of our death wish - Freud's Thanatos - whose alluring "come to me" (WWV 202) the two adolescents can barely resist: "They could almost have got up and walked across the pond and into the north without their boots, going up to disappear and die and join that great beast" (WWV 202). Here, a mystic union with the "spirit of nature" would not be a fertile act of the male and female principle, but simply mean death. This abortive relation between God and man parallels the one between male and male for the two boys during their phase of erotic desire for each other as quoted above. The absence of a complementary female principle would make a possible sexual act between them not a creative union but merely a competition between two representatives of the same principle, the weaker yielding to the stronger, suggesting a sterile form of power struggle leading to violence and death. For the two boys, the solution in this moment is "male bonding" - they become "killer brothers," turning their joint destructive potential outward, as a life-denying substitute for the creative sexual union they cannot achieve. Two years after this experience, the two "killer brothers" (WWV 204) go to Vietnam.

10 As Mailer sees it, the tension between our loss of faith in the irrational, on the one hand, and the growing scientific symbol systems for understanding ourselves and the world, on the other, have produced "a fiercely controlled schizophrenia" (Mailer, *Armies* 212), which

for him is the primary cause for aggressive behavior on an individual as well as national scale. The ultimate cause for this aggressiveness is a state of fundamental insecurity, an existential angst á la Kierkegaard, closely related to the repression of the irrational side - the body - in human nature. It manifests itself in the continuous need to take possession of the Other, as an obsessive pattern of self-(re)assurance that never brings more than temporary satisfaction - in Sigmund Freud's terms, a classical pattern of neurosis.

11 Mailer's most scathing and irreverent indictment of this attitude appears in the middle of the novel when Rusty, having failed to prove himself as the top big-game hunter in front of his subalterns, ruminates in distress about the possible consequences of this embarrassing situation:

Yeah, sighs Rusty, the twentieth century is breaking up the ball game, and Rusty thinks large common thoughts such as these: 1 - The women are free. They fuck too many to believe one can do the job. 2 - The Niggers are free, and the dues they got to be paid are no Texan virgin's delight. 3 - The Niggers and women are fucking each other. 4 - The yellow races are breaking loose. 5 - Africa is breaking loose. 6 - The adolescents are breaking loose including his own son. 7 - The European nations hate America's guts. 8 - The products are no fucking good any more. 9 - Communism is a system guaranteed to collect dues from all losers. 9a - More losers than winners. 9b - and out: Communism is going to defeat capitalism unless promptly destroyed. [...] 11 - The white men are no longer champions in boxing. 12 - The great white athlete is being superseded by the great black athlete. 13 - The Jews run the Eastern wing of the Democratic party. 14 - Karate, a Jap sport, is now prerequisite to good street fighting. 15 - The sons of the working class are running around America on motorcycles. 16 - Church is out, LSD is in. 17 - He, Rusty, is fucked unless he gets that bear, for if he don't, white men are fucked more and they can take no more. Rusty's secret is that he sees himself as one of the pillars of the firmament, yeah, man - he reads the world's doom in his own fuckup. If he is less great than God intended him to be, then America is in Trouble. They don't breed Texans for nothing. (WWV 110-111)

Adding contemporary problems to familiar nightmares of the Southern white male, the laconic presentation of well-worn clichés in the pseudo-rational argument lends satirical force to this passage. Rusty's gloomy view of himself, triggered by his personal failure, is something we may be able to sympathize with; but its global projection shows signs of an ethnocentric self-righteousness, reminiscent of the one entertained by the New England Puritans (and many other European missionaries at the time) when they saw themselves as the chosen people in the wilderness. Here is a passage from Increase Mather's introduction to the Indian wars of 1675:

That the Heathen People amongst whom we live, and whose land the Lord God of our Fathers hath given to us for a rightful Possession have [...] been planning mischievous devices against that part of the English Israel which is seated in these goings down of the sun, no Man that is an Inhabitant of any considerable standing, can be ignorant. (Mather 1, in Slotkin 83)

While Mather's self-image may be validated by religious beliefs and the historical situation, Rusty's Jeremiad comes across as compensating aggressiveness of a power elite that tries to hide the lack of an ethical and ideal core of their claim for supremacy behind meaningless macho rituals. Fears of liberated female sexuality here suggestively link up with racism, and loss of manhood and sexual prowess equals loss of social and political power and control, on the individual as well as national level. Rusty's catalogue of imagined woes and dangers also makes it very clear that in Mailer's world of Texas corporate executives, eroticism is little more than a difficult word in a spelling bee or the suggestive wording on a sophisticated night bar ad. As the name of the only female figure in the novel, Rusty's wife "Hallelloo Death-row Jethroe," suggests, and her comments on choice details from the intimate life of the Dallas upper crust reveal, eroticism is virtually absent from this world (cf. 19ff.). Eros, for over 2,500 years a term invoking a mysterious, irrational, seductive, untamed and inexplicable life force, has been replaced by rational technology and social engineering in a society that leaves little space for the irrational in everyday life. Yet the irrational can never be truly replaced, though it may be displaced or repressed.

12 For Mailer, this is the almost pathological force behind the destruction of Alaska's wildlife as well as the US involvement in Vietnam; it is the force that reduces the eros of sexuality to an act of mere physical possessing and thus to a competitive power-game, and it explains the desire for an ever-growing control of social life by means of state-of-the-art electronic surveillance technology.² In opposition to McLuhan, electronics for Mailer do not offer us the chance to regain the lost sense of trust and security between the I and the world in the information community of a global village.

13 Today, some of Mailer's radical critique appears exaggerated, some dated. Other aspects, however, still seem to be quite relevant. What Mailer suggests is that the war in Vietnam was, if not a logical, so at least a psycho-logical consequence of certain "civilian" attitudes and patterns in the U. S. which encourage the belief in a Manichean cosmology and envision the ideal American as God's soldier in the fight against evil. Needless to say, the body of this soldier is an instrument of power and death rather than a source of pleasure and fertility, as the "killer brothers" D. J. & Tex exemplify.

14 On this level, Mailer's critique of 1967 appears to be of almost uncanny topicality. One should recall that on March 8, 1983, speaking before church leaders in Florida, then US President Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union the seat of "evil in the world." With USSR

² Cf. also Mailer's arguments in *Cannibals and Christians*, pp. 1-4, and in *The Armies of the Night*, esp. pp. 172-175.

President Gorbatchev and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989, the demonizing Cold War rhetoric temporarily disappeared from US public statements. Yet it was speedily revived in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9-11-2001. For his 2002 "State of the Union Address" on January 23, President George W. Bush's speech writers coined the term "axis of evil;" apart from the fact that the two terms are also "four-letter words," they are a clever choice of phrase that evokes the Axis powers of World War II as well as the Cold War, and also suggests an American moral superiority of the fundamentalist kind. This rhetoric places the USA once again on the side of God in a primeval show-down against the forces of darkness in which American soldiers' bodies - and their electronic and high-tech armored extensions - are the primary weapons.

15 However, fairly obvious similarities may be misleading and can distract us from looking beyond them at more interesting aspects. Public statements like the "State of the Union" addresses have over the years developed their specific rhetorical conventions, and certain formulas have become an absolute necessity (see Goetsch/Hurm). Especially in times of crisis or war, a depiction of "us" versus "them" in black and white has become part of the standard repertoire, as have oppositions like rational/irrational, good/evil, just/unjust, freedom/oppression, peaceful/aggressive, brave/cowardly, etc., together with the emphasis on the role of the USA as victim of aggression and/or defender of a threatened peace (Goetsch/Hurm 73 ff.). Likewise, and quite independent of the actual state of affairs, speakers traditionally confirm American strength and determination ("Yet the state of our Union has never been stronger!"), point to the uniqueness of this particular historical moment, and express their conviction that the nation will emerge victorious.

16 In President George W. Bush's address, the combination of "war against terrorism" and "homeland security," with the envisioned beneficiary effects of "safer neighborhoods" resulting from "the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters [...], stronger police [...] stricter border enforcement [...]" and America's dependence on "the eyes and ears of alert citizens" convey connotations which, I must confess, for my ears have an ominous ring to them. To all of this, in his radio speech on June 8, 2002, Bush adds the prospect of a centralized information gathering institution, since realized in the shape of the Department of Homeland Security.

17 Let us situate this rhetoric in the context of recent major business malpractice (like the Enron, Worldcom, Xerox, Andersen Consulting, AOL, 3M, etc. scandals); the neglect of environmental concerns (the unsigned Kyoto agreement, oil projects in Alaska natural reserves, cutting of funds for cleaning up toxic waste sites), blatant violations of civil liberties

in connections with people detained for months without legal assistance following 9-11, plans to expand the rights of FBI and other intelligence agencies, the decision to dramatically upgrade military weapon systems, and Mr. Bush's recent considerations to end the congressional ban on "small" nuclear arms. What emerges looks like the profile of a society threatened domestically by ruthless business interests and besieged by an overpowering external enemy, determined to protect itself with the help of superior military technology and all-out information surveillance, electronic as well as personal, appealing to values like "service," "sacrifice," and "fierce brotherhood" - Rusty Jethroe's Jeremiad, the high-tech weaponry of the Alaska hunters, as well as the lethal "brotherhood" of D. J. and Tex come readily to mind.

18 To make it clear - I am not commenting here on the pragmatic effectiveness of whatever policies are adopted by the current U. S. administration, nor do I intend to draw superficial analogies. What strikes me as worth contemplating are the structural and thematic affinities to Norman Mailer's critical fictional analysis of U. S. society in 1967, then in another state of crisis. They seem to imply - and some people might find THIS a bit alarming - that conceptual changes in the mind of American male leadership over the past 35 years have not been very significant. Noam Chomsky, famous linguist turned activist, and an acknowledged representative of liberal intellectuals, in a recent interview does not mince his words: "Sept. 11 was just a gift to them and to other harsh and repressive elements throughout the world" (Holt).

19 Moreover, the absence of a female principle, in Mailer's novel one of the main causes for individual as well as institutional violence, seems to continue. The U. S. Attorney General's censure of even allegorical nude bodies, as mentioned in the beginning, comes across as a rather infelicitous act of symbolic repression directed against the return of the repressed. If or how Norman Mailer commented on this is not known. It is refreshing to see, though, that the Attorney General's action has spawned some quite outspoken criticism, among it also an eruption of the feminine into the male world of Texan militancy, from the American artists' grassroots.³ It is the text of an open letter to John Ashcroft that in the summer of 2002 is being circulated throughout the internet. Its author is described as "a woman of 60+ years, conservatively dressed, and obviously quite talented" (Braz-Valentine). Her name is Claire Braz-Valentine; she read her text (which has since been set as a poem) in

³ Other responses are also quite clear, like that of the singer and film star Cher: "What are we going to do next? Put shorts on the statue of David, put an 1880s bathing suit on Venus, rising a shirt on the Venus de Milo?" in *The Washington Post*, Monday March 4, 2002; or Mark Morford, well-known columnist of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, January 30, 2002, in his rather outspoken essay "John Ashcroft's Perilous Nipples - In Which the Desperately Dour Attorney General Covers up Justice and Law, Appropriately."

public at the annual *In Celebration of the Muse* festival at Cabrillo College, California, on March 14, 2002, and I quote the following passages:

John, John, John, you've got your priorities all wrong. [...] So, in your office every morning in your secret prayer meeting, while an American woman is sexually assaulted every 6 seconds, while anthrax floats around the post office and settles in the chests of our citizens... you've got another chest on your mind. [...] And when we women see our grandmothers, our mothers, our daughters, our grand-daughters, our sisters, ourselves [...] when we women see that statue, the Spirit of Justice, we see the spirit of strength and the spirit of survival. While you look at that breast, John, that jug on the Spirit of Justice, and deal with your problems of lust and sex and nakedness, we see it as a testimony to motherhood. [...] and you see it as a tit. It's not the money it cost. It's the message you send: We've got the right to live in freedom. We've got the right to cheat Americans out of millions of dollars and then just not want to tell congress about it. So, now John, you can be photographed while you stand there and talk about guns and bombs and poisons without the breast appearing over your right shoulder, without that bodacious bosom bothering you, and we just wanted to tell you in the spirit of justice, in the spirit of truth: [...] John, there is still one very big boob left standing there in that picture!

I find this spirited statement a wonderfully appropriate female complementary to Mailer's rough discourse; it recovers the "whuman" quality of the body and its erotic potential, evoking the whole range of sensuality, emotion, beauty, and idealism that Eros has symbolized over millenia, while its "motherly" discourse relegates John Ashcroft's misconceptions about the beauty and significance of nude bodies to the realm of a little boy's very displaced ideas of eroticism and the importance of the female. *Pars pro toto*, this critique includes the administration which installed Ashcroft in his current office.

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