



Tell Him Something Pretty

Robert Herritt

The story goes that after he submitted an early draft of *Deadwood* to HBO, David Milch, the show's creator, had some explaining to do. The script's use of obscenity was so brazen and voluminous that it made even that network's higher-ups, themselves no strangers to salty language, a little uneasy. Surely a show set in a mining camp during the 1870s Black Hills Gold Rush had no need for dialogue so drenched in profanity. And wasn't Milch's choice of words—top-dollar expletives hardly unfamiliar to today's ears—anachronistic anyway? If he wanted to work this blue, he'd have to provide a reason.

In reply to the executives, the former Yale literature instructor penned a short essay, substantiated with four pages of references, defending the foulness of his language as true to the show's time and place, as well as to the characters themselves. Whether his argument was sound or his research conclusive is mostly beside the point. Milch was deploying his skills as a theoretician to give

himself cover for what he wanted to do anyway.

His maneuver was only fitting for a show that so aptly dramatized the very human tendency to back-fill and rationalize, to shoot first and give answers later. In the world Milch creates, reasoning, thought, speech, and even laws and institutions are largely after-the-fact enterprises, things people come up with to make sense of others' actions, to make their own actions intelligible, and, as in Milch's case, to ratify situations that already obtain. *Deadwood* is a place where the subterranean forces that shape human affairs are close to the surface, revealing the plans, theories, customs, and laws that people impose on their predicaments as mostly incidental, their meaning a consequence of time and repetition.

For those who haven't had the pleasure, *Deadwood* tells the story of how an illegal settlement on Sioux land, populated by deviants and individualists and lacking in formal laws, gave rise to an organized community and, eventually, a recognized part

of the Dakota Territory—today the city of Deadwood, South Dakota. Loosely based on historical characters and events, the story unfolds over the course of three seasons, aired between 2004 and 2006, after which the series was abruptly canceled before reaching anything like a satisfying conclusion.

A feature-length movie, which premiered on HBO in May and is set a decade on from the original series, is the closest the show's devotees are likely to get to that long-awaited ending. It also offers a welcome excuse for reconsidering *Deadwood* and its lowly view of human reason—something I wanted to do anyway.

One of the first things to notice about *Deadwood* is how quickly the settlement comes into being. The camp we see in the first episode is only

months old. But its thoroughfare is already a lively site of commerce and labor, lined with buildings in various stages of completion and tents where residents can purchase meat, whiskey, and prospecting equipment.

How civil society can arise so rapidly in a place without law is among the show's richest themes. One could easily read *Deadwood* as a state-of-nature theory brought to life, a story about how free adults guided by self-interest might actually come together to form a functioning society. Both Locke and Hobbes, two of the most notable practitioners of this sort of theory, cited America, and specifically Indian lands untouched by European influence, as a real-life instance of the state of nature they each envisioned. "In the beginning," Locke writes in his *Second Treatise of Government*, "all the world was *America*."



Deadwood under construction

Viewed as a genealogical thought experiment, the show reveals what might be needed to get something resembling a community off the ground, and how that community might become a bona fide political society through a series of events guided by no person in particular. What begins as a practical endeavor for furthering commerce and serving prospectors takes on a life of its own, growing into something worth sustaining for its own sake.

By *Deadwood's* third season, even a murderous operator like Al Swearingen—owner of the Gem saloon, pimp, thief, and the camp's de facto boss—has expanded his concerns beyond his own gain. As he tells his friend Jack Langrishe, head of a touring theater troupe, one evening while standing on the Gem's balcony, aside from satisfying his sexual desires, "I've no...ambition past trading to my favor." That might have been true when he first arrived in *Deadwood*, but not anymore, as Langrishe is quick to remind him: "Bullshit! A thing of this order you'd as soon not see ruined or in cinders."

Such is the process by which the political realm emerges in *Deadwood*. When laws and institutions appear on the scene, they aren't instruments of progress, but of stability and maintenance. They are ways of protecting and perpetuating order that has arisen already. "*Deadwood* exists," a corrupt magistrate tells Swearingen as they consider how

the Dakota legislature might view the settlement's legal standing. "We don't have to create it. It would be disruptive if we did."

This is just one of the ways in which *Deadwood* inverts a certain rationalist picture of the social and political—of top-down, technocratic deliberation as the ideal of proper action. What the series shows us time and again is a sequence of unplanned, impulsive, or unexpected actions, the professed motivations for which are tacked on to suit other purposes.

So it is with one of the first season's pivotal events, the murder of Wild Bill Hickok by Jack McCall, who shoots the legendary gunfighter in the back in a fit of confused rage. During a meeting with his assigned attorney, McCall admits, "I'm a hard case for you, counselor. And no mistake, everyone in there saw me shoot him." "If you'll let me set our strategy," his lawyer replies, "I don't think we'll dispute what people saw."

McCall: Now, I guess you're here to break me out.

Lawyer: Son, did James Butler Hickok ever kill a relative of yours?

McCall: James Butler Hickok?

Lawyer: Wild Bill Hickok. Did he ever kill a brother of yours or, or the like?



Jack McCall (Garret Dillahunt) and his lawyer (uncredited) in a meat locker serving as a makeshift jail.

McCall: A brother?

Lawyer: I'm asking you if what happened in that saloon was vengeance—for the death of a family member? Possibly a brother in Abilene. Or the like.

McCall: A brother in Abilene.

McCall's defense will rest not on denying he killed Hickok, but on contriving a suitable reason for why he did. The murderer's exoneration is helped along by the fact that more than a few residents have a stake in it, not least Swearngen. As he sees things, convicting and executing a murderer might hurt the camp's chances of getting annexed to the United States: The nation's lawmakers could claim that Deadwood is a renegade government, and treat

it with the same respect it has the natives, claiming its riches for themselves and their "ne'er-do-well cousins and brothers-in-law." In this way, Milch shows how our retellings of events, and our recounting of our own motivations, are often tools for obscuring some unsavory reality, or at least making it more palatable. They are, as Swearngen says in the closing line of the series, attempts to "tell [us] something pretty."

How fitting, then, that someone like E. B. Farnum, a man governed almost entirely by greed, envy, and resentment, is also the most skilled talker, forever dressing up his unscrupulous nature with verbiage conspicuously ornate even by *Deadwood's* standards. Farnum also secures himself the title of mayor, a post even he admits is "largely ceremonial."

Deadwood's most honest residents are the ones least adept at rationalizing their feelings and actions. This is certainly true of Trixie, who begins the series as a prostitute at the Gem and Swaengen's lover. Unlike Farnum, the intricacy and vulgarity of Trixie's speech is a true expression of her complicated thoughts, judgments, and emotions. She seems always to speak directly from her soul, making no effort to apologize, much less to justify herself.

Something similar can be said of another of the camp's more upright inhabitants, Seth Bullock, who fled the role of marshal in Montana to become a hardware proprietor in Deadwood, but eventually finds the star pinned again on his chest. Bullock doesn't go in much for just-so stories that vindicate his occasional spasms of violence and animosity. "Reason," Swaengen explains to Langrishe about the sheriff, "ain't his long suit." And so we frequently find Bullock mystified by his own behavior, as he is after volunteering to serve as the camp's health commissioner—ostensibly to avoid being appointed sheriff. Sitting with his best friend and business partner Sol Starr on the porch of their hardware store that evening, Bullock laments his own "mettlesome nature," explaining that, "What I've done, Sol—and you have to admire me for it—is move three hundred miles to set the same damn situation up I left Montana to get away from." Bullock, of course, is no more opaque

to himself than are most of the others. What sets him apart is that he admits as much.

That our thoughts and reasons are, in a sense, downstream from the true causes of our behavior might seem like a view at home in a materialist picture of the world. But what we see in Deadwood is something different altogether: an environment suffused with agency in which our individual intentions play only a small part.

In *Deadwood's* very first scene, Bullock surmises that his recently acquired gunshot wound "don't look like it wants to infect." The miner Ellsworth encourages a fellow prospector about his newly acquired gold claim, "'Twix nuggets or nothin', she's usually gonna show you some flake." Doc Cochran, the camp's physician, implores Calamity Jane to change her hard-drinking ways by explaining how "Nature is a forgiving mistress, and you might could have some time to fill before she collects her due." Swaengen informs his right hand, Dan Doherty, who has offered to intervene in an escalating spat between his boss and Bullock, "No, that ain't how this wants to resolve." The mining magnate and *Deadwood's* chief villain George Hearst refers to himself as "the boy the earth talks to."

This is a universe in which intention, human or otherwise, is everywhere, and survival and success isn't

a matter of imposing one's will but of deciphering the import of these winds and currents and turning them toward one end or another, as both Bullock and Swearingen each try do in their own ways. Swearingen can be found daily on the Gem's balcony, observing the goings-on below and working on his "deployments and flanking maneuvers."

For Bullock, blind principle is a means of managing his own nature, with varying degrees of success. It's only after being reminded of this fact by a visiting general that Bullock finally relents, agreeing to become the camp's sheriff. "In a camp where the sheriff can be bought for bacon grease," the general tells him, "a man, a former marshal, who understands the danger of his own temperament, he might consider serving his fellows."

It's worth noting that neither of the show's two central characters—Swearingen and Bullock—is a miner, one of those who arrive in Deadwood to assault nature and extract their fortune from the ground by sheer mechanical force. Whatever wealth the two men have they've acquired as merchants, standing behind a counter or sitting behind a desk, waiting for human nature to bring the gold to them. Like many of the show's characters, they are improvisers in touch with the idea that, as Calamity Jane puts it, "Every day takes figuring out all over again how to...live."

By contrast, it's often those characters in thrall to some detached notion of truth or reason who are the most clueless. Here, A. W. Merrick, editor of the camp's newspaper, the Black Hills *Pioneer*, is the purest example. The closest thing the camp has to an intellectual or idealist, Merrick is a man of words more than action, as is illustrated nicely during his encounter with Bullock, Starr, and Charlie Utter after breakfast one morning at Farnum's hotel:

Merrick: Gentlemen, what's to prevent us from freeing our friendship from dependence on that little dining room? Relying not on happenstance and appetite to further commerce between us, but on our own conscious choice?

Utter: Meanin' what?

Merrick: Meaning, Mr. Utter, the most informal and disorganized of clubs.

Seth: We gotta open [the store], Sol.

Utter: Yeah, I don't join clubs.

Merrick: Ah, now, its sole purpose could be just walking together as we are now.

Sol: Well, why don't we just walk together when we happen to be out?

Merrick: We could, we could, or we could dedicate ourselves to the principle of walking together.



A. W. Merrick (Jeffrey Jones) proposes forming a club to his friends Charlie Utter (Dayton Callie), Seth Bullock (Timothy Olyphant), and Sol Star (John Hawkes).

Would it—maybe all we need is a name.

Merrick succumbs to a classic fallacy. Wished-for social arrangements are rarely brought about by “conscious choice.” Nor do names create circumstances that weren’t real already. Words usually come after.

But nobody is wholly innocent of this kind of folly. Those who arrive in Deadwood in its early days are running from the established world, eager to remake themselves according to their own design in a place uncorrupted by the customs and expectations of the past—a rationalist project if there ever was one. Swearingen is on the run from a murder warrant. Bullock abandons a life as a lawman for that of a merchant, while Ellsworth at the show’s

opening relishes being “beholden” to no one. What they find is that their inheritances can’t be so easily jettisoned. Swearingen’s warrant almost catches up with him. Bullock ends up sheriff after all. Ellsworth’s innate sense of duty and decency leads him to marriage and fatherhood.

That, of course, was then. The Deadwood we find in *Deadwood: The Movie* has a somewhat different character, and a new legal status to go with it. (Mild spoilers for the movie ahead.) Its streets are no less alive than in the show’s first episode, except this time it isn’t the pragmatic demands of commerce that animate the thoroughfare, but nearly the opposite: ceremony—specifically, the 1889 South Dakota Statehood Celebration. It’s one of several ceremonies that

punctuate the film. Among the others are a funeral, a wedding, an auction, and what could be described as last rites, each of which serves as a marker of how far Deadwood has come since we last saw it roughly ten years earlier. The town is now a place where people celebrate and preserve what they have achieved instead of knifing each other to get more. And the movie presents less as a conclusion than a formal remembrance and farewell.

Nevertheless, the elements of human nature that shaped the events of the original series are still on display. There is plenty of treachery and murder and greed in this legitimized Deadwood, but the rationale given for this wrongdoing is far more lofty than we are used to, mostly going by the name “progress.” This is the watchword of George Hearst, now a senator from California, who comes to Deadwood not only to christen its membership in the United States but to run telephone wires through its hills, all the while preaching a gospel of progress through communication technology to anyone who will listen, including his old whipping-boy, the mayor, E. B. Farnum.

Hearst: Stall progress he may, stop it he cannot. Every business, Mr. Farnum, in this territory thrives as a direct result of communication. Now we’ve no say as to the pace of modernity’s advance. I myself am merely its vessel. A humble foot soldier. Its

inevitability is the deepest tru—
What is wrong with you...to be shifting your feet so incessantly?!

Farnum: The procession of years.
Wantin’ leakage.

Farnum deflates Hearst’s airy paeon with an unwitting reminder that time brings both improvement and deterioration. What Hearst touts as modernity’s gift many in Deadwood see for what it is: a threat to all they have built from a man bent on dominance through destruction. It’s a fitting reversal for a place stolen from the Sioux under the guise of another high-flown philosophy of progress.

As in the original series, Bullock is one of Hearst’s chief adversaries. And again, we find them well-matched as two men who approach life in very different ways: Hearst, the legislator and “colossus of commerce,” as Swearingen calls him, determined to shape events according to his design; Bullock, now a marshal, engaged in a different relationship with the law. As Bullock explains to Swearingen, “My job ain’t to follow the law, Al. My job is to interpret it, then enforce it accordingly.”

It’s no secret that questions of reason and planning were on Milch’s mind when writing the original series, as he has addressed them explicitly many times over the years. In a talk delivered to the Writers Guild of America in 2007, Milch

insisted that “the ego—the sense of the self—is always after-the-fact. It is a response to your behavior, it does not generate your behavior, although you think it’s the other way around.” Commenting on Swearingen and Bullock during a 2006 interview in *American Heritage*, Milch explained, “Both, I think, had lives that lived them more than they lived their lives.”

Milch is no doubt drawing on his own experience here. As a recovering addict, he is acutely aware of our ability to manufacture thoughts that validate our actions. But he is also speaking as an academic. When Doc Cochran says of Swearingen’s “moods” that “you generate those yourself and then you find your excuse for having ‘em,” the character is offering a gloss on the psychologist William James’s view of emotion, a theory that Milch has referenced in interviews.

One could even understand *Deadwood* as an expression of Milch’s own approach to writing. During the show’s run, he was notorious for only thinking about his writing while he was doing it, for delivering pages the day they were shot, and for shouting his revisions to actors from off-camera as the scenes were underway. Yet out of this haphazard process came something that feels, in a word, impossible. The show is a generous mess of themes and ambiguities, evocative set pieces and lyric volleys of dialogue, not to mention

characters as alive and enigmatic as any to ever appear on television. Even the most trivial scenes feel like musical compositions, a stirring mix of the high and the low, the vile and the profound.

The new movie displays the same level of mastery, especially in its dialogue. Alma Ellsworth seems to acknowledge as much in one of the early scenes, which finds Trixie, in the late stages of pregnancy, berating Hearst from her balcony as his parade moves through town, accusing him of murder: “I convey to you, senator, memorial greetings from the miner Ellsworth and prostitute Jen. But two of the who-knows-how-many you’ve done for while making your monied progress.... For ain’t it so, sir, it’s the thieving and throat-cutting, them’s bloodied and dead in the mud, as still stiffens the member in your long-johns....”

Alma: Trixie hasn’t lost her gift.

Utter: She ain’t, for a fact. Time can’t touch that.

At the same time, Milch’s laxity of forethought while writing the series never stopped him from engaging in lengthy exegesis on completed scenes, unpacking their significance for the actors on set in the moments before the cameras rolled. In this way, *Deadwood*, like the camp it depicts, came into being through a cycle of extemporaneous creation and willful interpretation, mostly in that

order. Unlike much of today's entertainment culture, which is guided by data to appeal to what audiences are expected to want, *Deadwood* springs into existence spontaneously, less the product of engineering than of alchemy. For thirty-six episodes, the show

takes the most base aspects of our humanity and, through forces only glancingly understood, creates something precious.

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