

Last Words in *Deadwood*: Literacy and Mortality on the Frontier

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First Words

AFTER AN ESTABLISHING SHOT OF A MONTANA TERRITORY JAILHOUSE AT night, the series opener of HBO's *Deadwood* cuts to a close-up of Seth Bullock's hands: he dips a pen into ink with his left, switches it to his right, and puts it to page. The camera tilts up, revealing the sling on his injured right arm and resting on his face. From behind bars comes the first line of dialogue: "Is that some sort of a letter, Marshal?" asks the imprisoned horse thief. "Journal," replies Bullock. "Journal," repeats the prisoner, surprised: "Good" (*Deadwood* 1). His surprise reflects our own: we may not know Bullock yet, but we do know plenty of other western marshals—Will Kane, Wyatt Earp, Rooster Cogburn, Matt Dillon—and they do not, as a rule, keep diaries. The prisoner again interrupts Bullock: "You know, I was going to Deadwood, same as you." Now his impatience reflects our own: we do not watch Westerns—or subscribe to HBO, for that matter—to watch rugged leading men sit quietly writing. Bullock finishes his entry, puts down the pen, tucks the journal into his coat pocket, and resigns himself to the necessary exposition:

THIEF. No law at all, in Deadwood? Is that true?

BULLOCK. Being on Indian land.

THIEF. So then you won't be a marshal?

BULLOCK. Taking goods there to open a hardware business.

Me and my partner.

Returning to this scene after spending three seasons in *Deadwood*, we know all this already, and so let us instead consider a nagging question.

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Whatever happened to that journal? It never reappears in *Deadwood*, hidden away for thirty-six episodes in the long black coat that Bullock wraps so tightly around himself. Perhaps the journal, as a symbol, conveys enough meaning in this first scene that it can safely retire offstage, its work done. It does underscore the first plot point—Bullock closes the book on his old life as a lawman in Montana in order to start fresh as an entrepreneur in Deadwood—and it also suggests everything we will need to know about the psychology of our morally conflicted protagonist, as literate and thoughtful as he is violent and impulsive. Bullock yearns to understand and express his inner self, but that self remains mysterious and dangerous, something best apprehended in a jailhouse at night, described in sentences that no one else may read, confined to a black book—seen just once, by a condemned man—and carried next to the heart.

The journal, however, reveals as much about Bullock's environment as it does about his character: out here in the territories, far from civilization, the act of writing is remarkable, drawing the attention of both the camera and the thief. The thief's attention wanders almost immediately—all he can manage to say is "good" before changing the subject to Deadwood—but the camera carefully frames and tracks Bullock until he completes the day's entry. The scene thus splits off the thief's perspective, in which Bullock's writing is peripheral, from our own, in which the writing remains in focus, as important to us as it is to Bullock. In the nineteenth-century west, it is hard for even a marshal to get much writing done—his arm shot, his concentration likewise—but the journal affords a glimpse of a more civilized future, when the establishment of law and order will in turn permit the rise of literacy, education, and culture. As an audience seeking excitement, we are glad when Bullock stands from his desk to prove himself foremost a man of action, but if the badge on his coat gives him license to kill, then the journal in his coat licenses us to enjoy the killing, since we know that it paves the way for schools and libraries. The end of the scene underscores this point: after Bullock thwarts a lynch mob by hanging the thief himself, brutally but "under color of law," he carefully notes down the thief's last words for his sister. His partner Sol Star, waving a shotgun from a wagon loaded with hardware goods, covers Bullock as the mob grows angrier: "Move the fuck back, while my partner . . . while my partner's taking his sweet-ass time writing whatever the fuck he's writing over there!" Bullock then shames the mob into accepting the note for

delivery; having done what little he can to civilize Montana, he leaps on the wagon with Star and lights out for the Black Hills.

In following Bullock to Deadwood, this article will argue that writing—as both an act of representation and an object of interpretation—remains a focus of the series, whose creator David Milch continues to ask questions about the status and value of the written word on the frontier, questions that tend rudely to interrupt the civilizing process: “Is that some sort of a letter, Marshal?” As Deadwood evolves from unofficial camp to incorporated town, one visible sign of progress is all the paper that accumulates; like Charlie Utter in his freight office, but with more patience, we must sort through the letters, newspapers, telegrams, banknotes, receipts, titles, warrants, notices, speeches, contracts, and treaties that pile higher episode by episode. Al Swearengen may prefer to do “no fucking paperwork” (11) while running Deadwood from the back office of his saloon, but the course of history is against him; if he and the other principals are to survive the political transition from camp to town, they must make a corresponding transition from orality to literacy, from oaths and handshakes to contracts and signatures. In his analysis of the development of democracy in the early years of the United States, Larzer Ziff describes this transition as “the powerful drift from immanence to representation in both literature and society” (xi); the written word allows individuals to abstract themselves from their bodies and to enter as citizens into political, social, and economic relations that transcend the here and now. As Deadwood joins the republic a century later, it immediately drifts in the same direction.

Chronicling the birth of civilization in the Black Hills would be ambitious enough, but what interests Milch more than the general rise of literacy within the camp are the acute growing pains experienced variously by its individuals. Borrowing from Herman Melville, Milch has said that a good dramatic scene “spins against the way it drives”; that is, the subtext of psychological tension and emotional friction tends to warp the overall trajectory of the scene, bending the plotline into a more interesting and pleasing dramatic arc (“TV’s Great Writer”). The same can be said of the entire series: near the end of the third season, the children of Deadwood march single-file behind their teacher toward the new schoolhouse, but for the adults watching the procession, the route to literacy has been more roundabout, being full of complications and difficulties. “If there was a drift toward representation,” Ziff argues, “there was always an undertow of immanence”

(xi). The adults do not find it as easy as their children to exchange a preliterate sense of self, securely anchored to the old familiar body standing here and speaking now, for a newly written self that seems alien because of its indifference—and even hostility—to the presence of the person who sits and writes. Exploring this pivotal moment in frontier history, *Deadwood* dramatizes the specific psychological effects of a general philosophical paradox described by Jacques Derrida: “the value or effect of transcendentalism is linked necessarily to the possibility of writing and of ‘death’” (“Signature” 316). On the one hand, writing extends “the range of the voice and of gesture” for the writer, who may then overleap “an empirical boundary in the form of space and time” (311); on the other, because writing thus presumes “a break in presence” of the writer, whose words no longer need him, his demise is “inscribed in the structure of the mark” (316). Precisely the transcendental assumption that Bullock makes in the first scene—that a journal or a letter can conserve and preserve the self, saving it from dissolution and death—does not hold in grimy Deadwood, where the literacy and mortality rates seem to correspond directly. Not much point keeping a journal, in a place where written words are always last ones.

The Paper Trail

The series tells the story of Deadwood putting itself on paper, as a line item in the county register and a dot on the territory map: “We study for our fucking lives,” says Swearingen at the end of the second season, reading through the proposed terms of annexation to the United States (24). That “founding document” (24) represents a new beginning for the camp, now a town, but it also marks the end of a very long paper trail that stretches all the way back to the twenty-dollar rent that Star and Bullock pay Swearingen upon arrival in Deadwood (1). Swearingen receives their money along with gold from the prospector Ellsworth, who keeps a running tab in the saloon: the mix of notes and nuggets in Swearingen’s cashbox shows the local economy in transition, with paper currency floating in from outside Deadwood to circulate alongside the precious metals mined from its streams. Up to this point, prospectors have had little choice but to exchange their gold directly for women, whiskey, and poker chips: with no bank in town, and with Swearingen’s road agents on the prowl, they must both assess and secure the value of

the day's haul through the medium of saloon credit. Only Swearengen accumulates capital, since the prospectors must quickly spend rather than save their profits, but his wealth will grow only as fast as those prospectors can physically carry gold from strike to saloon. For his wealth to grow exponentially rather than linearly, Swearengen must relax his stranglehold and allow Deadwood's economy to modernize and expand through banking, which converts gold into paper—not only currency but also deposit receipts, promissory notes, and loan agreements—and thus encourages long-term investments in business and property rather than immediate gratifications of the flesh. It may seem to run counter to Swearengen's business interests, but allowing the widow Alma Garret to found the first bank in Deadwood proves him a shrewd speculator. The faster the bank converts gold into paper, the faster the value of the camp will grow, and the more eager the territory will become to annex it—on terms that will pay dividends for Swearengen.

The civilizing process converts not only the gold but also the land itself into paper. In the first season, as Magistrate Claggett explains, the statutes of the Northwest Ordinance guarantee “that a citizen can have title to any land unclaimed or unincorporated by simple usage” (9). Ownership depends upon someone personally occupying and actively improving the land, as Ellsworth explains to Alma: “Well, anyways, I'm glad to keep your title good working the surface” (9). When the territory annexes Deadwood as a whole, however, the prospectors will have to exchange their informal claims for formal deeds: words rather than work will keep the titles good. That moment of conversion—from turf into text—unnerves the prospectors, who worry that the politicians in Yankton, capital of the Dakota Territory, will exact a steep commission by stripping them of their property. Worry turns to panic in the second season after Francis Wolcott, agent for the capitalist George Hearst, conspires with Yankton to circulate a rumor that the claims will be invalidated; Wolcott then enlists Cy Tolliver, Swearengen's business rival, to buy up claims cheaply from prospectors eager to sell out. Whereas the conversion of gold into notes helps to grow the wealth of the local community, the conversion of land into deeds has the opposite effect. Once Tolliver duly signs over the stack of claims to Hearst, much of the Black Hills can be folded up and tucked into the wallet of one man who has never even been there in person.

As the hills go into Hearst's pocket, Swearengen struggles to keep the camp itself in his own: he has the same fear of losing political

influence to outsiders that the prospectors have about property ownership. Each morning, he stakes his claim on the town by appearing in person on a balcony overlooking the main thoroughfare; each evening, he keeps his title good by working over anyone stupid enough to challenge him. In the first few episodes, Swearengen commands a bird's-eye view of both friends and enemies as they scurry and whisper in the street below; the comings and goings of the stagecoach alert him to any new developments in camp. However, as soon as outside parties start taking a political and economic interest in Deadwood, Swearengen's far-sighted vision becomes useless, because now there is no one to watch: those parties never appear in Deadwood, exerting pressure through the growing postal service as well as the new technology of the telegraph. "Invisible messages from invisible sources," he complains, "or what some people think of as progress" (13). To counter opponents who represent themselves in writing rather than present themselves in person, a strategy that "blinkers [his] judgment of motive" (13), Swearengen must learn to apply his powers of interpretation to scrutinizing letters instead of faces and deciphering messages rather than gestures, so that he can continue to survey the increasingly abstract political landscape. When Charlie Utter opens his freight office in the first season, Swearengen snaps, "Nice sign, blocking my fucking view" (9), but his visual field will soon have to expand to include written signs, which bear watching even more closely than actual people. By the start of the second season, when he receives a "pricey little note from the governor," Swearengen has so much reading to do that he resorts first to a magnifying glass and then to a pair of spectacles, which he wears grudgingly for the rest of the series: "Yes," he sighs, "it has fallen to this" (13).

At the same time, Swearengen must learn not only to read but also to edit documents, so as to apply pressure back against his invisible enemies: the "instruments they use to fuck people up the ass," he says of governmental propaganda, "can be turned against them" (21). He may miss his old instruments—"Don't I yearn for the days," he laments, "when a draw across the throat made fucking resolution?" (25)—but the time has come to slash copy rather than arteries. Behind his massive desk, Swearengen immerses himself in the paperwork necessary to secure his own and the camp's interests: not only revising the terms of annexation but also replying to messages from Yankton, addressing envelopes stuffed with bribes, editing articles and publishing letters in the *Deadwood Pioneer*, and drafting the structure of an ad hoc

local government. For all his grumbling, Swearengen proves a quick study, gifted with a “keen editorial sense,” as journalist A. W. Merrick sniffs, at first annoyed by the interference (6); however, when the war of words escalates between Deadwood and Yankton, Merrick cheerfully collaborates with Swearengen, using the power of the press to circulate rumors and waft suspicion. Swearengen never overcomes his distaste for paperwork—yelling at Merrick that he wishes there were “any part of your rag I could just fucking read without having to evaluate how it fucking wafts!” (35)—but his editorial sense grows keen enough for him both to “parse Yankton’s proposal” (24) and to dictate its terms. Once Deadwood joins the territory and holds elections, currency will pile up in Swearengen’s safe faster than ballots in the box—faster even than the mail on Utter’s floor, the telegrams on Blazanov’s desk, the back issues in Merrick’s office, the receipts in Alma’s bank, and the warrants in Bullock’s file. No wonder that the town goes up in smoke in 1879; by then, the paper trail ends in a firetrap.

The Dotted Line

All that paper constitutes the thin skin sloughed off a growing body of representations that would otherwise have no substance: the abstract system of economic, political, and social relations that will soon govern the circulation of wealth, the ownership of property, and the distribution of power in Deadwood. Entering into those relations is simple enough, because all the system requires is your name on the dotted line—here, and here, and here again. “Paper,” says Derrida, speaking of its history in relation to the law, “often became the place where one took possession of oneself and became a legal subject,” whose identity and agency “rested on the ideal assumption of self-identification by a signature on a body of paper” (“Paper” 15). To emphasize this point, *Deadwood* repeatedly enlists its audience to witness the signing of documents; its signature scene *is* the signature scene—there, and there, and there again. The series begins with Alma signing her proxy over to Bullock and ends with signing her property over to Hearst, and in between there is a lot of “wrist business,” as bartender Johnny Burns calls it, of “brief but crucial importance” (21). We witness Commissioner Jarry signing the articles of incorporation, Trixie the prostitute signing bank receipts first as a depositor and then as a teller, Leon the

junkie signing his own bank receipt, hotelier E. B. Farnum requesting Sol Star's "John Hancock" for the receipt of camp funds, Bullock co-signing a property loan with the town drunk Steve Fields, the livery owner Hostetler writing his will on a chalkboard, Steve signing on the same chalkboard a confession that he molested Bullock's horse, the con artist Alice Isringhausen signing a confession of blackmail, and Star signing the deed to henchman Silas Adams's house. Even the hoop-lehead extras in the background get in on the act, signing up for jury duty, signing in at the vaccination tent, and signing away their claims.

All these signatures—and there is still more wrist business we hear about secondhand—are signs of progress and civilization, although each scene tends to spin against the way it drives: for example, to seal their deal, Adams spits in his palm and extends it to Star, who declines to shake hands according to a camp ritual that has already been repeated many times in the series. "Oh, no," he says, pointing to the inkwell and pen: "That's what these are for" (26). As a former lawyer, Adams should know better, but on the other hand, perhaps he does: a signature may not yet stick properly, not in a place so new to law and order. The same doubt about signatures arises elsewhere: when Steve signs the loan to purchase the livery, he presses down so hard—as if trying to engrave rather than ink his name on the paper—that he breaks the nib of the pen; Leon makes a similar gesture, handing his receipt to Alma only after carefully blowing his signature dry. Alma rolls her eyes, but she must make allowances for customers used to backing their word by making it flesh—swearing, spitting, shaking—rather than making a mark backed only by paper. Even Bullock, who puts his full faith in the bank, finds outside the bank that paper is too flimsy to support his signature; when he hesitates about how to cosign the livery loan in the street, Trixie must turn around, lean over, and literally back his signature.

The stock of the paper and the permanence of the ink are crucial because, for the signature to work as it should, all parties must accept that it will represent the signer now and in future—or rather, as Derrida insists, in a now that is forever, because it "marks and retains his having-been present in a past now, which will remain a future now, and therefore in a now in general, in the transcendental form of nowness" ("Signature" 328). The signature's games with time and infinity give rise to further confusion in *Deadwood*, particularly for Steve and Hostetler, who stubbornly refuse to meet but who also each refuse to

sign the livery papers before the other; they understand that “a handshake signaling the transaction’s completion” is no longer “absolutely required,” as Alma says (29), but they do not understand that the sequence in which they sign is absolutely irrelevant. Bullock finally breaks the deadlock by staging the transcendental nowness of the signature as a farce: the two men synchronize their watches and sign simultaneously but separately, on opposite sides of the camp, when Bullock fires his pistol at exactly ten o’clock. As soon as one crisis is surmounted, however, another immediately arises: Steve demands that Hostetler return to him the chalkboard on which he signed his confession of bestiality, but when they find the board, it has already been accidentally wiped off, which causes Steve to suspect a trick and to call Hostetler a liar. “I don’t know it’s the actual board,” Steve whines, “There’s no more fucking writing on it!” (29). Insulted, Hostetler flies into a rage, but Bullock still tries to mediate between the men: “This is the board! For Christ’s sake, what difference does the rest of it make?” Steve will never be satisfied, however, because the “actual” board with writing on it can never be produced; now blank again, this board will always differ from that one—which is to say, from itself. Signing in chalk rather than ink produces a nasty paradox: precisely because the signature was so easily wiped away, it can never be erased. It remains forever inscribed on what Steve calls “the true fucking board” that exists only in that transcendental nowness, where neither party to the signature will ever be able to clear their names. Hostetler realizes that the only way out is death; blowing out his brains all over the wall, he cleans the slate.

Steve lives on, but poetic justice soon catches up with him: a horse kicks him in the head and he spends the rest of the series in a catatonic stupor. Steve thus cannot avoid paying extra interest on the price that a signature always exacts in return for transcendence: “By definition,” says Derrida, “a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer” (“Signature” 328). The signature does not merely stand for the signer, so that he *need not* be present anymore; rather, he *cannot* be present anymore, because the signature now functions—assuming his identity, exercising his agency—as if he were absent. Like Steve, the signer is no longer quite all there; to take possession of oneself on paper is to lose possession of oneself in person. Steve is so far gone that he has no more signatures left in him; because the new owner “couldn’t authorize it,” Star takes it upon himself to reorder supplies for the livery (34). Steve’s helpless condition exagger-

ates the dissociation of represented and immanent selves that everyone else in *Deadwood* will also experience to some degree—the “situation being fluid,” notes Star, “and not likely to get less so for awhile” (34). Signing one’s name may not always cause brain damage, but it does often produce dizzy spells, whether you are a lady like Alma, who fails to recognize her own initials on a currency receipt, or a prostitute like Trixie, who gasps when she mistakenly appends “—the whore” rather than her surname on a deposit slip (21). Even if one does get one’s own name right, as when Hostetler chalks his will on that same confounded board, the self divides just as fluidly to produce alienation from rather than identification with the signature: “This isn’t my will,” he snarls only the next day, before erasing the board to start fresh—with Steve’s confession (18).

A will, of course, implies the ultimate nonpresence of its signer, but death necessarily taints all signatures; once completed, the transaction no longer absolutely requires either a sound mind or a sound body. Alice Isringhausen, the femme fatale who seduces Adams, finds herself in a tight spot: Swearengen will kill her if she does not sign a letter of confession, but he also may well kill her if she does, since her signature would immediately make her expendable. Alice’s predicament, in which she cannot be sure she is not signing her own death warrant, signifies a larger existential question that obtains during this period of transition from immanent to represented selfhood. Derrida speaks of “the paper ghosts that we have learned to trust” (“Paper” 15)—all the documents that embody us as twenty-first-century legal subjects—but the residents of nineteenth-century *Deadwood* have not yet learned to trust that such documents will conditionally represent rather than completely replace them, turning not paper but people into ghosts, immaterial in both senses of the word. Here is another reason to blow the ink dry, to bear down hard on the pen, to sign the document on someone’s back, to spit and shake hands: to reassure oneself that one’s body still carries some weight, that one’s presence still matters, even as material reality gives way to an ethereal textuality. Thus Steve begins “the biggest day of my goddamn life,” on which he signs for the livery, by taking a bath and combing his hair; before he can represent himself in writing for the first time, he feels compelled to make himself presentable (29). Self-presentation has everything to do here with self-preservation: even if the signature implies nonpresence, the act of signing at least requires that the signer be present, so that the growing

body of representations cannot wholly dispense with the living bodies of individuals. Alice exploits this loophole by dragging out the act itself over two episodes—negotiating terms with Swearingen, calling for Bullock as a witness, signing first in a false hand—to avoid being dragged off to decompose in Wu’s pigsty, where nonpresence awaits with teeth.

Swearingen counters the last of Alice’s dodges by comparing her signature to the one on the hotel register and making her sign again, but not before Alice baits him: “Mightn’t this be my true hand, and my hand to the hotel register false?” (22). Her cheeky question gives rise to two philosophical conundrums: the first, whether it is possible to forge one’s own signature, is actually less problematic than the second, whether it is possible *not* to forge one’s own signature. Derrida points out that a signature involves a paradoxical duplication of originality: “In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach itself from the present and singular intention of its production” (“Signature” 328). A signature can only be copied, not authored, even by its signer; what counts most is that the names on various documents look the same, not that they were all put there by the same person. Swearingen knows this because he has already glimpsed a future in which it is not his signature but simply his name—written in any hand—that allows the body of representations to take possession and then dispose of his own; in the first season, his name shows up on a murder warrant from Chicago, to be served as soon as the camp where “warrants don’t count” becomes a town where they do (1). Magistrate Claggett, composing a list of Yankton officials to be paid off, demands an additional bribe to lift the warrant. Swearingen balks, but Claggett ignores him: “If you don’t mind, I’ll continue writing” (9). The magistrate thus pointedly reminds the cutthroat that a pen is now the weapon of choice in a rapidly modernizing West, where a single stroke—writing a man’s name on this line, or on that one—either marks him a made man or makes him a marked man. It’s bad enough not to be sure if you are signing your own death warrant; even worse not to know whether someone else is signing it for you.

The looming problem, however, is that the body of representations has already grown large enough to detach itself from the hands that put pen to paper, taking on an independent and immortal life of its own: “I didn’t generate the warrant,” Claggett says later, adding smugly, “My

disappearance won't quash it. You can't murder an order, or the telegraph that transmitted it, or those that are content to put food on the table simply by being its instruments" (12). The warrant may threaten to deprive Swarengen of his personal liberty, but the network of official documents and bureaucratic records will soon also deprive everyone of identity and agency, even officers and bureaucrats themselves, now instruments rather than individuals. Claggett makes the mistake, however, of selling the warrant privately rather than serving it publicly; Swarengen, realizing that this particular paper trail dead-ends in a coat pocket, immediately kills the magistrate, and lifts the warrant himself. Score one for Swarengen here at the end of the first season, but he has had a narrow escape; as soon as the telegraph poles go up at the start of the next season and invisible messages start circulating, he takes special measures to preserve himself from nonpresence. Not even a generous bottom line can compensate for the existential deficits of the dotted one: Swarengen strikes his name from the founding document, although it means turning down a US\$50,000 bribe; later, he has Jarry sign the document but does not do so himself, instead shaking hands with Bullock (24). Swarengen does make one concession, however, to what other people think of as progress: this time, no spit.

Death Sentences

Swarengen does his best to avoid not just signing his name but writing anything at all: he may study, parse, and dictate, but he prefers to enlist other men—Bullock, Merrick, and Adams—as amanuenses. His reluctance may be read as a sign of gender trouble: while drafting the founding document, for example, he urinates in a chamber pot while Adams sits at the desk, transcribing his boss's words. The difference between what the two are holding in their hands suggests that the civilizing process will change the ways in which men conceive their masculinity and exercise their power; Swarengen's reluctance to exchange one instrument for the other suggests that men will at first experience such progress—the substitution of written fluency for physical potency—as a shameful loss. "Is the pen a metaphorical penis?" ask Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar at the beginning of their study of nineteenth-century literature (3); the answer for writers back in Boston or London may be "yes," but not out here in the territories.

Real men certainly do not write, and those who do will suffer both castration anxiety and homosexual panic: bad enough that both his eyesight and his prostate are failing, but Swearengen must worry also whether his choice to go after Hearst in print rather than in person means that he “mightn’t be fucking queer” (27). The suspicion that all this paperwork will unman him dogs Swearengen throughout the series, even though he loses nothing worse than a finger, and his language is both contemptuous and homophobic when he describes how government officials use the press “to fuck people up the ass” (21), or mocks the governor’s “pricey little note,” or archly ridicules the notion that he would look something up in “my yesterday’s diary” (5). Instead of a diary, Swearengen keeps a prostitute, who fellates him each night while he recounts the day and reminisces about his past. The sex act not only compensates for the pain and shame of his childhood but also substitutes for the embarrassing act of writing itself; like Adams, Dolly takes Swearengen’s dictation to make him feel more of a man. In both cases, the dysfunction he experiences is not only a symptom of his age but also a sign of his times. The advance of civilization has already begun sapping him, although he remains stronger and straighter than the literary, clerical, and administrative men around him, who are as limp (the indifferent Merrick and the naïve Blazanov) or bent (the effeminate thespians Langrishe and Bellegarde, and the tittering, bubble-blowing Jarry) or both (the impotent and depraved Wolcott) as they are modern.

The damage that writing does to male sexual potency, however, is only one symptom of its enervating effect on bodies in general. The signature may be “the point at which both presence and writing are in question” (Derrida, “Signature” 327), where anxieties about death tend to cluster, but those anxieties soon float free to haunt all texts in *Deadwood*, not only public documentation but also private correspondence, where further questions about presence and writing arise. One running motif in the series is the identification of corpses—the John shot by Trixie, the road agent Ned Mason, Odell Marchbanks from Liberia, the murdered Cornishman—by the personal letters found in their pockets, a grim reminder of the link between writing, transcendence, and death. Writing allows friends and family members to cross space and time in their communications and relations with one another, but only because it can function entirely in their absence, generating meaning with reference to a larger system of signs rather than

to the special relationship between these specific persons. In fact, writing must always function as if the correspondents were already dead and someone else, anyone else, were reading their letters: "A writing that was not structurally legible—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing," Derrida argues, because it must first constitute "a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general" ("Signature" 315). He then adds that "what holds for the addressee holds also, for the same reasons, for the sender" (316). To write letters, then, is to admit and confront the possibility of one's own death, as Wild Bill Hickok does instinctively in the postscript to his wife: "Agnes, darling, if such should be we never meet again, while firing my last shot I will gently breathe the name of my wife Agnes, and with wishes even for my enemies, I will make the plunge and try to swim to the other shore" (17). Hickok's letter only makes explicit what Derrida argues, all writing does implicitly refer at last to the death of the writer, who in this case is also a man so sick of being written about that he hastens his own destruction.

Furthermore, as the shift here from "Agnes" the second-person addressee to "Agnes" the third-person referent suggests, to write letters is to anticipate the post-postscript moment that *Deadwood* dwells upon, when strangers—even enemies—will read the words that once bound together two loved ones but now serve the grubby purposes of third parties. In the exemplary case of Hickok, that moment is prolonged and exaggerated over the first two seasons, as his letter passes from one stranger to the next, each of whom defiles it in a different way. The drunken hotel clerk forgets to mail it, finds it in the soiled pants he left under a rock (9), and then gives it to Farnum, who studies the envelope under a magnifying glass and sells it on speculation to Wolcott (15), who in turn opens it and, finding nothing of financial value, amuses himself by reading it aloud in bed to a prostitute and making fun of Hickok's spelling (17). Here is a sordid corollary to Derrida's argument about writing, transcendence, and death: one man's love letter is always already another man's sex toy.

In reading the letter aloud, however, the jaded couple experiences together an unexpected emotional and erotic charge; the dead man's words move the prostitute nearly to tears and awaken in Wolcott a healthy sexual impulse. "Are you a man who needs his trousers rubbed?" she asks softly, since usually he can climax only if dry-

humped; he answers, “I am a man who needs his trousers taken off,” a response which seems to surprise him as much as her (17). Driving at first toward death and Derrida, the scene of foreplay spins away here toward the life-affirming transcendentalism of Thoreau, who famously declared in *Walden* (1854) that the written word is “at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art,” because it may “not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself” (69). Given voice, Hickok’s words not only relay his message but also restore something of his lost presence, producing an intimate experience of universal connection which twice prompts Wolcott to be a better man, if only very briefly: once with the prostitute, and once with Charlie Utter, to whom he again reads the postscript—gently breathing the name of Agnes, just as Hickok once did. “It’s clear he would want her to have it,” Wolcott says, giving the letter to an emotional Utter (19). Utter pledges to take it directly to Agnes himself, because he cannot bear the thought of its continued circulation and contamination: “God knows who [Wolcott] fucking bought it off of, or how many hands it passed through” (21). Delivering the dead letter to its rightful addressee, whose lips alone may then give breath to the words of her husband, Utter soothes his own grief by making a private gesture of faith in writing as “the work of art nearest to life itself,” in Thoreau’s phrase (69).

Merrick makes the same gesture of faith, although more publicly, by framing and hanging that quotation from *Walden* in his office (26); of course, an idealistic newspaperman has his own mixed psychological motives for mystifying the written word as a spiritual vessel rather than a tombstone. Although he loves to deprecate himself as an “ink-stained wretch” (2), Merrick also exalts his “sacred responsibility” (26) to shepherd public discourse into the new medium of print, where it will not only flourish but be transformed. One effect of print on public discourse, as Michael Warner has argued, is to replace “an ethic of personal presence” (22), which persists in relation to private correspondence, with a radically different “principle of negativity,” which dictates that citizens entering the public sphere prove their lack of self-interest by checking individual personhood at the door (42). The self-negation that haunts all forms of writing functions here as a sign of virtue rather than a source of anxiety; so that his arguments may be considered rationally and objectively, the published writer absents

himself from his printed words, which no longer bear even the traces of a singular hand. At this pivotal moment in Deadwood's history, however, public discourse raises questions about presence and writing that trouble even the forward-thinking Merrick. Reading aloud a draft of his forthcoming interview with the founder of the new bank, Merrick concludes with a frown, "Mrs. Ellsworth being so elevated, so sweetly radiant in spirit, I wonder if her words resonated with me at the time as being more poetic and compelling than now they seem in cold transcription, and with the lady herself absent" (29). And what holds for the interviewee also holds for the interviewer, whose personal presence matters less and less as his audience grows more and more anonymous, its members as faceless to him as he is to them. This is why Merrick both deprecates and promotes himself; on the one hand, the impersonality of printed public discourse demands that he, as its custodian and chief contributor, "bracket the particularities of his life" (Warner 72). On the other hand, to compensate for that displacement of self, he feels compelled to get in everyone's face, making his presence felt by perambulating up and down the boardwalk, holding forth windily to anyone who will listen, and introducing himself to newcomers just off the stage. Especially when he pesters Al for a response to the latest issue of the newspaper, Merrick betrays anxiety that his words will not resonate fully with their readership unless the writer also busily presents himself in person; because the cold transcription of print heralds his own death, he reassures himself by displaying the famous passage from *Walden*. Tellingly, however, Merrick omits its first sentence, in which even Thoreau concedes that writing, however sacred, is only ever a remnant of life: "A written word is the choicest of relics" (Thoreau 69).

The self-negating effect of public discourse troubles not just journalists but all citizens who write themselves into that discourse only to suffer even worse doubts than Merrick. "I'd sooner be hanging from those hustings than stand on them giving a speech," says Bullock, acknowledging a fear of public speaking that also afflicts other candidates in the coming elections (25). The problem is that the hybrid form of a speech—the oral rather than print publication of a manuscript, itself a cross between letter and document—brings the preceding ethic of personal presence into direct conflict with the emerging principle of negativity. On the one hand, the speaker presents himself before the audience, pronouncing his own handwritten words in his

own voice; on the other, as the phrase “giving a speech” suggests, those words actually constitute a text that exists apart from the speaker, who presents it rather than himself, now a public citizen rather than an individual person. Even a drunken hooplehead can sense how much potential for slippage between speaker and speech obtains here—and in fact one drunken hooplehead does, mounting the hustings before dawn to deliver a mock address that begins, “I am not the fine man you take me for” (26)—but no one feels the slippage more acutely than the speaker himself, having to recall or read out his own scripted words, which no longer come to him naturally or belong to him integrally. To breathe life into another’s words, as Thoreau recommends, is to experience a moment of connection that transcends time and space; to have to breathe life into one’s own words, however, is to experience a moment of dissociation—split between first-person writer and third-party reader—that portends death. Bullock may exaggerate when he equates speechifying with being hanged, but only slightly, as that drunken hooplehead discovers; in mid-speech, he slips, plunges off the hustings, and breaks his neck.

To emphasize that the fear of public speaking originates in the writing of the speech, even if it culminates in the delivery, the first two episodes of the third season focus on the candidates’ nervousness as they prepare their remarks. Paradoxically, the preparation worsens rather than soothes the mounting anxiety: the more Bullock revises his speech, the more estranged he becomes from his own words, which seem to be “doing the wrong jobs, piling on too heavy, or at odds over meaning” (25), until he must turn to his wife for editorial assistance. The other candidate for sheriff, Harry Manning, reads over his own pages, growing sicker and sicker to his stomach, until he loses control of his bowels; Utter, who will be called upon publicly to endorse Bullock, is only slightly less phobic, scripting even simple phrases like “thank you” on his increasingly sweaty palm. Star is cooler, but he meets with Utter and Bullock to go over their speeches at the last minute and mutter key phrases aloud; even the experienced Merrick, who will preside as moderator, jots down his introduction and practices it on the cutthroat Dan Dority at the bar. All of this rehearsal is symptomatic of the struggle to reintegrate the speaking subject with the written word; only Farnum, mayoral candidate, seems immune to such anxiety, but not because he is the incumbent. Twice he extemporizes his stump speech, the first time denouncing Bullock and the

second time insulting Star; however, his colorful ad hominem arguments indicate that he is not really participating in public discourse at all, in the rational and impersonal way that Warner describes, but instead just venting repressed animosity. That is, Farnum is not giving a speech so much as raising his voice and speaking his mind; however unbalanced that mind, at least he is spared the feelings of dissociation that hang up the other candidates. To calm their nerves and restore their sense of self-presence, even Farnum's opponents adopt his approach when they actually mount the hustings; instead of giving their scripted speeches, they speak informally about their own personal emotions ("I'm glad we're in the camp," says Bullock, "even on the sorriest of days") and individual histories ("I've always loved fires," says Harry, "since I was a boy") rather than take the dizzying plunge into formal public discourse (26).

Return to Sender

Standing with Hearst on the hotel's second story, Swearingen keeps his distance from the speeches, just as he keeps his distance from either official documents or personal letters—"I don't notify fucking family," he barks at Bullock (36)—and instead restricts himself, just as Hearst does, to brief and occasional notes. Like Farnum, Swearingen is "a stickler for self-delivered messages" (7) that bypass questions about writing; unlike Farnum, however, his deep voice and fluent speech give him a powerful presence well out of proportion to his only average height. The actor who plays Swearingen, Ian McShane, emphasizes the way in which "the voice has this innate churning rhythm to it" (Milch, *Deadwood* 22): the strings of plosives and fricatives and the layers of syntactical inversions and the lacings of profanity thicken Swearingen's speech until it accumulates an almost material density—even a froth and spray of spit—more satisfying than paper imparts to the written word. Milch has said that profanity allows the characters "to raze the English language" and "to break their ties to civilized institutions and forms of meaning" as they start fresh in the Black Hills (*Deadwood* 15). As civilization overtakes Deadwood, however, profanity then allows its residents to resist the subversive effects of writing on their sense of self, not only by defending what Ellsworth calls "my full range of expression" against the restraints of polite or official discourse (6), but also by

freighting their speech with sexual and scatological references to bodies that might otherwise go without saying. One may, as dimwitted Johnny often does, find it hard to parse what exactly Swearengen has just said, but there is never any doubt—least of all on his own part—that Swearengen is standing here, speaking now, so fully self-present that he has no need to weigh or mince his words.

Swearengen thus resembles “the figure of preliterate man, primitive or savage and frequently an Indian,” whom writers such as Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Melville invoke “as a standard of authenticity” (Ziff 188); certainly much of his appeal as a character derives from his will and power to cut ruthlessly through all the paperwork that complicates the civilized lives of HBO subscribers. However, even if he groans that civilization has “fallen to this,” Swearengen is not at all sentimental about the past, which was never innocent; the cultural drift from immanence to representation does not precipitate a descent so much as initiate a slide from one set of problems to another. The series may emphasize the ways in which writing undermines self-presence, producing various psychological complications and difficulties, but the series also at times reverses its spin, suggesting ways in which unmediated self-presence causes moral lapses and excesses that writing can correct. The chief example here is not Swearengen, even though he occasionally talks aloud to the severed head of an Indian, but Hearst, who takes far too literally the Indian name he received in childhood: “Boy the Earth Talks To” (24). Projecting his own gold lust onto the natural world, which then seems to tell him “where the color is” (24), Hearst immerses himself so completely in the sound of his own voice that he loses touch with humanity and becomes a monster of egotism. “Comprehending such a language,” warns Langrishe, “can cost a man his own kind’s sympathies,” but Hearst prefers his “solitary life” in which he can indulge the grand delusion that he is the particular addressee of the earth’s messages rather than the sender (36). Hearst thus takes to psychotic extremes the auto-affective experience that Derrida calls “*s’entendre parler*,” or “hearing oneself speak,” through which the speaker both articulates a purely interior self and maintains its distinction from the external world that otherwise mediates it (“Voice” 79). No longer aware that he is hearing himself speak, Hearst loses that distinction entirely, becoming what Benjamin Franklin called “a King in *Soliloquy*” who “fancies himself conquering the World” (21).

A telling symptom of Hearst's megalomania is his antipathy to writing, which would introduce a break in presence that would in turn interrupt the fantasy; according to Derrida, the closed circuit of *s'entendre parler* is "broken when, instead of hearing myself speak, I see myself write" ("Voice" 80). Removed from his own written discourse, and thus made a third party to it, Hearst would then have to admit the possibility that those messages from the earth have been self-delivered all along. "You wrote a letter on my behalf," protests Wolcott, when Hearst questions him about his criminal history; Wolcott quotes the letter from memory and asks, "What did you think that was about?" (24). "I didn't think about it!" snaps Hearst, angry at having his own words recited back to him and thus having to think now about their meaning then; repositioned as addressee rather than sender of the letter, Hearst cannot help but perceive its signs of his denial. Wolcott presses his advantage, repeating the earth's words aloud in order to question where they originate and what they mean: "Suppose to you it whispers, 'You are king over me. I exist to flesh your will,' and to me, 'There is no sin.'" In no mood for critical detachment, Hearst fires Wolcott, but he cannot so easily dismiss the disruptive effects of self-representation on his otherwise universal ego. The next time Hearst picks up a pen, he draws a picture instead of a writing a note, a seating diagram of the bar from which Swaengen must puzzle out his intentions; even when Hearst does follow up with a very short note to arrange a face-to-face meeting with Swaengen, Dority observes that it is "written in an awkward hand," as if its author were not comfortable representing himself on paper (26). To compensate for this weakness, Hearst makes other writers feel awkward by twisting their words back against them; standing up and stepping closer, he imposes his physical presence upon his enemies until they doubt their textual representations, which suddenly seem too flimsy to convey meaning. "I began to read to him my proposal," cries Alma, unnerved after Hearst bullies her, "but I was more and more afraid I was only chanting sounds" (27). In the same episode, Bullock tries to put Hearst "on notice," writing up a list of criminal charges that includes the murder of a Cornish miner, only for Hearst to deconstruct the document: "With such disagreement among statements, Mr. Bullock, on what basis could an inquiry justifiably go forward?" "I identify a pattern in these events," counters Bullock, but Hearst advances his aggressively

poststructuralist argument—"Why in fuck should I care what pattern you identify or don't?"—and forces Bullock to retreat (27).

Fed up, Bullock finally arrests Hearst on a trumped-up charge of drunkenness and drags him to jail by the ear, perhaps making it harder for him to listen to the earth but accomplishing little else; in fact, Hearst deliberately provokes the confrontation, since the sheriff then appears more prone to violence than he does. However, while Utter advises gunning down Hearst "as Wild Bill would have done," Bullock risks his masculinity and adopts instead what Langrishe calls "a strategy in counterpoise" that better befits the modernizing West: he writes a personal letter of condolence to the family of the murdered Cornishman, giving it to Merrick to read aloud at a camp meeting and then publish in the newspaper (31). While Swearingen admires the "nice fucking letter," he is nonetheless "mystified I was moved to endorse it," since it does not accuse or even mention Hearst, but Langrishe assures him that the strategy is "cunningly sophisticated" (31). Rather than directly charge Hearst with a criminal offense to which there are no witnesses, the letter implicitly rebukes him for a moral offense of which the letter itself is witness: Hearst's failure to write it. "The letter's contents is witness that Bullock wrote a nice fucking letter, and it proves that that's the sort we are here, the caring sort that would write a letter of that ilk," Dority explains to Johnny; "furthermore, we don't give a fuck who knows it, George fucking Hearst included" (31). The letter writes off Hearst as a missing link in the civilizing process: because the medium is the message, it can go without saying that Hearst is not only preliterate but also subhuman, too primitive to write nicely and too savage to converse with anyone but himself and the earth. "Was the Sheriff's making his letter part of the public record meant to embarrass or reproach me?" demands Hearst (31). Merrick demurs, but the answer is yes, and Hearst knows it: "I suppose I should have written them myself" (31). Too late: everyone now acknowledges "the pretense to civility in a man so brutally vicious," as Alma declares, to be "vapid and grotesque" (36). Hearst may end up owning the town, but his methods debar him from the public discourse of civil society; instead, he resorts to buying up its print medium and hiring other writers to represent him in his absence. "I've stopped reading your paper, Merrick," he gloats as he rides out of town, on his way to fathering a publishing empire. "I'll have my people here start another one, to lie the other way" (36).

In contrast, the letter inscribes Bullock within public discourse as the representative figure of literate man, whose character is endorsed by even the most violent members of the camp as its new standard of authenticity; by voluntarily negating himself through print, where his words then represent the community as a whole, Bullock civilizes Deadwood by becoming its first genuine citizen. At this early stage of the civilizing process, however, literacy will cost the sheriff his own kind's sympathies; while the rest of the camp participates in *Amateur Night*, a communal celebration of immanent selfhood in which ordinary folk show off what their bodies and voices can do, Bullock sequesters himself to write, returning once again to a jailhouse at night (33). This time he is entirely alone, with no thief to interrupt him; he can write for as long as he likes in the peace and quiet it has taken him three seasons to earn. This time we cannot see what he is writing, because the lamp on the desk illuminates the room but blocks our view of his hands; we can see only that he is writing, an act even more dazzling than the performances taking place outside. Cutting away to the theatricals and then returning to Bullock, the camera moves back to a long shot from outside the jail; we watch him through a window that reflects and superimposes the images of passersby, as if his writing were already depriving them of presence and accelerating the drift from immanence to representation. From this distance, we can only speculate about these last written words. Is that some sort of a letter, Sheriff? A journal? A speech? Whatever the answer, we can be certain that it is the founding document of the future from which we now look back at him, through the glass of the television screen that reflects our own ghostly images; we are sitting at the far end of the paper trail on which he is just setting out.

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