

***Deadwood* and *John From Cincinnati*: Societies of Faith and the Incognito God**

Andrew Russ

*"Hawthorne said that man's accidents are God's purposes.
We miss the good we seek and do the good we little sought"
"...if you bring the right arc to it, any word can be the path to God."*

David Milch

David Milch's HBO series *Deadwood*, (and even more obviously *John From Cincinnati*), provide us with an exploration of the possibilities of social redemption through emotional chaos; of faith as the primary organising principle of social life, before abstract codes of law and order supplanted the binding functions of love and grace. This was Milch's stated aim, having been so rehearsed and learned with the vicissitudes of law and order in his previous cop shows, *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue*, he wished to show a society that organises around other signs and motive powers. Television has not seen a writer who speaks so candidly about society as a "cohabitation of the spirit", who speaks about God's power as carried through words, and words as paths to God without our knowledge, and who spurns the modern belief in the isolated self as "fundamentally an illusion".

This chapter will explore *Deadwood*, *John from Cincinnati*, and David Milch's own testimony in articles, interviews, lectures and DVD commentary, on his aim of demonstrating to his audience the idea that society gains strength from faith, not law, and is the disguised workings of a power we have come through obscure acknowledgment to call "God" or "Spirit". It is essentially a look at Milch's masterful and entertaining exploration of how faith harnesses and orientates the energies, talents, faults and purposes of individual people into a body politic, how they come to "rest transparent in the spirit which gave them rise".

Reconnoitering the Rim

"a genuine option as one that is live, forced, and momentous, as opposed to dead, avoidable and trivial."
(Slater, 2009: 103)

"But will our faith in the unseen world similarly verify itself?... I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity."(Ibidem)

The title for the third episode of *Deadwood*, "Reconnoitering the Rim" is a most apt description for the general situation that the show initiates its viewers into. The Black Hills of the future Dakota Territory are a dangerous borderland that is being coaxed into the nation's fold by curious soul's both brave and desperate. A dissolute and seething settlement is formed on the outer rim

of civilisation. Tantalisingly beyond civilisation's grasp, its inhabitants are natives of nowhere, surveying the brute, raw aspects of their unhinged existence. While Deadwood itself is pushing at the contours of a civilisation and nation, its denizens are also exposing their own psychical and physical contours to the push and pull of unknown forces. What few boundaries are found here are usually discovered at the violent birth of their founding. Sometimes it is the threatened animal snarl of a combative that draws a line in the sand, but most often it is the expiration of a life that sauntered unthinkingly close to someone's unseen preconscious defences, only to become a deadly warning to others. Whatever the boundaries are, they are at their most elemental¹. They surround individuals of pure will, and whatever circle of influence they can sustain via that agency. In the truest sense of the word, this is a land of egos. Egos in competition, one against all. Not orbiting any power, law or order beyond themselves, each individual becomes their own orbit. And at the limits of experience, orbits brutally collide. Everyone is reconnoitering their own rim in a Hobbesian state of nature².

Whether it be the megalomaniac out to see how far their mania for power can expand (Swearengen, Toliver), the down-on-their-luck misfit seeking to carve out an incorruptible corner of the earth for themselves (most prospectors), the dissolute who seek to see how far they can dissolve themselves in their own self indulgence (the drunks and dope-fiends), or those burdened by conscience who seek a land where that responsibility will melt away (Bullock, Hickok), all have come to test the limits of themselves, and hopefully forge themselves anew in the lawless atmosphere.

...one of the things that really drew me to the story was the fact that Deadwood had no law. I had been writing shows, mostly cop shows which had to do with the intersection of law and order or the failure to intersect, and I was interested in what it would be like to examine a society where there was order more or less, but no law whatsoever (David Milch, Commentary, "Deadwood," (1.1) Deadwood: The Complete First Season DVD box set)

Whatever order there is, it is provisional, dependent only upon how well people keep out of each other's way. Each man's plot is his own. "Enter at your own peril", seems to be the guiding principle. With nothing to temper retribution, affront, threat or insult every inhabitant can bring about a moment that is 'live, forced and momentous'. As opposed to the civilised expanses of the American continent, whose day to day moments are 'dead, avoidable and trivial' (notice how the trifling, flippant, and needless figure of New Yorker Brom Garret, is murderously dispensed with in the early episodes, recognised as the superfluous, inauthentic presence he is by the genuine Deadwood residents) the wild badlands of America's west paradoxically set up genuine options

1 "Mining law said that you owned a claim only as long as you were on it and working it, and if you've left for three days, whoever came could take it from you, so you had to be willing to resort to violence... Obscenity was used as a way of announcing, 'don't come in here with any weak stuff'. Any question potentially had lethal implications."

Television's Great Writer, Filmed interview with David Milch for the MIT Communications Forum, April 20, 2006, <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/383>.

2 In mentioning the war-like Hobbesian nature of Deadwood, it is worth noting that other great English contractarian thinker John Locke, who believed that ownership of property was in the application of one's labour to the land, and that such ownership preceded government and law. The gold prospectors of Deadwood fit this category, but the anxiety felt across the series about ownership and right of title, suggest that Deadwood is a conflation of a Hobbesian and Lockean states of nature, where tenuous pre-social ownership is guaranteed only by brute force and violence.

for the entrance of the spirit and openness to the religious appeal³. Deadwood's existence upon the limits of life, means that whatever genuine human bonds are forged will be full, animate and pregnant with possibility, as opposed to exhausted, anodyne and withdrawn.

St Paul's First Epistle to Deadwood

The climactic event of the first season of Deadwood is the cowardly murder of the world-weary gunslinger, Wild Bill Hickock, by his resentful poker rival, Jack McCall. And his funeral provides the pulpit for the show's fundamental teaching, that the individualism and separateness of existence is a delusion. A demented preacher, a tumour pressing on his brain, delivers a reworded formulation of St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians.

Reverend Smith: St. Paul tells us from one spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jew or Gentile, bond or free, and have all been made to drink into one spirit. For the body is not one member but many. He tells us: 'The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of thee.' Nay, much more those members of the body which seem to be more feeble . . . and those members of the body which we think of as less honorable—all are necessary. He says that there should be no schism in the body but that the members should have the same care one to another. And whether one member suffer all the members suffer with it. (Episode 4, Season 1, Deadwood: The Complete First Season DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc, 2004)

In the aftermath of the funeral, the preacher falls into a physical paroxysm in his tent, which mirrors the psychical paroxysm that descends on Seth Bullock (the former sheriff, masquerading in Deadwood as a hardware salesman), who rants sarcastically on the preacher's message while revealing a deeper awareness that it was spoken to him, imploring him to take part in the body of the camp.

Seth Bullock: What is my part, and your part, what part of my part is your part, is my part your knee, what about your ear, what the fuck is that!...I'm not supposed to do anything, lets agree to that, there's not one fuckin thing I don't decide I'm gonna. (Ibid)

His rant ends with the last gasp of his individualism and separateness from the world, as he then proceeds immediately to ride out to pursue the coward Jack McCall, and thereby take his 'part' in the proceedings of justice, thereby becoming a 'part' of the whole. The speech pricked at his instinct for justice, and he harkened to the call. Previous to this individual epiphany, the camp had joined together in a farcical mock trial to bring justice for the slain Hickock. But fearful that the ruminants of working justice would spook a US commonwealth to descend avariciously upon the not yet assimilated Black Hills, Al Swearengen, owner of the Gem saloon (the site of the trial) and machiavellian Deadwood patriarch, scuttles the proceedings. The scene is underscored with the delicious words of the stool pigeon magistrate who directs, "The jury will now retire to the whore's quarters to deliberate". It is ultimately a counterfeit assembly and denotes a counterfeit

³ The impulse to open this section with quotes from, and thoughts of, William James, and to direct this subsequent discussion along these lines was supplied by David Milch's quoting of William James from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (which will be quoted later in the chapter). Milch also disclosed that he had worked on a project with R. W. B. Lewis centred on the James brothers. So Milch was obviously highly familiar with William James' thought, and to the extent that so much of Milch's own testimony on Deadwood resonates with James' religious thought, this seemed a particularly fruitful avenue for delineation of the present themes.

community. Having only come together as a ‘body’ in bad faith, Bullock is spurred beyond his naked self-interest to begin the work of redeeming the sham association of Deadwood.

And while it may seem that Bullock’s act is a lone act of redemption and rectification in a community baulking hard against what it sees as the imposition of such necessary community acts, the fact is that this sets in train a litany of such genuine coming togethers. The show is literally weaved together of such acts of communion and the dramatic consequences that ensue from them. For the show makes us mindful that acts of faith, communicative deeds and the entrance of cooperative spirit is no self-satisfied, fatuously-smiling, hymn-singing, holding of hands, but is a brutal, confused, frightening and ultimately miraculous occurrence. It seems precipitated by necessity, and its fount seems a mystery only because we are ‘absolute mysteries’ to ourselves (Singer, 2010)⁴.

Deadwood literally begins to “civilise” despite itself. Each episode chronicles the settlement coming to terms with the necessities of human co-habitation and the small miracles, gifts of spirit and unpleasant obligations that it requires. From the vast communal act of setting up a “pest tent” by the camp “elders” to combat a smallpox plague, to the more intimate communal act of propping up a barely pardonable scoundrel to help him pass kidney stones, Milch attempts to show that “in apprehending for just a moment the suffering of others... the minute one person is brave (in the face of that suffering) the spirit comes alive.”(Ibid)

It is the mystery behind every cooperative act, the unseen coming togethers that we observe in Deadwood. Happening despite the individual wills of the participants, the ego’s of individuals never really enters into the social equation, and even if their egos bring them to the moment of communion, they must be shed for the communion to be genuine. What Milch requires of his characters is a kind of renunciation remarkably similar to that which he subjects himself to when writing for them.

To gain access to the characters, Milch says, his strategy is to make himself disappear. Citing William James in “The Varieties of Religious Experience,” he asserts that “all apprehensions of the deity have in common ego suppression at depth. James said that every vision that ever came to anyone is prefaced by a sense of dissolution of the self,” he said. “It’s the fragmentation of ego that allowed what he called the oceanic sense to flow in. I find that when I’m merely thinking about a scene I’m in an egoist state, which is the opposite of the state of being where you suppress the ego and go out in spirit to the characters. What writing should be is a going out in spirit. And my idea of storytelling is—I wouldn’t say it’s religious but I would say it’s spiritual. (Ibid)

Milch’s writing shares with his characters, in their extraordinary moments of forgetfulness from grim avaricious grasping, the paradoxical state of kenosis. Kenosis is that vacancy of self. Seen

⁴ In a New Yorker article written by Mark Singer, Milch discussed the psychology behind the seemingly inexplicable behaviours that many people find themselves the author of. “So Bullock, as an exemplar of the law, would have had to be a particular kind of person. Psychologists talk about the binding of one thing to another, taking a feeling that is absolutely unacceptable and suppressing it by binding it to another feeling which is completely acceptable... For Bullock, the law was a binding against his impulse to violence... Darwin wrote about accidents of evolution—he called them ‘sports’—species which turned out to be superadaptive in whatever environment they discovered themselves in. In social terms, those are civilizers... Bill Hickok was another guy like that, men who were absolute mysteries to themselves.”

Mark Singer, *The Misfit*, New Yorker article from February 14, 2005, accessed from http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/02/14/050214fa_fact_singer?currentPage=all, on November 29, 2010.

from the angle of the self it is mere emptiness, irresolution and failure, but seen from the angle of spirit it is the possibility of astonishing plenitude. The kenotic self is emptied of its solipsistic props, and instead of being left defenceless, it finds that it is open to being vulnerably sustained by others. It is a psychological state of going out to others without just assurance of reciprocation. It draws out unnoticed reserves of faith. That this state besets Milch's character's so often without their warrant, understanding or premeditation is what makes his characters mysteries to themselves. From the most central to peripheral of characters, all are beseeched to draw upon unnoticed reserves of faith. Perhaps one of the most timorous but instructive of such connections is that between Charlie Utter, the hesitant wagon-train driver/cum/businessman and Joanie Stubbs the newly emancipated prostitute.

Charlie, having just opened his new freighting enterprise and wearing the entrepreneur's attire foreign to his tastes and inclinations, and Joanie, having mustered the courage to scout the town for the premises of her own brothel, meet each other on the street unsure of themselves and each other. They tentatively and nervously assay each other, and inexplicably begin to confess to each other their involuntary behaviors, despite being total strangers. Charlie begins by sheepishly trying to explain his frock-coat to one who requires no such explanation, and in so doing admits to the unknown quality of his trust in his uncharacteristic conduct.

Charlie Utter: I'm a considerable hand at the freight business, but as far as leasing this building before knowing what the traffic's going to bear, I don't know what possessed me. I do well at a camp, or a settlement, or a township, but that don't make me a camp, or settlement, or township type. This is the attire for that type... of type.⁵ It is as much a gracious invitation to Joanie to disclose and reveal herself, as it is a candid exhibition of his own neediness. And Joanie recognises the twin purpose behind the exposure, as she is put at ease in her own disquiet and worry, while also offering to Charlie the knowledge that he is not alone. And all this is done by the simple act of admitting to her own similar fears and the unconsciousness of her motivation. She reciprocates;

Joanie Stubbs: Far as being ready run a place and stand up to all you have to stand up too, I don't know what got into me.

Charlie Utter: I tell you what, if something's ready for you to do something, don't seem to matter if you're ready or not.

Joanie Stubbs: Better lift your skirts and jump, huh?

Charlie Utter: That's what's coming to mean to be true. (Ibid)

As this scene plays out we see two strangers, unsure of their place and motives, relinquish their gathering fear of the feeling that they are not the sole authors of their actions. A 'cohabitation of the spirit' is at once the incognito force that drives them into unknown territories, but then also offers them together the cessation of their fears about their suitability and readiness for the tasks that they find themselves submitting to. In Charlie and Joanie's cases the hour and place found them. They did not actively and consciously seek their futures, but were drawn ineluctably to them, led by a necessity that they did not fully comprehend. They do not recognise themselves in their actions, but in that lack of self-identification they are able to recognise themselves anew

5 Episode 9, Season 1, *Deadwood: The Complete First Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc, 2004)

in each other.

But the show's most wilful and astute character, Albert Swearengen, whose identity and selfhood loom so large over the camp, is often able to divine the coming hour with astonishing precision. And he almost preternaturally knows what is required of him in that moment. But even in those moments he recognises that the hour calls for a shedding of the self, not only of himself, but of all those that seek the cooperative option. When a treaty with the native American's of the area is about to be signed, clearing the way for the annexation of the camp into the United States, Swearengen quickly realises that the bounty that it may bring will require he and his adversary of equal wilfulness and selfhood, Seth Bullock, see beyond themselves and ignore their natural inclination to clash. Cooperation in this case hinges on a wilfull suspension of the self. They had known that the hour would come, and on its arrival they agree to pay it its dues by consciously enacting kenosis.

Al Swearengen: I wanted to show you my bona fides, for cooperation, if the treaty is signed, it would be wise for you and me to paddle in the same direction; ticks or habits or behaviour either finds dislikable in the other, gotta be overlooked or taken with a grain of salt... the oath stands as a gesture to you. (Ibid)

That it is wilful and conscious does not lessen the need for faith to underpin its operation. This is evidenced by Swearengen's almost confessional desire to show his "bona fides", or good faith. To use a gambling metaphor that seems appropriate to the setting, Swearengen shows Bullock his hand, and in this weakened state of exposure they are able to forge a stronger, more fulfilling bond. Swearengen is engaged in the act of confiding to Bullock, "con" meaning together and 'fide' meaning faith. By displaying their vulnerability in an act of faith they can work together; a possibility that would remain disallowed if they were to retain the barriers and secrecies of their isolated selfhood. The word 'gesture' in the context is also instructive, meaning not just a movement of meaningful communication, but also being derived from Latin "gestus" meaning to bear, carry and bring forth. Through the cooperation they help bear and carry the weight of things, and also bring forth new possibilities and plenitude. All of this requires that they forget each other's "ticks, habits and dislikable behaviours".

This of course correspondingly requires them to forget themselves, to cast off their typical stock of instinctive responses to others and the world. Such a moment occurs when the camp finds itself in its most endangered and precarious position. Awaiting the wrath of the humiliated mining magnate George Hearst, who threatens to wipe the whole camp from the map in a violent conflagration, the camp elders meet at Swearengen's saloon to discuss the hiring of guns to protect themselves. In a baffling but touching scene, the camp elders decide to publish a consolatory letter written by Bullock to the family of a Welsh miner murdered by George Hearst. This, they conclude, will constitute their rebuttal to his awesome challenge. Their natural instinct for violence, too organise a brutal strike before they themselves are struck, is mollified by the reading of the humane letter. Their purely animal, fierce intuition of the situation is replaced by a benevolent one precipitated by a confraternity of spirit. The lamb lies down with the lion, and yet all the characters leave the town meeting thoroughly mystified by their benign response to the

dire situation. Confused by the mild contrariness of their act of defiance, they are nevertheless strangely proud of, and surprised by, the humanity that it reveals.

In fact, the polarising figure of George Hearst at once shows the viewer what exactly is at stake. He is both the figure that threatens to obliterate the cohabitation of spirit that animates Deadwood, but is also the mouthpiece for the highest social organising principle that Milch wished to articulate with the series. Musing on Hearst's unfathomable actions in the camp, and his psychopathic strategies for dominance, Swearingen echoes the sermon of the Reverend Smith about the 'baptism' of all the parts and members into a common spirit.

Al Swearingen: Plans keep coming to the cocksucker, but their final sum is this; but for what brings income to him, break what he can, what he can't, set those parts against themselves to weaken... the why's what fuckin' confounds me... what's in his head I cannot fuckin find in mine." (Episode 5, Season 3, *Deadwood: The Complete Third Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc, 2007)

Swearingen, in stark contrast to his former calculated psychopathy and vigilant promotion of self-interest, wonders aloud and angrily at the mentality of someone who seeks to wreak the hard won spiritual commonwealth of a society through separating the fused parts of the whole against each other. This deliberate echo from the Reverend's epistle to Deadwood does suggest that George Hearst could be the greatest threat to the body politic of Deadwood. He does seem sent by Milch in order to test the Reverend's prophecy, that the whole is greater than the part. He is the agent that tests the dictum 'that there should be no schism in the body'. But paradoxically, Milch also gives to George Hearst the speech that encapsulates the sum of the wisdom that Deadwood has come to stand for. In this speech with his Negro cook's banished son, he shows how a mere symbol can coordinate and synthesize the energies of all, (even allowing for a black man and white man to saunter the streets together smoking cigars, flaunting the common custom), and reveals to us how we 'have all been made to drink into one spirit'.

George Hearst: Gold is everyman's opportunity, why do I make that argument? Because every defect in a man, and in others way of taking him, our agreement that gold has value, gives us power to rise above... That is our species, that uniformly agreeing on its value, we organise to seek the colour. (Episode 7, Season 3, *Deadwood: The Complete Third Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc, 2007)

Hearst sees himself as an agent of this transformative power of symbols, and how it asks of its participants that they contribute their power to the common cause. When pitching the show to HBO, David Milch had originally sought to exemplify this principle with a series on the formation of the early Christian congregations of ancient Rome. But since the network had already commissioned a show on ancient Rome, Milch was asked to reinterpret the idea into another historical context. In a lecture Milch explained the kinship between his original subject matter, and its eventual material outcome.

Gold is something that has no internal meaning at all, it has no use. Gold is an illusion agreed upon, in the same way that the cross is a symbol whose meaning is agreed upon, and the agreement on the meaning of the symbol liberates energy, and the liberation of the individual's energy so that

PREVIOUSLY ON

he or she can participate, and begin to find his or her identity in the collective, is the beginning of society as we understand it. (David Milch tutorial to a USC class, COMM 426, "Religion, Media and Hollywood" on January 24, 2008)

This idea of explaining the origins of our social being in our ability to symbolise was Milch's purpose with *Deadwood*. But the space is not available here to look at all the myriad acts within the series that illustrate Milch's 'cohabitation of the spirit' concept in all of its permutations and eccentricities. But one should pause to look at what is perhaps the series' apothegm. In episode 3 of the third season, entitled 'Full Faith and Credit' we witness the opening of the first *Deadwood* bank. A space for the accumulated wealth and materialised hard work of the *Deadwood* residents to be collected in common holding, thus providing the settlement with a monetary foundation upon which to provide credit. A. W. Merrick, the town's newspaperman, shouts out to the assembled outside, "Trust, gentlemen and ladies, we live in faith!" (Episode 3, Season 3, *Deadwood: The Complete Third Season DVD* box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc, 2007) And while it is a mercantile faith, and seems odd to place credit and faith in the same breath, the point is apposite, for only faith can provide us with credit, in whatever form that credit may take and be conferred. Even the concept of an afterlife, is no more than the belief that extra credit will be installed in death for having shown faith in the small fraction of life that is given to you. Show faith, and allow it to direct you, and an as yet unknown bounty will be yours. *Deadwood's* accumulated faith, its cohabitation of spirit, bestows on its residents full character, good standing and the prize of abundance. Ultimately this faith resides in a symbol. And while that symbol is simply a shiny piece of metal, it displays all the creative promise and omnipotence of a god. It is the incognito God of the modern world, or as David Milch would say it, gold is just a 'synonym' for God.

Art... storytelling, I believe is the dynamic process which embodies spirituality even in a seemingly Godless society. God is just a name for whatever is the spirit that has given us rise. And whatever that spirit is, I think we can all agree something gave us rise... In this formulation the Big Bang is a synonym of God. (David Milch tutorial to a USC class, COMM 426, "Religion, Media and Hollywood" on January 24, 2008.)

This of course raises many questions about what sort of symbols/Gods can orient our powers and energies, and whether they unleash good or bad powers and energies, and what sort of society is organised under their watch. It also raises very interesting questions about art, so conceived by Milch as the capability to symbolise. Milch would try and answer these questions with his next series *John from Cincinnati*. But before we turn to this, we should try and delineate further Milch's understanding of art, society and the religious impulse in his own words and the words of his influences.

The Osmosis of Being and the Power of Art

In a number of fora, but most illuminatingly in a seminar given to a USC class entitled "Religion, Media and Hollywood", Milch talked of the driving ambitions behind his art. He admitted that *Deadwood* began its life as a pitch to HBO executives for a story about soldiers in ancient Rome and their arrest of St Paul. In it he hoped to show how a community of faith blossoms by

“agreement of a meaning of a symbol” (Ibid). In the case of his proposed Roman series, that symbol would be the Cross and the Christ, but since HBO had already commissioned a show that season on ancient Rome, he set about recasting the idea into the American West, and recast the symbol of the Cross to that of Gold. He cursorily and coolly saw no real difference between the two, as they were both symbols that could prompt the same spiritual camaraderie between humans if seen in the right light. According to Milch there is a divinity in all symbols, but the symbols have responsibility to us because they are created; they are beholden to us as much as gain energy from our fealty to them.

Milch chose to clarify the power of symbolization to his students with a pithy but illustrative reference to baboons. The difference between baboons and humans resides solely in the unique human ability to symbolize. Milch claimed that baboons in the wild are only able to congregate in groups no larger than 44, for the reason that all the members of the community must be able to see their leader at all times. Any congregation of baboons larger than 44 makes this visual requirement an impossibility.

This natural limit is something transcended by humans because of our ability to symbolize the leader. Symbolising the leader in a “crown”, “throne”, or any number of other ciphers, prompts greater, extended and prolonged organization, beyond the physical limitations of a flesh and blood leader. It frees us from our natural limitations and liberates new energies and possibility. This is simply one symbolic example of many that could be advanced, the point being that the cornucopic range of human symbols all expand our capabilities in time and space. And when we submit ourselves to a collectively agreed-upon symbol, we position ourselves in an entity larger than our individual selves.

In the seminar, Milch attempts to give voice to what this positioning might be with a passing reference to Soren Kierkegaard. Seeming to thumb through *The Sickness Unto Death*, he reads a passage that in a more modern prosaic translation reads; “This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.” (Kierkegaard, 2004: 44)

Milch’s rendition/translation is read more poetically and spiritually as; “the absence of despair, which is the transcendent state of being, in that state, the self rests transparently in the spirit which gave it rise.” (David Milch tutorial to a USC class, COMM 426, “Religion, Media and Hollywood” on January 24, 2008)

Milch is here describing that state of being when a congregation of selves, emptied of the jagged contours of their individual personalities (kenosis), experience grace (absence of despair) by feeling at home in the collective symbol/s they have created. The created symbols provide a ‘ground’ or ‘rest’ for the self, but in a larger sense they also create the self by “establishing it” or “giving it rise”. The power to symbolise is so mysterious because it constitutes both our creative potential while also grounding that that potential. It is so mysterious that we have even

PREVIOUSLY ON

symbolised it with the name “God”. And if David Milch believed in a God, this would be it. This is why Milch says that the symbols, while giving us our ground, providing our orientation, and ultimately being our products, have a higher fidelity to which they must bow. “That symbol must itself rest transparently in the spirit that gives it rise, or it itself becomes corrupt, and that’s the fundamental, the overarching theme of the series.” (Ibid)

We create the symbols, just as they “draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity”. And thus God, as the symbol of all symbols, the “spirit that gave us rise” also draws “vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity”. This leads Milch to state unequivocally, both here and on many other occasions, that the perception of our separateness is fundamentally an illusion. Not only the separation between people but the separation between subject and object is not a meaningful predicate for looking at reality. As Milch says, “any duality, I would argue, is predicated on a falsehood”. And it is on this point that Milch not only riffs at length in the seminar, but can also be seen to be improvising upon in all the scenes he writes for television. The insistence and repetition of the sentiment makes it obvious as the clue to deciphering both his art, and what he understands art to be.

The telling of a story is nothing more or less than the process of the viewer coming to experience what has seemed to be separate entities, as informed by a single unity. (Ibid)

The fact that we think of ourselves as separate, does that mean that we are not members of a larger body, which for the moment we do not recognize as being a larger body? (Ibid)

This doubleness, this paradoxical doubleness, of seeming to be both separate from each other, and yet to be able to experience radiating through each other, with no distortion, the universal spirit, is the state of grace... and I would also submit, that it is the state of art. (Ibid)

Where does this article of faith come from? What is its lineage? In Mark Singer’s New Yorker article, Milch expressed his profound artistic debt to his old university professor, and great American writer, Robert Penn Warren. Penn took the troubled Milch under his wing as not only a teacher, but an encouraging friend, artistic colleague and mentor until his death in 1989 (Millichap, 2006 :100). Milch admitted to a particular fondness for his poetry, reading it three to four times a week, and schooling himself in Warren’s redemptive poetics. “As Milch says of Warren in this regard, “his poetry is an expression of a unified state of being and really is... As close to an exalted state as one who hasn’t God can get.” (Idem: 113)

It is to Warren’s influence that we can trace Milch’s adoption of an artistically inspired philosophy of social monism, a “merging of self in a collective Being” (Strandberg, 1986 : 102). Warren himself expressed the idea in the mid 1950’s in an article for the Sewanee Review, which described the human animal as entrenched in a continual ‘osmosis of being’. This “osmosis of being” rather than erasing human difference, paradoxically provides the individual with an identity, one that is persistently revealed to him/her through the osmosis. Like most monist perspectives, Warren’s “osmosis of being” shows that what we take to be spiritual transcendence is in fact absorption.

PREVIOUSLY ON

And the image of himself necessarily has a foreground and a background, for man is in the world not as a billiard ball placed on a table, not even as a ship on the ocean with location determinable by latitude and longitude. He is rather, in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values- that is, a new self- and so the identity is a continually emerging, an unfolding, a self-affirming, and, we hope, a self-corrective creation. (Penn Warren, 1955 : 186)

To my mind, Milch takes on this perspective wholesale, and it is a guiding principle behind his work. From this perspective Milch is able to see even the most banal and commonplace dramatic scene as significant and contributing to the forming of bonds and relations between people and their ongoing interpenetration. For a writer and storyteller, this process is made most plain in the transference of words in speech. In just the act of speaking to each other, humans are participating in symbols that both orientate and unleash their powers. Milch views humans as conductors of energy, energy expressed and codified in the symbolic cache of words. And it is in the use of words that we can see the reciprocal relationships between humans and their symbols. Words as symbols spoken to us can change us, just as words themselves are a provisional and contingent commodity, capable of changed meanings dependent upon who is speaking them and how.

The generation of words is an expression of electrical energy. The reason storytelling engages us perhaps more fully than other kinds of communication is because the words in a story can mean in different ways. They contain their opposites... I believe that we are all literally part of the mind of God and that our sense of ourselves as separate is an illusion. And therefore when we communicate with each other as a function of an exchange of energy we understand not because of the inherent content of the words but because of how that energy flows. (Mark Singer, *The Misfit*, Opcit.)

With this insistence on the divine nature of symbols, and our participation in the mind of God when we speak, Milch is echoing quite considerably the very little known thinker Johann Georg Hamann, the 18th century German philologist and linguist who had a great influence on Kierkegaard. While there is no evidence that Milch knows of this neglected thinker, there is no doubt that Milch has a kinship with Hamann's religious understanding of the function of words. For Hamann also saw language as arising from the "co-activity of God and man", and that in language is fused the duality we perceive into the unity of its origin (O'Flaherty, 1952: 72) . Language and speech for Hamann, as for Milch, is the ground that gives us rise, the platform for our interdependence with each other and God, and the theatre of creational togetherness. It is my contention that Milch would be heartily supportive of Hamann's belief in the "sacramental" structure of language (Ibid). For both Milch and Hamann, "being *Homo symbolicus* is integral to being made in the image of God". (Ward, 1998 :236)

It seems to me that the way God says ' I too have a hand here' is in the rhythms and metrics of speech, so that even unbeknownst to themselves they honor a divine presence in some of the elocutions of Deadwood. (Televisions Great Writer, public interview with David Milch held at the Bartos Theatre on 20th of April 2006)

It could be surmised at this stage that Milch operates with four basic interrelated articles of faith in his writing. These are; firstly, that the idea of our separateness is a fundamental illusion; secondly, that despite this illusion we partake in a cohabitation of spirit: and thirdly that our capacity for communion is dependent and proportional on our ability to symbolise; and fourthly, that symbols unleash potential energy and are 'paths to God'. All of these insights were woven into Milch's short-lived drama *John from Cincinnati*, and it is to here that we turn by way of conclusion.

Lines and Circles, Ones and Zeros

In *John from Cincinnati* Milch turned his focus towards a more contemporary setting, and yet a more elemental extrapolation of his ideas on art, society, spirit and symbolisation. Rather than a nascent community that builds itself from nothing, Milch examines a self-indulgent community in desperate need of redemption and revitalisation. Rather than a community building itself through faith, we find a community where whatever faith built it and held it together has vacated. In this work he also explores that symbolic urge that had built America, but that in its contemporary setting could not possibly be seen as anything but the fetid and corrupt heart of that nation. Milch attempts nothing less than the possible redemption of that fallen symbol of money (gold), and the reharnessing of the atrophied commercial and material impulse of modern life to the service of spirit. Most appropriate for someone who did so much to raise the standards of that medium so slavishly beheld to the commercial interest... television.

Milch writes of a surfing community, and specifically a surfing dynasty of three generations, breaking apart from its own hubris, stupidity, arrogance, anger and pain. The 'Yost' family name is second to none in surfing centred Imperial Beach, California, and yet each member of the Yost brood is without reservation an "entrapped psyche". The family embodies the former glory of this surfing community, but in their current dysfunction they also spell out its broken and spent spirit. Introduced into this equation are many peripheral characters, but three in particular concern us here. The title character John Monad, a mysterious Christ-like, holy-fool type of a character. He is almost a divine vessel sent down to parrot the words of others, and in parroting their words, they may hear the words of his 'Father' mirrored in themselves. Linc Stark, a wealthy surfing entrepreneur, partly responsible for the ruin of the Yost family, who has his eyes set on commercially exploiting the surfing prodigy that is the youngest Yost, Shaun, by signing him to a lucrative sponsorship contract. And Cass, a filmmaker who from the outset is in Linc Stark's nefarious employ, but who is gradually and unconsciously co-opted into John's plans for the redemption of the family, and by extension all around them. At the end of the first (and only) season, even Linc Stark, transfixed by the miraculous figure of John, diverts and channels his considerable commercial and material powers in service to John's redemptive plans. John's plans for the Yost family are ultimately concealed from us because the series never saw out its natural life, but in episode six much is revealed to us by John who "renders them unconscious for the first time, and begins to deliver subliminally a sermon to them on how the capacity to symbolize, to agree upon the meaning of certain symbols, has allowed us to organize in groups

larger than 44.” He intones a kind of condensed version of our human history as symbol creating and hence spiritual beings. In creating symbols we participate in the divine word.

John Monad: “Fur is big, mud is big, the stick is big, the word is big, fire is huge, the wheel is huge, the line and circle are big, on the wall the line and circle are huge, on the wall, the man at the wall makes a man from the circle and line, the man at the wall makes a word on the wall from the circle and line, the word on the wall, hears my father. The zero’s and one’s make the word in Cass’s camera.” (Episode 6, Season 1, John From Cincinnati: The Complete First Season DVD box set)

John posits a line of continuity between the primitive lines and circles on cave walls, and the endless reams of ones and zeros generated in our digital labyrinths. And John intimates that he has seeded his redemptive message for the world in the tool that most democratically and profoundly displays our modern ability to create symbols... the binary code of a digital camera, just as all divinity has been encoded in symbols from time immemorial. As Milch explains in the DVD commentary of the episode, “whoever has sent John, begins to become aware of us as a species, when we begin to generate art... The zero’s and ones that make film, are a way to communicate with God.” The word of God can be found in something as perfunctory as film and television, as they are both part of our considerable symbolising arsenal, even if they have been corrupted by that other humanly created symbol, gold. But... “Even a soulless materialism, if willing to submit itself to the possibilities of the present moment without distortion, can be an instrument of salvation... art can help materialism transcend itself” (David Milch’s audio commentary to episode 10, Season 1, John From Cincinnati: The Complete First Season DVD box set)

In the final estimation of Milch’s work, this is his creative achievement. To have sought the redemption and transcendence of today’s most popular and material form of entertainment, television, by illuminating its space as the most powerful and influential modern realm of the symbol. Just like those more exalted mediums for symbolisation, television (though riven with base commercial pursuits) is likewise a capable “vehicle for exploring the artistic possibilities of redemption and the redemptive possibilities of art”. (Singer: Opcit.)

Works cited

Grimshaw, Jr., James A..(Ed.) (1986): *Times Glory: original essays on Robert Penn Warren*. University of Central Arkansas Press.

Heelas, Paul; Martin, David and Morris, Paul (1998): *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*. Blackwell Publishers.

Kierkegaard, Soren (2004): *The Sickness unto Death*. Penguin Books.

Lavery, David (Ed.) (2006): *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*. I. B. Tauris.

Milch, David (2006): *Televisions Great Writer*, public interview with held at the Bartos Theatre

PREVIOUSLY ON

on 20th of April 2006, <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/383>, accessed on 29th November, 2010.

Milch, David (2008) tutorial to a USC class, COMM 426, "Religion, Media and Hollywood" on January 24, 2008.

Part One: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jOQcWr_dnl

Part Two: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hzZ-MxIV8wU&feature=related>

Part Three: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaGpG7qOzVE&feature=related>

Part Four: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-Tpxuxnly8&feature=related>

Accessed on 29th Novemeber, 2010.

Milch David (2004): *Deadwood: The Complete First Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc)

Milch David (2006):*Deadwood: The Complete Second Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc)

Milch David (2007):*Deadwood: The Complete Third Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc)

Milch David (2008): *John From Cincinnati: The Complete First Season* DVD box set. (HBO Home Box Office, Inc)

O'Flaherty, James C. (1952): *Unity and Language: A Study In The Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann*. The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Penn Warren, Robert (1955): "Knowledge and the Image of Man" in Spears, Monroe K. *The Sewanee Review*, vol LX111.

Singer, Mark (2005): *The Misfit*, New Yorker article from February 14, 2005, accessed from http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/02/14/050214fa_fact_singer?currentPage=all, on November 29, 2010.

Slater, Michael R. (2009): *William James on Ethics and Faith*. Cambridge Uni Press.

Ward, Graham (1998): "Kenosis and naming: beyond analogy and towards allegoria amoris, in Heelas, Paul; Martin, David and Morris, Paul (1998): *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*. Blackwell Publishers. pg 236.