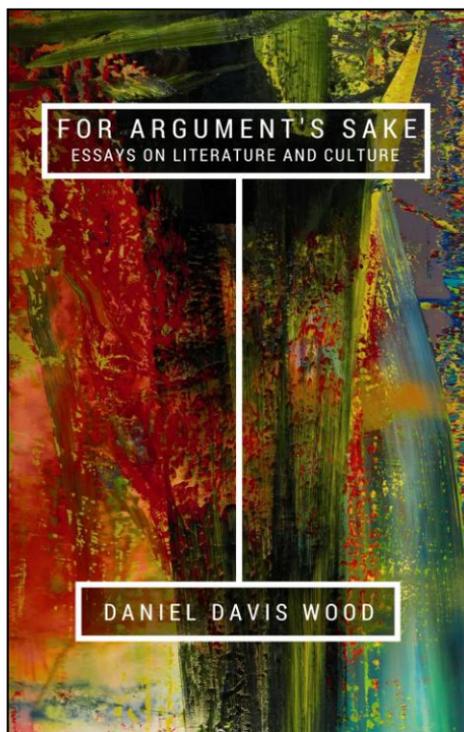


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 115-120.

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GREEN HAIR AND NOSE BONES

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LITERARY REJOINDERS ARE RARELY ISSUED AS BLUNTLY AS THIS one in Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*.

From Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, published in 2005, here's the soft-spoken Sheriff Bell wallowing in soul-searching nostalgia as he approaches retirement:

I think we are all of us ill prepared for what is to come and I dont care what shape it takes. And whatever comes my guess is that it will have small power to sustain us. These old people I talk to, if you could of told em that there would be people on the streets of our Texas towns with green hair and bones in their noses speakin a language they couldnt even understand, well, they just flat out wouldnt of believed you. But what if you'd of told em it was their own grandchildren? Well, all of that is signs and wonders but it dont tell you how it got that way. (295-296)

From Meyer's novel, published in 2009, here's Glen Patacki, chief of police in Buell, Pennsylvania, indulging in nostalgia with the world-weary sergeant Bud Harris:

You should have been here for the seventies, Bud. The department was buying new cruisers with Corvette engines maybe every three years. And then came the eighties, and then it wasn't just that we lost all those jobs, it was that people didn't have anything to be good at anymore. ... We're trending backwards as a nation, probably for the first time in history, and it's not the [fault of the] kids with the green hair and the bones through their noses. (212)

Meyer's novel is pretty clearly a response to McCarthy's, an attempt to provide a corrective to Sheriff Bell's assessment of what ails the United States. As the only first-person narrator of a novel set in 1985, Bell issues a right-wing critique of American culture typical for

his time: after the Greatest Generation suffered immensely in order to defend a certain way of life — quiet, respectable, humble, and deeply moral — the narcissistic and overly permissive Baby Boomers and early Gen-Xers have trashed it and sent it all to hell in a handbasket. As a character who speaks for the whole of a novel set at the dawn of the Great Recession, Patacki issues a fairly standard left-wing critique of social developments in the time since Bell's era: from the rise of Reaganomics to the forging of the Washington Consensus, the implementation of NAFTA, and the offshoring of manufacturing jobs, the triumph of neoliberalism has destroyed the dignity of a whole generation of American labourers and thrown their dependents into despair.

The difference between Bell and Patacki, and between Bell's first-person portions of *No Country for Old Men* and the entirety of *American Rust*, is a disagreement over who should bear the blame for intergenerational ills. Both men sense that American society is on the brink of a descent into chaos. Whose fault is that? Has a generation on the cusp of adulthood selfishly rejected the propriety of the generation before it, or has the older generation failed to bequeath a healthy and just society to the generations that have followed it?

The trouble with the view held by both Patacki and *American Rust* is precisely that Meyer advances it by taking a shot at Bell. Why bother echoing the line about green hair and nose bones and then putting a different spin on it? What exactly does *American Rust* gain by pointing to Bell and taking him to task? *No Country for Old Men* is itself a slow-motion evisceration of Bell's belief systems, which makes Meyer's critique largely redundant. There's little need for a second novel to stand against the views of Bell because Bell already appears in a novel that stands against those views. McCarthy himself takes shots at Bell and frames the novel's anarchic violence as a consequence of the darker side of what Bell represents: the Greatest Generation, eclipsed by the Baby Boomers, is now paralysed by self-righteousness and moral complacency. Since McCarthy has already discredited Sheriff Bell, Meyer prospectively undercuts his own critique in *American Rust* when he uses Patacki to summarise it with an explicit invocation of Bell's lament.

To see how McCarthy rebukes Sheriff Bell, and to see that he invests *No Country for Old Men* with a consciousness of the rebuke, you need only read the entirety of the monologue in which Bell decries the prevalence of green hair and nose bones. "It's a life's work to see yourself for what you really are and even then you might be wrong," he says:

And that is somethin I dont want to be wrong about. I've thought about why it was I wanted to be a lawman. There was always some part of me that wanted to be in charge. Pretty much insisted on it. Wanted people to listen to what I had to say. But there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everbody back in the boat. If I've tried to cultivate anything it's been that. (295)

So Bell holds himself to a hierarchy of values. At the very top is perpetual self-awareness. Beneath self-awareness is the spirit of authoritarianism and, beneath that, the spirit of public service, although, by Bell's own admission, it requires an act of will for him to subordinate his innate authoritarianism to his public service. But here's the problem with Sheriff Bell. His circumstances are such that the last two values serve one another — authoritarianism is what has put him in a position of public service, and his acts of public service bolster the authoritarian spirit through which he has obtained his position — and, worse, he lacks all awareness of that situation.

Bell is a veteran of the Second World War who was decorated for distinguished service in Europe and then elected sheriff in 1945 on the basis of his wartime bravado. But beneath the surface of the stalwart soldier is an emotionally crippled man harbouring a shameful secret. Although he received honours for a wartime incident in which he held ground under enemy fire and only retreated when the rest of his unit had been killed, the truth is that he "cut and run" and left his unit to be slaughtered just after the first shots were fired (272-279). He is a coward elected to office by constituents who believe in his heroism. More than that, as he admits, his office entails essentially unlimited authority within the jurisdiction of his county:

The opportunities for abuse are just about everywhere. There's no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law. You think about a job where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not. Because I say that it is. (64)

If there is so little crime in his sleepy little county that there aren't even any county laws for the sheriff to uphold, why would Bell's constituents feel that the best possible candidate for sheriff is a returned soldier whose distinguishing feature is his heroic service in the bloodiest conflict in the whole of human history? Bell's concealed cowardice advances McCarthy's point: when Bell maintains a facade of strength and heroism, his constituents, having assumed that appearances are not deceiving, assume in turn that his apparent fortitude renders him capable of deterring or swiftly resolving county crime. What they want, in short, is an authoritarian lawman of whom they approve, and, with his blanket assumption that he can distinguish good people from bad people at a mere glance (64), Bell does nothing to challenge that want.

To the extent that he successfully deters and resolves crime, then, Bell justifies the authoritarian sentiment that swept him into office. The better he serves the public, the more he bolsters the validity of authoritarian law enforcement despite what we as readers know about his cowardice. Yet Bell himself cannot see that his public service strengthens the authoritarian wants of the voting public. Nor can he see that, inversely, the extraordinary bloodshed that arrives in his county brings his cowardice back out into the open — "I walked in front of those eyes once," he says of the remorseless Anton Chigurh, "[but] I wont do it again" (4) — and thereby reveals that the emperor has no clothes, undermining the basis on which Bell was elected and making a farce of the parochial post-War authoritarianism he represents.

Is America in a state of decline? It's not the fault of the kids with green hair and bones through their noses. It's the fault of eld-

ers too enamoured of their own past glories to sensibly commit themselves to resolving the problems of the present. McCarthy already made that point. He didn't need Patacki to make it again by rebuking Sheriff Bell, and Meyer should have edited out that rebuke to avoid a distraction from the very point he too tries to make.

Works Cited

McCarthy, Cormac. *No Country for Old Men*. 2005. London: Picador, 2006. Print.

Meyer, Philipp. *American Rust*. 2009. London: Pocket Books, 2010. Print.