I hate to break it to you, but there is no big lie. There is no system. The universe is indifferent.

DON DRAPER, "THE HOOD COOL," SEASON 1, EPISODE 8
Chapter 13

EXITUS ET REDITUS IN MARRIAGE

Mad Men vs. Hollywood Remarriage Comedies

—BRANDON L. MORGAN and JONATHAN TRAN

We want to begin by contrasting two portraits of marriage, one gathered from the investigations of ordinary language by Stanley Cavell and one inferred from the words of Mad Men’s Don Draper. The first can be found initially through Cavell’s important study of 1930s and 1940s era Hollywood remarriage comedies. These early films bear some common features to their Shakespearean comedy forebears, most noticeably their attention to the domesticity of everyday life as that sphere in which happiness is pursued and hopefully discovered. One of their added features is the contemplation of divorce and remarriage and, thus, of the space of marriage as one of conversation, deliberation, reconciliation and acknowledgement. Marriage in the form of remarriage “recapitulate[s] the full weight of the concept of conversation, demonstrating why our word conversation means what it does, what talk means . . . learning to speak the same language.”

While many—Cavell’s interest, Shakespearean—comedies require overcoming certain objective obstacles on the way to marriage, remarriage comedies attempt to overcome marriage itself (or ourselves in marriage) that is, the temptation to avoid the constraints that marriage places on our speech, desires and futures. In Cavell’s words, the hope for such domestic conversation, “invokes the fantasy of the perfected human community, proposes marriage as our best emblem of this eventual community—not marriage as it is but as it may be—while at the same time it grants . . . that we cannot know that we are humanly capable of achieving that eventuality, or of so much as achieving a marriage that exemplifies it, since that may itself be achievable only as part of the eventual community.” For Cavell and the film genres he describes, marriage names one possibility for the mutuality of voice and the space for self-transformation. It exemplifies the possibility of equality and moral education working in tandem to sustain, or more often to recycle, a trust in our common speech and moral growth. These possibilities (and here an overlap with certain metaphysical claims of Christian theology) remain possible by a fact of language, a fact of how language works out, itself a function of the kinds of creatures we are (hence those metaphysical claims), just as do possibilities of denial and departure.

The second portrait of marriage comes initially in Season 6 of Mad Men, as Don analyzes an ad campaign for air fresheners with an image of a happily newlywed couple in the background. The tag line reads, “Love is in the air.” Don responds to the concept of “love” this way.

Don: It’s a big word . . . what is this?
Staffer: They’re newlyweds.
Don: This couple doesn’t exist . . . anything matrimonial feels Palesolithic . . . let’s try to trade on the word love as something substantial . . . Why are we contributing to the trivialization of the word? It doesn’t belong in the kitchen. “I love this. I love my oven. You know what I’d love? A hamburger.” We’re wearing it out . . . we want that electric jet to the body. We want even. It’s like a drug. It’s a domestic.

Don alludes to a “substantial” concept of love with the sparks and spontaneity of the erotic, though willingly unbonding its association with the matrimonial and the domestic, churning that appealing to such modes of life is radically outdated—prehistoric.

This remark from Don speaks volumes about how he and other characters in Mad Men picture marriage for themselves. It is a concept seemingly homeless. Or at least its home has been lost at some point and what we have left is a shell of the concept—no context for its use. This appears to be what Mad Men often and perhaps most often says about marriage and domestic life, something Don’s claims here summarize. To any dedicated

2. ibid., 112.
viewer of the show, *Mad Men* can often subject its viewers to some of the bleakest portraits of marriage in all of television.

Marriage in *Mad Men* can easily be read as a sung song to the institution of marriage as such, of its possibilities to establish the conditions for trust, dependence, self-knowledge—in short, happiness. For Don and others, marriage as an institution is up for grabs, foreshadowing, and ostensibly explaining, social realities commonplace in our time, *Mad Men* as genealogy dramatized. Marriage depicted in *Mad Men* is susceptible to its usefulness or lack thereof in inciting sentimentality or nostalgia among potential buyers of a product. Don’s own cynicism here speaks truthfully in that such romantic appeals to nostalgia are empty. Marriage as an institution no longer has authorization or ratification but rests on the maintenance of the participants themselves—a maintenance that *Mad Men* portrays as a lost, ancient art.

Yet, *Mad Men* also raises—periodically and evanescently—narratives of recovery, self-knowledge and apology, risking scenes that appear ripe for, if not redemption, at least acknowledgement of what has been forgone in the loss of maternal voice. Read straight, these scenes might indicate hesitation about the show’s otherwise steady march into cynicism. We remain intent in this essay to show them as more. For Cavell, marriage preserves the possibility of shared life amid a world that avoids or rejects our everyday commonness as human beings. It names a space in which the temptation toward various skepticism might be faced and lived through with the help of another. For *Mad Men*, the question of marriage’s legitimacy appears to name its failure and outmodedness and, thus, a form of the ordinary and the domestic to which persons no longer find reason consenting.

However, reading *Mad Men* alongside Cavell’s claim that marriage resides between the acknowledgement and avoidance of shared speech in conversation reveals its bouts of cynicism about marriage and mutuality as more recoverable, or at least less inevitable, as they might otherwise be. Hence we read *Mad Men*’s cynicism as threatening rather than fatal; in this vein, hopefulness—of the kind piqued by Cavell on marriage as comedy—is seen as lying in the same soil as that which saps hope, both emerging from the frustrating conditions of human words and worlds, to the conclusion that the same conditions that allow words and the human worlds constituted by them to atrophy, threatening cynicism, make for other possibilities, provoking hope. We call these conditions, biological as they are, “ordinary.” Where *Mad Men* and Cavell’s philosophy of the ordinary agree concerns the belief that marriage is struggling to rediscover its legitimacy and, in so doing, adapting itself to a struggle often won (or thwarted) by no more than one’s own willingness to go on (or not). The stakes of going on here include not only the possibility of hope (rather than despair), but of talking, and so of companionship. Where philosophies of the ordinary and Christian theology agree, as dramatized in this essay by *Mad Men*’s scenes from a marriage, is in an unrequited claim about the semblance of conversation, life, and hope, according to which Christianity says something about God.

**MARRIAGE AS CONVERSATION**

Stanley Cavell is one of our most important interpreters of what has gone by the name of ordinary language philosophy, a mode of thinking that follows the path of J. L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein in returning words from metaphysical to everyday uses—or, to put it differently, from the world of fantasy to the world of domestic conversation. Cavell’s developed account of marriage, worked out through his interpretation of early Hollywood talkies, is in response to his complicated picture of language and its relationship to skepticism. In philosophical parlance, this is the view that human knowledge is universally insufficient to secure the existence of the world and the presence of others. Most importantly for us, Cavell claims that the meanings of our words do not lay in the establishment of philosophical rules or requirements or in correspondence with universal ideas, mental states, or external world objects—medium-sized dry goods (paraphrasing Austin) or otherwise—but in the ordinary agreements in uses that speakers share.

In Cavell’s words, “There is nothing deeper than agreement itself.” Yet those agreements are not everywhere available for inspection, nor are they arbitrarily established by habit but reside in (an attainment created through learning concepts with other speakers who live in the world they do together. Agreement (or its absence) is not so much established as discovered.

One goal of Cavell’s philosophy is to explore the surprising depth to which our agreements in language extend. Such lengths are surprising because agreements do not simply reside at the level of social convention, but react to those everyday human concepts of eating, walking, thinking, desiring etc. that both constitute our very sense of humanness and grow out of the kinds of creatures humans are—the bodies we are, the environs we inhabit, so on and so forth. Only by appreciating the eventual and degree of these agreements can one also appreciate what is at stake when agreement comes to an end. A second goal involves exploring these stakes when agreement gives out. Those stakes are artificially raised, and hence flattened, under philosophical skepticism—which views given failures in linguistic agreement as connoting the notion that words as such are useless.

in making us intelligible to one another, that that which matters—that beyond language (universals, mental states, or medium-sized dry goods)—is the very thing language cannot convey, the very thing language shrugs or blocks. According to the skeptic, we are trapped in unknowability by the words we use because they can neither grant the knowledge of others or of the world we crave nor the knowledge we crave to grant them of ourselves.

Part of the hope of Cavell's work on language is to investigate this craving and the kinds of responses it elicits. Part of the challenge for any theological investigation into what happens when, as Rowan Williams puts it, words come under pressure (marriage being that eventually where agreement lives under continuous close quarters pressure) requires remaining attentive to rather than avoiding (i.e., "I won't understand you because I cannot"), the fragile conditions that make for agreement, and its ending. Such attention comes with some difficulty and often no small amount of pain (e.g., "I don't understand you because I refuse to")—which helps us place the presence of cynicism as the avoidance of these conditions and skepticism as their denial.5

The practical outcome of the first goal of Cavell's picture of language is that we speaking animals can appeal to nothing beyond everyday human words and concepts in order to make ourselves intelligible. We have nothing beyond "our sense that we make sense" to others in the language we speak. However, this also means that we need nothing beyond our shared concepts for obtaining mutual intelligibility. The sense that we need more than what language can give us is, on Cavell's reading of philosophical skepticism, the tendency for humans to deny their own humanity, deny the very conditions that make them human and so therefore to relinquish the possibilities language grants including a whole range of human intimacy. Here lies the significance of Cavell's famous sludge of the crushed body as the ultimate picture of the unacknowledged person.6

If we can resist the fantasy of mutuality beyond or before or after (in other words, better than) the words we have, we can arrive at a practical outcome of the second goal of Cavell's work—namely, the discovery that the end of language entails the end of our world. To acknowledge the end of ourselves in those moments is to recognize our separateness from others, a separateness as much a part of our humanness as is our mutuality—each constituting the possibility of the other. Going on with another beyond this point will require a willingness to see oneself as incomplete, as needing another to recognize one's limits and possibly to deepen or expand those

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6. Ibid., 430.

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limits by way of mutual conversation. In the world of human speech, we are "bound to become lost and to need the friendly and credible words of others in order to find [our] way..."7

Common pursuit of conversation does not negate our incompleteness vis-à-vis others; it does not dispel what Cavell calls the "threat of skepticism"—which attends all human speech. The temptation to repudiate our shared words is not so much overcome as repeatedly faced and lived through, which means refusing again and again taking oneself as exempt from language, affirming again and again our aliveness to speech. To see meaning as residing in our agreements, which is to say, residing with us, suggests that the possibility of recouping and maintaining conversation amid disagreement lies in our own patience and generosity, our own humility and hope for moral growth. Conversation's future requires perpetually attending to our future together and to our own habits of recuperation. A remarkable claim of Christian theology is that these same facts of language determine speech about God—since God in Christ has spoken ordinarily when extraordinarily speaking about himself—making theology (that is, our speech about God) as ordinary and hence as dependent, dispossessive, tempting, and threatening as all of our other ordinary occurrences of speaking of and to one another.

Cavell's interpretation of remarriage comediess allegorizes this picture of language by seeing remarriage as exemplifying the importance of ordinary speech through the curial and domestic practice of marriage. For Cavell, remarriage comediess find their inspiration from Shakespearean comedy but diverge from them in (at least) two key ways. They both narrate the coming together of a couple or couples in marriage. While Shakespearean comediess present an obstacle external to the central pair, remarriage comediess present the couple's relationship itself as the obstacle, an aspect unavailable to the audience until the conclusion. The second difference, following from the first, is that while the principle pair in Shakespearean comedies seeks to achieve marriage, the pair in remarriage comedies seeks marriage again—that is, coming back together after separation or divorce. Cavell sees such comedic recouping as expressing the pursuit of shared marital happiness in terms of the search for a common language.

Thus, marriage is always remarriage: always the search for a next step together in the wake of mistakes and avadences—realities that humans inevitably face given their life in words. Cavell offers describes such a pursuit as the return to innocence after temporality—which, in turn, depends upon seeing innocence as a something capable of being renewed. In addition,
Cavellian marriage is akin to Aristotelian friendship in that what is sought and maintained (in its most noble forms, at least) is the friendship itself, and not a form of relation for the sake of external gains. To still speak about and pursue marriage for Cavell (or friendship, for that matter) is to refuse skepticism to satisfaction in seeing communicative barriers as deserving the repudiation of our shared words, which is to say, of a future for us. It involves reviving our interest in talking and conversing, to overcome narcissism by way of trusting speech to do what we need it to do. Cavell finds conversation in these early Hollywood tales as central to their plots of matrimonial recuperation, not simply because the capacity to represent human life as simultaneously visual and aural was a technological achievement for film, but that such technology registers a vital cultural achievement (even a philosophical achievement) in (re)turning attention, trust and responsibility to ordinary language as what constitutes marriage. In Cavell's words, "Talking together is for us the pair's essential way of being together, a pair for whom to repeat, being together is more important than whatever it is they do together." An outcome of seeing marriage as largely constituted by the repeated human acceptance of ordinary language and the pursuit of common speech amid our separateness raises the question of what constitutes an outcome of marriage—which turns out to be a central concern for Cavell's interpretation of remarrying comedy.

It is part of our understanding of our world, and of what constitutes an historical event for this world, that Luther redrew the world in getting married, and Henry the Eighth...in getting divorced. It has since then been a more or less open secret in our world that we do not know what legitimates either divorce or marriage. Our genre emphasizes the mystery of marriage by finding that neither law nor sexuality (nor, by implication, procreation) is sufficient to ensure true marriage and suggesting that what provides legitimacy is the mutual willingness for remarriage, for a sort of continual reformation... According to Cavell, the conversation of marriage denudes the attempts to secure marriage institutionally (e.g. ecclesiologically)—which in turn brings into question how society as such is to be legitimized. Cavell has his own complicated answers to that question, but for our concerns suffice it to note that marriage as continual conversation involves seeing the future of marriage as residing in the willingness of the participants to trust that their words have a common future. Part of the challenge of Cavell's philosophy is in seeing that the future of marriage is not granted by something more than this. The other part of the challenge comes in seeing that it is also not denied by something more than this. Its granting and denial will depend largely on the moral possibilities of the persons involved. "The virtues most in request here are those of listening, the responsiveness to difference, the willingness to change..."

This issue about marriage as institution leads into questions about the church's proper comportment toward marriage. It is often thought that the church is the home of this institutionalization and, therefore, responsible for many of our cultural attitudes about marriage—including, rightly or wrongly, the overinflated ones. An account of human life that aspires to the ordinary conditions of language deflates the standard romanticisms, including those that follow on what we have characterized through Cavell as a biblical Shakespearean narrative arc that presumes marriage insofar as it is marriage (two people as now married) as complete. It will find confounding any conception of marriage that does not view marriage a species of friendship, even if one with very unique features (i.e., duration, sex, begetting children, etc.). Approaching conversation as the practice and enactment of friendship and marriage as internal to friendship, it prepares a vision of marriage as the kind of conversation (i.e., unfolding over time, as one body, hospitable, etc.) fit to bear the weight of the humanness we have discussed. As much as it resists marriage as fantasy—or fantasy as marriage—it admits of a picture of marriage attentive to the fragile conditions that make for attendance and heralds the event of agreement. Unlike the banal romantic sense, that theological sense of marriage does not presume agreement a possession of marriage, but rather a moral achievement along the way. By placing marriage within the life worlds of the kinds of bodies humans are, a theology attentive to ordinary language institutionality secures marriage as natural convention—though, undoubtedly, not the only convention conducive to human life in words. By narrating ordinary language conditions as natural to human life and emplotting sin as that denial which denigrates creaturely life, marriage as church institution initializes a locus of meaning that goes before any marrying couple as the sacramental life—which directs desire towards certain
ends, recognizing the all-too-human tendency to deny our humanity. We continuously call ourselves back to humanity, where repentance indicates something like remarriage.

ANOTHER COUNTRY

Our description of Cavell’s picture of marriage as constituted by a hope in mutual conversation is meant to cast light on Mad Men’s own picture of marriage and its suggested commentary on the trustworthiness of speech, Cavell himself admits that his picture might look utopian. “So many terrible charges can be brought against the institution of marriage, or in some cases, marriage, that it can sometimes seem a wonder that sensible people who have choice in the matter continue to seek its blessings and accept its costs.” He acknowledges hope in the institution may be but a wager on marriage and might be understood best as his faith that words and those animals that speak them have a possible future worthy of pursuit. One way of interpreting Mad Men, especially in light of this Cavellian hope, is as on account of why that wager is no longer worth making and, thus, why hope in this case is misplaced. Akin to Cavell, Mad Men raises the question of marriage’s legitimacy and finds in domestic life a sphere of investigating how marriage might be viewed in terms of pursuing a shared world of words. The difference being that, in Mad Men, conversation gives way so often to irony, cynicism, and doublespeak that the reinvention of marriage as a pursuit of mutual voice might be insufficient to save it.

The show raises these questions by exposing its audience, regularly and relentlessly, to a stark division of worlds—suburbs and Madison Avenue. The presence of the competing worlds or spheres of existence pressures the audience toward judgments regarding the relevance of concepts within ordinary domestic life, forcing us to decide about marriage and its possibility, directing us to either despair or hope. From the perspective of Don and the advertising industry he embodies, the world of suburbs naively theatricalizes love and marriage, falsely presumed to carry substance, while the world of Madison Avenue fully understands theatricality as bespeaking an exhaustion of concepts such as “love” and “marriage,” opening them up to commodification. In Don’s words, “What you call ‘love’ was invented by

12. Cavell, Cities of Words, 16.
13. This is revealed most starkly in “Smoke in Your Eyes,” S5/E1, where Don’s touches his day avoiding away from work to sleep with a woman in town only to return home to Betty and his family.
reflexivity reveals them to be fools or worse. Their claim of impossibility is in all honesty a refusal of possibility.

Mad Men initially assesses the sustainability of marriage as a concept of relation, whether it can survive on the seemingly fragile ground of agreements upon which it rests. But as it goes along, the show arrives, finally, at its last question: should we go further? Should we see Mad Men as a representation of agreement having already failed, resulting in skepticism not only about marriage but the capacity of mutual intelligibility itself? In this case, the presumed failure of the latter entails the failure of the former and much else besides. Whether or not we should or whether or not Mad Men in fact does go further here is what we might call Mad Men’s voice of temptation, a voice that tempts its audience to see, as Don Draper and Peter Campbell do, particular instances of mutuality’s denial as the universal (metaphysical) rejection of its possibility. That temptation, involving a universal maligning of speech as fit to our whims, will play out as a rejection of the possibility of responsiveness to the separateness of another, blinding one to one’s own incomplete moral education. Accordingly Mad Men stages what happens when one no longer recognizes the possibility of moral growth in another or in oneself, where exempting myself from language entails exempting myself from a moral future. Mad Men’s picture of marriage raises the stakes of those questions while leaving the role of answering them to the viewers.

There are plenty of reasons—supported by scenes of confrontation, manipulation, and avoidance within the show—that would support reading Mad Men as sinking in its cynicism about marriage. We will focus on those scenes that highlight the impasse between Betty and Don. Draper already mentioned, an impasse that from Don’s perspective bespeaks the divergence between America come of age and the naive childishness of a supposedly original America. In “Three Sundays,” Don deals with the firm’s American Airlines account after the airline suffers a market-altering plane crash (which so happened to have Peter Campbell’s father on board): “American Airlines is not about the past any more than America is. Ask not about Cuba, ask not about the bomb, we’re going to the moon. Throw everything out. There is no such thing as American history ... only a frontier.”13 Don’s America as forward facing no doubt contributes to his contempt toward his own suburban life, not to mention his own secreted past. Don is wedded to a vision of American enterprise where maturation entails leaving behind childhood ways as associated with Betty in Season 1. The information he receives from her psychiatrist only reinforces his sense that he is taking care of a child: “Mostly, she is consumed with petty jealousies and everyday ac-


activities. Basically, we’re dealing with the emotions of a child here.” This is not only a case of men sexually infantilizing women, since Betty herself enables a crush that the young boy Glen develops for her. Limiting the charge of childishness to certain risks assuming that her desires, if granted a hearing, would follow the path of Don’s America, and that does not appear to be the case. What is being denied by Don’s condescension toward Betty is her right to social adulthood and her ability to voice what that adulthood would cost her, namely a shared pursuit of innocent happiness and a common task of learning what love and marriage could become. Her connection with Glen, as uncomfortable as it is, provides an alternative to Don’s vision of America. It is one that recognizes something akin in the confidence that Don conveys about his own knowledge of others and the license he grants himself for trespassing a common future with another in, say, marriage. Don’s repeated affairs are underwritten by his repudiation of the concept of love as tied to maturity, something Betty takes (understandably) as presumed by the conversation of married life.

This tension between childhood and maturation, along with mutuality and its slow demise, comes to a head in Season 1’s final and memorable episode, “The Wheel,” which includes Betty’s confessing to Glen, “I can’t talk to anyone.” The arrival of Don’s America comes at, and can only come at, Betty’s expense. What Don calls her childishness is, in reality, her unwillingness to surrender all that her life has given her—a home for her concepts of love and marriage. It is a home, no matter his denials, shared with Don. We see this tension poignantly displayed in Don’s freighed pitch for a projector ad during which he memorably uses pictures of his and Betty’s family life, turning the projector into a “time machine” that “takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It’s not called the wheel. It’s called the Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and around and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved.”14 Are we to see Don’s cavalier use of their family as telling the truth, that their common life, and common life as such, is but advertisement? In this reading, Don appeals to a life of marriage, a concept of love, and a past happiness as only manipulation—where the concept of love has been lost, sold, by way of so much manipulation. Throughout Mad Men, Don appears to place the risk of that loss on Betty and her failure to notice all the times he tells her “I love you,” when, in fact, that loss is on the emptiness those words must have in Betty’s (and our) ears. We are brought again to the repeated question in Mad Men of the significance of love as a concept related to marriage by way of the perpetuity of love as viable concept in Don world. How could Don mean those
words given his avoidance of the life required to provide a home for them, given his turning "love" to unfamiliar uses. What accounts for the briefest moments of sincerity, or at least, longing, in Don for things to remain how they are? Can we (or he) differentiate in such moments between his twisting of words and his (admittedly failed attempts) to recover them and use them again? How do we (does he) pick up concepts that have been twisted almost irrecoverably and claim to know what is being said? These are some of the stakes that Mad Men means to put before us by displaying Don's liminal space between using words and missing them. And to the extent that the fate of marriage is bound to the fate of conversation, his often-purposely misuse betrays a desire to exist outside language and its demands, and more specifically, outside marriage.

Interestingly, their marriage does not come to an end because of his affairs but because his secret life and his former "Mrs. Draper" is made known to Betty—which suggests that what the deeps is not infidelity, in general, but his secretly making her name and their marriage a lie to her. What appeared to be a common pursuit was, from the beginning, constituted on the ability for love and marriage to function ironically—as other than what they appear to be. She cannot remain married to him. In her words, she no longer loves him but he can't hear her confession because he does not know—or has forgotten—what love means and, therefore, what it might look like for it to end. As he claims in Season 1, "Every day I make pictures where people appear to be in love... I know what it looks like." What surfaces here is the common need to differentiate appearance from reality, true love from feigning love, a real marriage from a pretend one. And what we may go searching for, perhaps, is a way to observe the presence of marriage in those cases where it has turned out that agreement was absent all along. We may want to secure ourselves from how words can be twisted, secure ourselves from Don's own twisting of them. A plethora of philosophical inventions have surfaced in the search for that kind of security to our shared lives. But it is a telling feature of Mad Men, one it shares with Cavell, that there is no security of twisting outside Don's initial willingness to found his marriage with Betty on the confession of his past. There is nothing beyond his own hope in her willingness to accept him in spite of it. Agreement in marriage, like agreement in language, is not willed or enforced but discovered and re-discovered. So the forgiving of marriage by both Betty and Don is expressed by seeing that future as hopeless, as love itself among those concepts where agreement can no longer be found or trusted.


Does Mad Men grant us only this conclusion? Does it offer more, require more? We come face to face with our own judgment of Don's exemplars from moral growth. Are we willing to go on speaking in a world of Don Drapers and are we willing to grant him an eventual future with us? What might be entailed if we buy into his own sense of himself as too beautiful or too ugly for ordinary love and companionship, for an ordinary future? What are the implications of admitting with Don that ordinary concepts are insufficient to the task of mutual intelligibility and that therefore to go on speaking as if they were sufficient is simply to buy into nostalgia? In short, if we cannot see marriage from Don's America, can we at least save language from it, and thus the possibility of, as Cavell says, an eventual marriage? In Season 1 Rachel Menken remarks that utopia is both "the good place" and "the place that cannot be." Does Mad Men claim as much for marriage, if not shared human speech itself?

This question surfaces most clearly in Mad Men's final episode, when he speaks morosely to Betty who is now dying of lung cancer in a subtle moment that brings us face to face with our judgments of Don.

Betty: I want to keep things as normal as possible and you not being here is part of that.

Don: Birdie... [crying]

Betty: I know.20

What does she know? That Don is sorry for his exemptions from their marriage, that he does love her and therefore admits submission to love as belonging to married life? Maybe that is hoping too much. It might not be too hopeful, however, to say that Don's silence is his confession that he has reached the end of his words (his world) and her response ("I know") is her acknowledging his silence as his confession of his own inadequacies and moral incompleteness. Taking the latter option denotes at least one moment where silence betokens a submission to language's failure, namely, that what cannot now be said may come to be spoken eventually. And an underlying implication of the futurity of language is Don's future in speaking, that while words are not yet forthcoming, his potential moral change might allow him to consent to conversation again. Here, Mad Men seems to want to lay claim to a place for love still present in domestic life, to a possibility of acknowledging Betty's voice even now as companionable to his? If so, what, we need to ask, licenses his appeal to love at just this moment, when the end seems to have come, when all seems lost? How could he begin to find the words again, and if not for himself, at least for others?

These questions return us again to the ordinariness of language, for the fact of its convertibility conditions egress of concepts from the homes in which lives are made and any return to homes in which lives might be built anew. Indeed, it is the self-same words that we believe forgotten that might return to us and return us to the forgotten words like “love” and “marriage.” Our concepts come to us amidst our life in the world, the bodies we are, and the emotions we inhabit and so naturally, while words are conventional, these conventions arrive naturally suited to and arriving out of life in the world. “Love” and “marriage” may not be eternal, but neither are they arbitrary. One might be straightforward and say that concepts sick because they work, but that would beg the question as to what is meant by “work” since what remains under consideration is where our concepts now find their homes. If putting it this way sounds evasive then are we better off claiming Christian theology as able to view the ground of language as the natural history from which it springs as natural conventions? Here ground may speak to literal places of growth rather than the foundation philosophical skepticism crave. Ground speaks to dirt and soil, the local contexts and sources that feed into conceptual development, the mutuality of organic life that reproduces itself domestically again and anew. Conversational life in natural life fractures further possibilities for mutuality since the same aliveness that gathered concepts from the raw material of life in the world toward what is called “love” continues stubbornly as it grows allied to new contexts and sources, bearing up new concepts of love and their varied uses. Mad Men repeatedly—perhaps minimally and barely—gives voice to this vis-à-vis Betty’s use of an outmoded “love” and her recollection of another country almost forgotten. Don senses it too, mostly making use of it, sometimes mooting it, every once in a while giving into it. If, as we have claimed in one way or another, language goes all the way down, then there is no pure soil, no Christian justification for suspending hope, however bleak. One might invoke creation ex nihilo spending an eternal return to nothing, a belief in a place where the promise of future words could come to an end. There is no such end and, thus, no ultimate bleakness—only the ongoing structure of creature life: exitus et reditus.

It has been tempting to take Mad Men as a justification for an intellectual or institutional overhaul of language as such, seeing in Don the epitome of modernity’s nihilism about shared meaning. However, that temptation looks too much like admitting with skepticism that meaning has already been lost, that too many concepts are already stained and forgone. To see in Mad Men one further example that justifies remaining Christian discourse from the ground up is to succumb to Mad Men’s voice of temptation. And that risks missing the fact that there are no established limits to language’s ability for being recouped, nor are their definable points in which our attempts to reconcile or redeem conversation are necessarily in vain, necessarily requiring us to start from ground up. What appears more companionable to Christian commitments is the claim that whatever ways in which our current words and worlds have been twisted, they have not yet lost their capacities for an eventual future any more than the murdering of the Son of God forecloses resurrection. The Christian commitment to the latter implies a greater willingness in the pursuit of learning a common language in a context in which intelligibility itself appears difficult to establish. This is not to say that the difficulties of shared words in Mad Men are overcome; indeed, the Christian view of marriage supplied earlier lays bear the stakes. Rather, this is to say that Mad Men presents a truly cynical world where our notions of things as common as marriage and love and conversation are brought under remarkable pressure in ways that place our willingness to suffer the companionship of characters like Don under severe scrutiny. It has been our purpose to show that such willingness has its source in our capacity to trust in the future of our words and that Cavell’s view of language and remarrying helps to strengthen the scope of that trust without succumbing to false securities. This trust gets strengthened by those who recognize their future as fundamentally bound up with the future of a life identified by the ability to continue on. If our America is anything like Mad Men’s America, we are going to need all the sources of trust we can get.

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