

Mad Men, the Historical Novel, and Social Change



Don Draper

“[Riehl] sees in European society *incarnate history* and any attempt to disengage it from its historical elements must be ... simply destructive of social vitality. What has grown up historically can only die out historically.”

— George Eliot¹

BY WILLIAM BARTLEY

I. Introduction: “Now We Know Better”

One obstacle to understanding the significance of *Mad Men*, Matthew Wiener’s long-running “long form” historical drama (2007–present) is that it is repeatedly described as “the greatest television drama ever.” It’s an honour that it shares with too many other long form series—for example, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Wire*, among others—for the phrase to mean anything much.³ Bearing some of the blame for this over-zealousness is the in-house hype of AMC and Netflix for *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, and of HBO, for the *Sopranos* and *The Wire*. In the case of *Mad Men*, the critical praise blurs into hype as well. An equally important obstacle is that the negative criticism, unfortunately, is as hyperbolically imprecise as is the praise—although the imprecision here actually points to the greatest strength of the series.

The recent debut of the seventh and final season has roiled up dissatisfaction again: “Let’s be clear,” says Marc Tracy in *The New Republic*, who at first appears to be usefully reactive before his invective takes on a life of its own: “We will be watching a show whose most sociologically interesting fact is its overratedness. It’s not that *Mad Men* is *bad*. It’s just not nearly as good as most people say it is.” Critics who “needed a new Great Show” enthuse a little too much about its assiduous visual style and melodramatic lines of

“I started off writing the show as a scathing analysis of what happened to the United States. But the more I got into Don, the more I realized this is an amazing place. Something really did change in those years.”

“I wanted to show what it was like to have the world change around you.”

— Matthew Weiner²

action, and are conned by its “trying-too-hard brand of seriousness”. Worse still, it is “midcult”, recalling Dwight Macdonald—i.e., “unexceptional art whose highbrow trappings convince consumers they are putting real cultural work into consuming it.” Finally, striking at the very heart of the series as historical fiction, he scornfully notes the “ostentatious intrusion of historical events” which, far from being organically absorbed into the action, are “showy Moments for the readers/viewers.”⁴

Daniel Mendelsohn, three years before, pushed a little harder in *The New York Review of Books*. Like Tracy, he uses a scatter gun on Wiener and the series; he says that *Mad Men* is simply not equal to “the Aeschylean moral textures” of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, to the mythic resonances of *Battlestar Galactica*, or to the insightful exploration of middle-class marriage in *Friday Night Lights*. Rather, in *Mad Men*, “[t]he writing is extremely weak, the plotting haphazard and often preposterous.” More to the point, Mendelsohn complains about *Mad Men*’s superficiality as historical fiction: “The actual stuff of *Mad Men*’s action is, essentially, the stuff of soap opera: abortions, secret pregnancies, extramarital affairs, office romances, and of course dire family secrets; what is supposed to give it its higher cultural resonance is the historical element” but it fails here too: “it’s [*Mad Men*’s] attitude toward the past is glib, and its self-positioning in the present is smug.”⁵

Mendelsohn and Tracy aren’t alone in their dismissive scepticism of *Mad Men*’s handling of the “historical element”.

The series, set as it is during the early to late 1960s, with its characteristic racism, sexism, and homophobia in full display, only seems to encourage a twenty-first century self-righteousness available only to a twenty-first century enlightenment, making it, as Mark Greif puts it, “an unpleasant little entry in the genre of Now We Know Better.” He adds later on that “it’s a commonplace that portrayal of the past can be used to criticize the present. What of those cases in which criticism of the past is used to congratulate the present?” *Mad Men* is one of those cases; it “flatters us where we most deserve to be scourged.”⁶ And so on: Benjamin Schwartz complains of the “unlovely smugness” of the series; Melissa Witkowski, like Greif, points to how the series encourages a “self-congratulatory response”—a sense of “Look how far we’ve come!”⁷

There are too many fragmentary challenges here to the integrity of the series than can be addressed here individually. But redressing these doubts about *Mad Men*’s value as historical fiction, if they can be redressed, will go a long way towards unravelling the other charges, and towards providing a foundation for understanding why the series is as good as it is. It is simply false, to single out Mendelsohn as a representative voice, to claim that the series has mishandled the “historical element.” The “higher cultural resonance” that Mendelsohn says is only a pretence is, in fact, powerfully present thanks to the formal and thematic richness of this historical element as it is realized in *Mad Men*. That thematic and formal richness, which flatly contradicts the charge of “midcult”, in turn, is there because, as I hope to show, Wiener, as *auteur*/show-runner, has fashioned *Mad Men* as a cinematic extension and instantiation of the tradition of the nineteenth-century historical novel, although I must shortly qualify this claim in a very particular, but not eccentric way. In any case, Wiener’s success in doing so is the reason why the series is of such deep interest to us—or, at least, to many of us. Its genuine historicity is our access to a profound reflection on the nature of historical change. This essay can only be an initial foray into some very rich material.

II. The Historical Novel

Of the rapidly proliferating number of long form dramas, *Mad Men* keeps closest company with productions that have taken on an historical theme, such as, to name a few notable instances, *Deadwood*, *Rome*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and, most recently *The Masters of Sex*. What distinguishes *Mad Men*—something one notices at first contact with the show—is its deep and intense preoccupation with the nature of social change as it evolves during the 1960s, a critical period in American history; the series begins, roughly, with the election of John F. Kennedy and extends, to date, to include the emerging social and political turbulence of the late 1960s.

This is not just a preoccupation, as one critic is content to describe it, with “how change affects the individual and how it affects the broader community within the historical

moment.”⁸ More precisely, the series is driven by a concern for how change *happens*, not only socially, but also as it is reflected and actively created in the day to day professional and private lives of characters who work for a mid-sized Manhattan advertising agency (Sterling Cooper—later, Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, and, later still, Sterling Cooper and Partners). One could be excused for thinking that the show is too preoccupied with the ostentatious display of how past the past is; the *mise en scène* from episode to episode could be seen as a curated diorama furnished with artefacts of a lost world: the clothing, the product brands and slogans, the old black and white, over-the air television shows, enormous gas-guzzling automobiles without seat belts, gynaecologists smoking in examining rooms, the unrelenting, casual sexism, racism, and homophobia of a well-educated WASP elite, 50c movies, and so on. But there is nothing static about this world; rather, signs and prospects of change are everywhere. As viewers are aware, the shifting mores of the period are examined on multiple fronts: relations between men and women, both in the workplace and in marriage and in courtship; race and ethnicity; social class; sexuality; the family—to name just a few. And just as the series alerts us to its core concern with social change, it also reflects Wiener’s evident fascination with the dynamic, change-driving relationship between individual free agency and cultural milieu.

To see as much is to discover that the historical novel arguably shapes Wiener’s conception, thus placing him in a central tradition of American story telling, although, again, I will shortly need to qualify this claim. In any case, it is a tradition that was powerfully propelled by Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), the influence of which swept the English-speaking world and Europe with a swiftness that seems roughly equivalent to the arrival of the Beatles. The historical novel, as result, became *the* staple genre of American and European fiction. Wiener doesn’t give us much help in determining how the tradition reached him other than to say that he read everything that came his way in college; even if Wiener had never encountered it, it might be sufficient to say that not only did Scott decisively influence the development of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American novel; but indeed, the genre has proved so popular that, according to George Dekker, it “undoubtedly had a profound effect ... on the way Americans of all levels of education and intelligence have conceived their past, present and future.”⁹ Any episode of *The Simpsons* involving Sideshow Bob (the voice of Kelsey Grammer) shows the *Waverley* model at work—the series’ Ivy League writers undoubtedly read their fill of historical novels and passed the model on to a mass audience.

Like any genre, the historical novel is a particular model of human experience, a particular understanding of its parameters, of what can happen and how. Its central assumption is that national history—not exclusively, but especially in times of great social and political change—could not be understood sufficiently without an understanding of how

private human lives are implicated.¹⁰ The reverse is true as well—one cannot understand private life apart from its inextricable connections with the movement of public events and trends. The insight of the historical novel is the insight of Felix Holt: “there is no private life that is not determined by a wider public life.”¹¹ As commonplace an assumption as this is now, it was an assumption that understandably reshaped contemporary historiography as well as the writing of fiction. Furthermore, driving that change is the ever present conflict between “tradition and progress/modernity,” between, that is, “reform and reaction;” The action is typically focused on protagonists who were neither great in social stature or distinguished in career or character (“middling” as George Lukács referred to them) whose loyalties were divided between these two sides. In the *Waverley* novels, the cause of reform generally trumped the cause of tradition. But if the historical necessity of such a victory was generally affirmed, it was always qualified by an awareness of the tragic, human cost of this victory; writers and readers were not responding to the complexity of the experience if they did not mourn the passing of superseded ways of life and the values that supported them. This is not to say that writers, even in the nineteenth century, couldn’t have deeply mixed feelings about progress—it’s only to say that the tension between tradition and progress is definitive of the genre.

Now for my qualification. One problem with the historical novel, as it is widely understood, which is not the same as it is practiced, is as follows: although one is very conscious of the genre’s investment in representing social change, it doesn’t accommodate or imagine how free agency contributes to, even drives change, at least if we take the critics and literary historians at their word. The problem begins with perhaps the most important authority on the historical novel, George Lukács; there isn’t a critic or historian that I’m aware of who wouldn’t agree with, or would find controversial, or wouldn’t let pass, what Lukács says of Sir Walter Scott’s achievement as a novelist:

Scott’s greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types. The typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible had never been so superbly, straightforwardly and pregnantly portrayed. And above all, never before had this kind of portrayal been consciously set at the centre of the representation of reality.¹²

However, if this is truly the case, Scott’s strengths are nested in his weaknesses. That is, the historical novel, in Scott’s hands, is primarily a kind of theatre in which “great historical trends” become “tangible”—are merely reflected—in individual characters, who are passively shaped by these trends as they unfold independently. History is “expressed” through the detailed interactions of private life. This is precisely Scott Stoddart’s attitude towards *Mad Men*, in a

passage I’ve already quoted: “*Mad Men* focuses on change in America—how change affects the individual and how it affects the broader community within the historical moment.”¹³ It’s an attitude that might be ideologically driven; Marxists would be as prone to it as Victorian Whig apostles of progress—in the conviction that impersonal laws of history are the real agents and not individual people. Or it may well be an innocent reflection of most people’s experience of change as externally imposed; it simply *happens*. My point is that this widespread attitude suggests that our understanding of historical fiction as a genre hasn’t caught up to the actual practice of *some* novelists and, more particularly, of Matthew Weiner and his creative team.

One way of catching up to and capturing this understanding of the individual as a creative agent of change in the wider world is to turn to another staple genre, the *Bildungsroman*, sometimes known as the “novel of ‘development’” or the “novel of ‘formation,’” which itself was evolving on a separate path towards the same conceptual territory as the historical novel. If we follow Mikhail Bakhtin, in his account of the evolution of the *Bildungsroman* from its ancient origins to the nineteenth-century, we are taken to a point where the distinction between the *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel blurs, even to a point where the two might be said to converge. In Bakhtin’s description of its development, the *Bildungsroman*, like the historical novel, seeks to establish a relationship between historical trends and individual agents—just as the historical novel descends from broad historical context to private life, the *Bildungsroman* reaches up from mere biographical narrative to implicate a wider historical context. From opposing starting places, the individual is historicized—a theme in European intellectual history that precedes the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but which is certainly firmly established during this period. But Bakhtin finds in the now historicized *Bildungsroman* an emphasis on the efficacy of free agency that no one notices of the historical novel, except perhaps novelists themselves. Pending a more precise description of the genre, one can’t help noticing that *Waverley*, the most influential historical novel, and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) perhaps the greatest instance of that influence, are sometimes described as either an historical novel or a *Bildungsroman*—or, as often, both. The simultaneous presence of these genres is not accidental or arbitrary; they are actually deeply implicated in one another, separated only by terms that haven’t quite held to their original meanings.

III: Between Two Epochs

These claims are more credible when we turn to Bakhtin’s treatment of the genre. His final formulation of the *Bildungsroman*, or as he renders it, “the novel of historical emergence,”¹⁴ grows out of its more familiar and conventional form. This earlier version tells the generic story of a young man, who after a period of rebellion and resentment of the world of his parents, matures, settles down, and

reconciles himself to and affirms the bourgeois world. In Hegel’s classic and somewhat self-indulgent description, the hero “may have quarrelled with the world, or been pushed about in it, ...” But “in most cases at last he gets the girl and some sort of position, marries her, and becomes as good a Philistine as others.”¹⁵ With his examples of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile* in hand, Bakhtin described the conventional form of the genre in similar terms. A person’s formation or development, or “emergence” is a process of conformity and integration. It

proceeds against the immobile background of the world, ready-made, and basically quite stable; [...] The world, existing and stable in this existence, required man to adapt to it, that he recognize and submit to the existing laws of life. Man emerged, but the world itself did not. On the contrary, the world was an immobile orientation point for developing man. Man’s emergence was his private affair, as it were, and the results of this emergence were also private and biographical in nature.¹⁶

But Bakhtin then opposes to this a richer sense of emergence he finds in *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-97), the exemplar of “the novel of historical emergence.” In this kind of novel, according to Bakhtin, Goethe clarifies the true relationship between personal growth and wider cultural and social change. Here, we find that individual and culture both emerge in an active relationship with each other—that the one kind of change is inseparable from the other. Bakhtin says that

human emergence ... is no longer man’s own private affair. He emerges *along with the world* and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to another. This transition is accomplished *in him and through him*. [my italics] ... What is happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man.¹⁷

The genre as such sees the present as a moment of interactive social and personal transition. The social milieu is no longer assumed to be stable or static or ready-made; rather, our present is established as a constant state of transition “between two epochs”—the very idea of epochal time is challenged insofar as an epoch is no longer strictly demarcated as it needs to be to remain intact.¹⁸ Epochal boundaries blur and give way to a messy zone of unconcerted continuities and discontinuities between past, present and projected future; this transitional space makes up our true field of action and decision-making day-to-day, moment to moment.

This transitional movement is generated, in terms that

readily evoke the historical novel, by a tension, in the most general sense, between what is given in one epoch and what follows in the epoch that is hypothetically projected to come. It is a small step to see this as a conflict between historically entrenched *mores* (the status quo, tradition, if you like) and a future-directed, creatively reactive free agency (again, if you like, modernity or progress). The genre prizes moments of personal, cultural and social transition (as implied by the transitional tension between “tradition and progress”) and further implies that one is never outside the dynamism of the transitional moment, that the idea of who we humanly are is deeply implicated in an open-ended historical process. It’s worth noting that the genre in Bakhtin’s view is not the exclusive terrain of the young.¹⁹

Thus, the “novel of historical emergence” is a conservatively optimistic understanding of the world—conservative in the way that it favours gradual, organic change over radical political intervention, a preference, to a radical point of view, for “feeble gradualism”. The genre holds us to the idea that transition is accomplished “in and through”, both within and by means of, the emergent person. We are as active in shaping that process as we are powerfully and decisively shaped by it; it is deeply conscious of the burden of historical constraint but maintains that the self is never entirely exhausted by its historical situation, by a given “epoch,” which we only experience in the most particular circumstances. On the contrary, there is room for creative initiative by individuals who, reacting to particular problems posed by given circumstances, reshape themselves even as they “create new circumstances, which [in turn] provide constraints and opportunities for future action.”²⁰ As Gary Saul Morson has put it, the genre conceives of a world in which “people truly change bit by bit; they are essentially shaped both by their own decisions and by their reactions to the historical milieu; and that milieu itself gradually alters in surprising ways, thus creating new possibilities for individuals and the culture as a whole.”²¹

It is enormously helpful to learn, in the light of all this, that Bakhtin goes on to claim that “aspects of this historical emergence of man can found in almost all important realistic novels.” Goethe’s clarification of historical emergence, and the conception of the human person that attends it, is not confinable to a single genre, but is absorbed by and becomes a defining feature for all fiction that would be known as “realist”. It is something of a relief to discover that Bakhtin confirms that the conceptual insights of the novel of historical emergence were absorbed into the historical novel. Indeed, he praises Scott because in his historical novels, “he overcomes the closed nature of the past and achieves the fullness of time necessary for the historical novel.”²² Like Goethe, Scott, translator of Goethe and evidently his true student, has achieved the “assimilation of real historical time”—he has, that is, grasped the idea that “the world is not merely given or ready made but created by the human efforts of real, specific people.”²³ The “historical novel” is, thus, still a useful term but in this enriched sense.

IV: "... stop dressing like a girl."

So it remains to be seen how *Mad Men* is saturated with this idea of historical emergence—the idea that the world is not merely given or ready made, but created by the human efforts of real, specific people. As the series opens in 1960, we sense the very earliest and faintest stirrings of the civil rights movement and of feminism before Martin Luther King, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, of a burgeoning consumer culture, of the growing cultural impact of television, of baby boomers beginning to surface as counter-culture students, and of a building resistance to the Vietnam War: we have reason to believe that the *status quo* is as fragile as the creative pressure of change that challenges it.

This process of emergence is traceable in many lines of action, but to trace any one of them without getting drawn into others is difficult to do without damage, so novelistically multiple and tightly intertwined are the sub-plots. But, all the same, to gain some purchase on how this process works, a certain arbitrariness is apt. I will turn to Peggy Olson's story in the first two seasons of the series as a kind of tissue sample. Peggy's case reminds us that so much of the series is generated by characters other than Don Draper, the head of Sterling Cooper's creative department. These characters, moreover, tend to be women. During this period, Peggy graduates from being Don's rookie secretary to copywriter at Sterling Cooper. Her growth is, indeed, representative of the kind of dynamic between personal choice-making and cultural milieu that the series tries to capture, and yet, her ascent is a far more complex process than the "anachronistically Whiggish vision of women's liberation" that Tracy tries to dismiss it as.²⁴ Her story is a good example of how long form television narrative has successfully absorbed the serial novel's "slow build"—in David Simon's (*The Wire*) phrase—of character, circumstance and thematic complexity in a manner that enriches the creative possibilities of both the novel and film narrative. As such, it is especially conducive to narratives of historical emergence.

This process of growth is set in motion casually and accidentally at Sterling Cooper when Paul Kinsey, a junior copywriter with Sterling Cooper, takes Peggy on a tour of the office after her first few days. Paul casually reveals a simple fact about the milieu that Peggy finds herself in. He says: "You know there *are* women copywriters ... I mean you can always tell when a woman is writing copy, but sometimes she might be the right man for the job."²⁵ It's not clear that Kinsey means this as a joke, or whether the habit of an old expression carries the moment. For the moment, she makes little of this precedent as she spends her time learning the ropes of her new job, fending off the unwanted sexual advances of young executives, and otherwise taking up her role, as Joan Holloway, the office manager, describes it, as something between "a mother and a waitress." (1.1) Nevertheless, Paul's off-hand remark may well "plant a seed" in Peggy as Will Dean has observed²⁶—in any case, that such a seed has been planted has consequences that are not lost on senior executives like Don or Freddie Rumsen.



An opportunity comes up for her with Freddie Rumsen, who is looking for a new approach to the Belle Jolie lipstick account. He has Joan organize a focus group consisting of the firm's secretaries and surveys them on what they look for in lipstick; he is particularly struck by something that Peggy says about the product. He takes it to the others, and they decide to invite Peggy to write copy for them; they then pitch it to Belle Jolie, and they buy it. She becomes, as a co-worker tells her, "the first girl to do any writing for the firm since the war." (1.6) She is assigned another account—the Rejuvenator, later renamed the Relaxicizer—still without a raise or relief from her secretarial duties (although Don later lightens her secretarial load): she gives her first pitch in-house and is impressive, to the point where Don actually gives her a raise. (1.11) At the same time, she, throughout this process, is gradually changing; she's visibly more confident, ambitious, and happy in her work and in her ability to struggle for and to hold the new social space she has created for herself at work. For her emergence is not simply her private affair: as she changes, so does the culture of the office change insofar as she has played a role in changing the way women are actually *there* in the office. A human possibility is created where it didn't exist before;

what becomes a possibility for Peggy becomes a possibility for other women too—and a good measure of the reality of this change is Joan's resentful—possibly envious—reaction, witnessing as she does that Peggy is slipping the leash of part mother, part waitress.

Even so, it's worth asking: has Joan, ultra-competent office manager, taken her cue from Peggy by making her own move into this new social space? She is temporarily assigned the crucial task of vetting television scripts for Harry Crane, the head and only member of the newly created television department, itself yet another sign of change; her job is to anticipate client concerns, and, although it's a position she didn't seek, it grows on her, and her success here is so marked that she can be credited with making the unproductive and expensive department a success. Peggy earns the recognition of an important few at least, but most importantly, Don. A significant moment comes when Peggy finally heeds the advice of Bobbie Barrett, the wife and manager of the obnoxious comedian, Jimmy Barrett, who tells her: "You're never going to get that corner office until you start treating Don as an equal." (2.5) She finds the right moment to take the initiative, when she, for the first time, addresses him as "Don" instead of "Mr. Draper"—he is quietly struck by this

coup of quiet self-assertion, but we sense that it has gradually come due; he accepts the overture without a word.

Thus, the world *has* changed, however discreetly and bit by bit. If this all sounds too optimistically Whiggish, we have only to turn to Joan's story, which I've raised but left hanging. It is a pointed reminder of the fact that, if things are changing, this change is not concerted, is, in fact, exceedingly fragile and proceeds at a glacial pace. There are no breakthroughs or revolutions, no swift vindications of historical necessity, but only painfully gradual transitions, troubled by a painstakingly elicited sense that every small change might be annulled by a corresponding setback. The problem for Joan is that Harry is simply not Don—either because he lacks the imagination or simply out of dull habit, he hires a clueless college buddy and *not* Joan when a full time position becomes available; the college buddy will be utterly dependent on her to learn the job. Whatever the case, Harry is invulnerable to change. Joan, for her part, also has to deal with her fiancé Greg, who is threatened by her enthusiasm for her new career possibilities; it doesn't mesh with the domestic destiny he has in mind for her. And if Peggy earns the respect of some of the men, she earns the disapproval of others, like Pete Campbell (junior accounts executive, later head of accounts and partner), who can't bear her success because he surely envies these new and unwelcomed revelations of her competence. Things have changed but not quickly enough.

Even the men who do have respect for Peggy are trapped in old habits of regard. Transition means inconsistency. If Freddie Rumsen is impressed with her, he also confesses to the kind of awe one feels, as he puts it, while "watching a dog play the piano." (1.6) Ken Cosgrove, one of her strongest allies, who at one point describes her as "Kinsey with balls," turns his frat-boy wit on her. In one instance, he comments on her increasingly evident weight gain (we don't know yet that she is pregnant by Pete) saying that with Peggy, like the lobster, "all the meat is in the tail." (1.12) Even Don's sponsorship of her must be qualified. He shows signs of proto-feminism, but turns savagely on Rachel Mencken, a client, who stands up to him: "I will not be talked to that way by a woman." (1.1) Peggy's promotion to the Clearasil account, over Pete's angry objections (she's just "a little girl" and "only a secretary"), comes when it comes, not as a grand gesture of acknowledgement but as a spontaneous political manoeuvre directed against Pete. This isn't to say that Peggy doesn't impress Don and that it doesn't make business sense. But he wouldn't have promoted her if he couldn't have used her as a means to humiliate Pete. Don's more immediate and urgent purpose is to put Pete, who is swollen with self-importance for reeling in the Clearasil account, in his place. (1.13)

Moreover, Peggy herself is wracked by inconsistency. After she confronts Roger Sterling, a senior partner, firmly demanding that she be given Freddie Rumsen's office after he leaves the firm, she meekly apologizes for her rudeness even as Roger compliments her, when he says that "[t]here

are 30 men out there who didn't have the balls to ask." (2.12) But even though she gets Freddie's office ("Why don't you just put Draper's pants on!" says Kinsey apoplectically), she will still have to scrap for territory at the firm—as she discovers on the Playtex account, when the boys come up with a pitch while they are at a bar without her. They've scooped her account; she is left to stand by herself after the meeting with the clients, as Matthew Weiner says in his DVD commentary, "as if she were still a secretary"—while they head off to a strip joint with the clients. She begins the long process of working her way out of this inconsistency not through confrontation but through working the system. Joan advises accommodation: "You are in their country. Learn their language ... if you want to be taken seriously, stop dressing like a girl." (2.6) It's also possible Peggy remembers something Bobbie Barrett, who, of course, plays a role in keeping that new social space open, says to her as well: "You can't be a man. Don't even try. Be a woman. It's a powerful business when it's done correctly" (2.5). As if taking Bobbie's advice to heart, Peggy, in response to being left out by the boys, goes home, returns dressed to kill, goes to the strip club and sits on the lap of one of the Playtex executives. It's a crude measure, but she wins back her place at the table.²⁷

As the series progresses, Peggy becomes gradually less dependant on such manoeuvres. But again and again throughout the series, we are reminded that altering cultural habits, of regard and of conduct, will be a long process, a series-long, a life-long process, a process likely requiring another generation to advance—truly a matter of *la longue durée*. In Peggy's case, even as she becomes more hard-nosed and confident as the series progresses, she can't resist (in Season 3) trying on for size, and wanting to get *right* in a self-diminishing fantasy, Ann-Margaret's girly-chirping of "Bye-bye Birdie" as she looks into the mirror in the privacy of her apartment (3.2).

V. "Is it just me, or ..."

The series also traces the evolving relations between whites and African Americans; an African American presence is emergent in Season 5, roughly according to the patterns established with Peggy as discussed before, only slower moving and with a greater social distance to travel. This new movement is occasioned when Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce hires its first African American employee, Dawn; this establishes the first on-going narrative thread involving an African American character. As we have learned to expect, thanks to Peggy's story, the hiring of Dawn, has, in fact, *almost* nothing to do with social justice. Not that there aren't signs of a growing sympathy for African Americans, but the hiring of Dawn is as much the unintended consequence of a prank gone wrong as it is the beginning of a slow transformation of the office culture. Our contact with African Americans through the first five seasons has been very limited, restricted to the kind of contact that would

be historically typical of the WASP ascendancy of midtown Manhattan. The status quo in New York in 1966 is still in a state of *de facto* segregation; we have contact with African Americans as washroom attendants, janitors, elevator operators, and domestics. Interracial relationships are a possibility, but they are transient. We have our first interracial kiss in season 2, between Kinsey and his girlfriend (2.1) and, later, a more serious relationship between Lane Pryce, financial officer and partner, and Toni Charles, a Playboy Bunny, although Pryce's Britishness is likely partly why this is possible. (4.10) However, neither of these encounters yielded long-term plot lines. We become increasingly aware of the rising intensity of the civil rights movement, but this is confined to the margins—we hear off-screen television news reports. We also hear word in casual conversation that there is rioting during the summer in unnamed cities.

This is roughly the context of the opening scene of the Season 5 premiere; we see a small anti-poverty protest group, mostly African American women marching on a sidewalk, carrying placards and chanting slogans—our first direct encounter with the civil rights movement since our brief encounter with Freedom Riders in the second season. A group of junior copywriters for Y&R (Young and Rubicam), annoyed by the racket the group makes below



Dawn Chambers

their window, are caught dropping water bombs on them. The story makes the papers, and Roger Sterling responds, hoping to take advantage of their embarrassment, by placing an ad in the *Times* that Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce is an equal opportunity employer. At the end of the same episode, we learn that the stunt backfires because it unintentionally attracts dozens of African American job applicants, both men and women, who fill the firm's lobby. Lane Pryce steps in to unravel this embarrassing problem by declaring that the firm is looking only for secretaries; he then asked the remaining women to leave their resumé. In the next episode, after a long ellipsis, we see that Dawn is Don's new secretary. (5.2) We safely conclude that this is a result of the combination of Lane's quick face-saving creativity in response to unexpected and frankly unwelcome circumstances, the fact that the firm actually needs more secretarial staff, even though Lane earlier indicated that the firm couldn't afford to hire, and the still soft but strengthening external pressure of the civil rights movement.

Thus, the office culture changes again decisively, but once again there are no breakthroughs, only painful transitions. One mark of this is that the scene is awkwardly comic. Roger makes a joke about the extraordinary and the obvious, at the expense of the job applicants, which only some of the partners find amusing—not including, for example, Pete Campbell, who is otherwise an unreconstructed WASP Republican, but who alone of the group is also openly sympathetic to African Americans, a sympathy we've seen developing for some time. In any case, Roger quips: "Is it just me or is the lobby full of Negroes?" (5.1) We ourselves are put to the test; we have to be careful not to laugh. Later on, Peggy's first real contact with Dawn is clouded by her fear that she has accidentally left her purse open when she leaves Dawn alone in the room with it. (5.4) The point once again is that the world is changing but not quickly enough and for not quite for the right reasons.

The same pattern of emergence continues, and it even accelerates in season 7, as Shirley by then joins Dawn in this now widening social space. The narrative threads involving them are of greater duration and complexity. Then, significantly, Dawn, who has been moved to reception after she righteously stands up to her boss, is eventually promoted to Joan's position as personnel head after Joan is suddenly promoted to a position as the first female accounts executive in the firm. However, this is instigated primarily because senior partner Bert Cooper doesn't like the idea of having an African American as a lobby receptionist. (7.2) Dawn, like Peggy, partly by competence, partly by a creative seat-of-the-pants decision in very particular circumstances, and not through the interventions of what Michael Berubé describes as Good White People although, no doubt, a contributing factor is the new presence of anti-discrimination laws in the workplace as well.²⁸

Part of this painful transition is, at the outset, that Dawn, and the African American presence generally are seen strictly from a WASP point of view—a matter already

hinted at with Roger's joke. Dawn is, at first, a very quiet and yet too conspicuous presence. Although Weiner has been much criticised for this exclusivity,²⁹ the point of this tactic is clear. It is a powerful way of measuring how slow and problematic this change is, as slow and as problematic as all change. If Weiner privileges a WASP point of view, it is only because it is historically dominant; the series is, in many respects, about how that perspective is transformed as it slowly awakens to the marginalized—how, accordingly, it undergoes a slow emergence itself.

But more importantly, it is the best way of exposing how grudging and accidental are the necessary historical conditions of a supposed twenty-first century enlightenment, and serves as warning against any sort of supposed post-racial complacency. It forces us to acknowledge how historically bound and blind we are in *any* present, and that we are as ignorant of our horizons as any earlier era is of its own. This brings us very close to Foucault's notion of the episteme or discursive formation (it is an echo of Bakhtin's "epoch")—to a sense that we, in the present, are utterly blind to the parameters of what we see as real, and that we can't even be aware of that discursive formation, let alone be able to describe it, until it has been superseded by the next; for Weiner, Bakhtin, and the genre of historical fiction, the past can never be sealed off from the future although it is tempting to think so. One of the undiscussed thematic elephants in the room of my discussion, so to speak, is the profound disposition, played through Don Draper in particular to follow this temptation—to reach for a fantasy of self-definition and self-sufficiency. However, the judgement of the series on this disposition is clear: we are always thrown back on the truth that we make our moral and political choices and live our moral and political lives in that transition between the past that never wholly recedes and the future that never takes a final shape.

VI. Conclusion: "Dear Dodo, do throw off that cap."

If it is true that some of the best writing today goes into television, one senses that George Eliot would find a home with HBO or AMC as an *auteur*/show runner, creating and producing long form historical TV dramas; one also senses that she would agree with Vince Gilligan's (*Breaking Bad*) preference for a "hundred hours worth of story" over "two hours worth of story."³⁰ At the same time, it's hard to believe that Weiner didn't have some direct contact with Eliot's novels, so concordant are their views on the historical process; their anti-revolutionary stance and their faith in the necessity of gradual change are concisely captured in Eliot's claim that "[w]hat has grown up historically can only die out historically ..." Of course, there needn't be a demonstrable direct influence beyond the genre itself; *Mad Men*, like *Middlemarch*, finally embodies an impassioned discovery that history is "incarnate" in society—is an active, dynamic presence which shapes us and which we have a



The cast of *Mad Men*

say in shaping, and, furthermore, is a process we cannot successfully extract ourselves from as Bulstrode and Don Draper so painfully discover. For Eliot, as for Weiner, it is a view that prizes the small motions of historical emergence because they are a necessary (and not sufficient) condition for any broader movement of humanly significant change. I offer this following instance of historical emergence as a tributary moment in the process that feeds any future achievement in the novel or long form television series. In this scene, in a time of national political ferment and social change, and not long after the death of Mr. Casaubon, Celia can no longer bear seeing Dorothea sitting in the summer heat wearing her widow's cap:

“Dear Dodo, do throw off that cap. I am sure your dress must make you feel ill.”

“I am so used to the cap—it has become a sort of shell,” said Dorothea, smiling. “I feel rather bare and exposed when it is off.”

“I *must* see you without it; it makes us all warm,” said Celia, throwing down her fan, and going to Dorothea ... Just as the coils and braids of dark-brown hair had been set free, Sir James entered the room. He looked at the released head, and said, “Ah!” in a tone of satisfaction.

“It was I who did it, James,” said Celia. “Dodo need not make such a slavery of her mourning; she need not wear that cap any more among her friends.”³¹

It's a tiny, impulsively creative gesture on Celia's part, who is concerned about her sister's comfort (and her own—looking at her makes her ‘warm’), but Celia is thinking just as much about freeing Dorothea from the grip Causabon's legacy. It's a gesture that the small world of *Middlemarch* is both ready and not ready for. It delights some of the women present and appalls others; Sir James Chettam's first response is spontaneous delight as he lets out an “Ah”

when he sees Dorothea's liberated coils and braids, but who, sensing things have gone too far, self-correctively retreats—he “was annoyed, and leaned forward to play with Celia's Maltese dog.”

At the same time, although Dorothea didn't initiate this gesture, she is emboldened by it; having submitted to the noticeable undoing of one custom, she considers resisting another more stable custom: the expectation that she remarry soon, which also receives a mixed response. *Something* has happened and it is set in motion by the indisputable rightness of Celia's impulse. We discover a welcome limit to self-sacrifice: Dorothea is no longer in mourning, even though her year isn't up. However slightly, she is changing; and, however slightly, so is the very idea both of womanhood and marriage, both ideas that are already in motion. The implication is that these mourning and marriage customs won't disappear soon, but they won't disappear without these, small, initial and surprising undosings. It's a change Sir James notices. Well aware of the “practice of the world” and not entirely selflessly (even though he is securely married to her sister, is he still wounded by Dorothea's turning him down, and does this play into his preference here?) he is privately satisfied with the thought that “... if Dorothea did choose to espouse her solitude, he felt that the resolution would well become her.”³²

Middlemarch in this way re-illuminates the achievement that *Mad Men* shares with it—an achievement that consists in the way that *Mad Men*, like *Middlemarch*, beautifully deepens the essential optimism of the genre. In the case of *Mad Men*, it's an optimism that survives the profound Jupiter-like gravitational pull of cultural habit so clearly evident throughout the series, resisting, even as it gives credit to, even as it invites submission to the tantalizing and despairing simplicity of Faulkner's claim in *Requiem for a Nun* that “the past isn't dead, it's not even past.”³³

My deepest thanks to the students of English 464 (“Mad Men and Historical Fiction”) for their enthusiasm and insight.

Notes

- George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life.” *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 127.
- Matthew Weiner quoted in Scott F. Stoddart, “Introduction.” *Analyzing Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series*. Ed. Scott D. Stoddart (London and Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2011), p. 3.
- To take a tiny but representative sample, and without regard for the infinitude of the blogosphere: Lily Rothman, “The Sopranos named best written TV show ever.” *Time*, (3 June 2013). Web. 23 May 2014; Allan St. John, “Why *Breaking Bad* is the Best Show Ever and Why it Matters.” *Forbes* (16 September 2013). Web. 23 May 2014; “*The Wire*: Arguably the Greatest Television Programme Ever Made.” *The Telegraph* (2 April 2009). Web. 20 May 2014; Todd VanderWerff and Monty Ashley, “*Game of Thrones* is the best show on television, except for *Mad Men*,” *The Guardian* (4 April 2014). Web. 20 May 2014.
- Marc Tracy, “Matthew Weiner is Overrated: The *Mad Men* Auteur's False Advertising.” *The New Republic*. (12 April 2014). Web. 18 June 2014. The invective turns into a rant: “It's worse than something that both looks, and is, trifling. It's empty calories that leave you feeling full.”
- Daniel Mendelsohn, “The *Mad Men* Account.” *The New York Review of Books* (24 February 2011). Web. 5 May 2014. He also describes it as “a soap opera in high-end clothes.”
- Mark Greif, “You'll Like the Way It Makes You Feel.” *London Review of Books* (23 October 2010). Web. 18 June 2014.
- Benjamin Schwarz, “Mad About *Mad Men*: What's Wrong—and What's Gloriously Right—About AMC's Hit Show.” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 2009). Web. 1 May 2014. Melissa Witkowski. “It's Still a *Mad Men* World.” *Guardian* (2 February 2010). Web. 1 May 2014.
- Stoddart, “Introduction.” *Analyzing Mad Men*, p. 32.
- George Dekker, *The American Historical Romance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 67.
- Ibid., p. 76. Dekker argues that the tradition precedes the French Revolution and, in fact reaches back as far as Shakespearean drama, notably *Anthony and Cleopatra*.
- George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.) p. 45.
- George Lukács, *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 35
- Stoddart, “Introduction,” p. 3. This is the unquestioned view in all the essays collected in Lauren M.E. Goodland, et al, eds. *Mad Men, Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2013).
- Which itself is an English translation of the Russian translation of *Bildungsroman: roman stanovleniia cheloveka*: “novel of a person's ‘emergence’ or ‘becoming.’”
- G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art. Vol. 1*. Trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 593.
- Mikhail Bakhtin, “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward an Historical Typology of the Novel)”, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 23.
- Ibid. p. 24.
- See Thomas Carlyle, “On History”: “Our clock strikes when there is a change from hour to hour; but no hammer in the horologe of Time peals through the universe when there is a change from Era to Era.” Web. 1 May 2014.
- pace Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World* (New York: Verso, 1981).
- Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 413-14.
- Gary Saul Morson, “Bakhtin and the Present Moment,” *The American Scholar* (Spring 1991): 217. I have applied the idea of “emergence” in an earlier essay on Barry Levinson's *Liberty Heights*. See William Bartley, “Barry Levinson's *Liberty Heights* and ‘Historical Emergence.’” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35 (2007): 248-267.
- Bakhtin, op.cit. p. 53.
- Morson and Emerson, op.cit. pp. 410-11.
- Tracy, “Matthew Weiner is Overrated.” Web. 23 May 2014. Just in case the terms “Whig” and “Whiggish” aren't as current as I think they are, they refer specifically in this essay to the school of Victorian historiography that promotes the idea of inevitable social, moral, and scientific progress. See Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell, 1931).
- All quotations from and references to *Mad Men* are taken from *Netflix* and will be cited according to season and episode: (e.g. 1.2)
- Will Dean, *The Ultimate Guide to Mad Men* (London: Random House UK, 2011), p. 15
- But this is a mere shadow of the compromise Joan will make in 5.11 when she prostitutes herself at the request of a potential client, Herb Renet of Jaguar, and with the complicity of the partners: if she will sleep with the client he will give them his business; she will be given a partnership. Whether or not her new position of power and wealth (she stands to make one million dollars if the firm goes public) is worth an open embrace of prostitution is a question left disturbingly open.
- Michael Berubé, “Afterword,” in *Mad Men, Mad Worlds*. p. 351
- For a summary of these arguments see Berubé, “Afterword.” pp. 347-351.
- Brett Martin, “The Men Behind the Curtain: A GQ TV Roundtable.” *GQ* (June 2012). Web. 19 June 2014.
- George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 548. For a superb exploration of the connection between *Middlemarch* and David Simon's *The Wire*, see Garry Watson, “The Literary Critic, The Nineteenth-Century Novel, and *The Wire*,” *CineAction* 84 (2011). In his view, *The Wire* deserves consideration as part of Leavis' Great Tradition.
- Eliot, *Middlemarch*, p. 551.
- William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 92