telling someone like Mr. Tulliver that his “clinging affection for the old home as [...] part of himself” (217; bk. 3, ch. 9) is merely an instance of reactionary nostalgia.

Indeed, as Terry Eagleton points out elsewhere, the idea that unstable identities are always subversive and thus desirable is a claim “which it would be interesting to test out among the socially dumped and disregarded” (After Theory 16). Philip Fisher’s remark that a “break in continuity is the death of what is meant by the self in The Mill on the Floss” has to be seen precisely in this context (522), for without a certain amount of material stability, it becomes extremely difficult to sustain a reasonably stable sense of self. Mr. Tulliver’s attachment to the past may thus have much to do with an underlying sense of economic insecurity – at least according to Eliot’s narrator, who contrasts the old miller’s fear “that the country could never again be what it used to be” with the optimism of Mr. Deane, who is “attached to a firm of which the returns were on the increase,” and who “naturally took a more lively view of the present” (64; bk. 1, ch. 7). If, in short, The Mill on the Floss insists perhaps too much on the importance of “immovable roots,” we should not forget that it does so against a backdrop (or at least the fear) of material dispossession that, in turn, highlights the fragility of the place we call home.

**Nostalgia, Mourning, and Ironic Distance: Novelistic Immaturity**

Accordingly, we should read the novel’s generally nostalgic mood not exclusively as a form of sentimental indulgence, but also as an implicit critique of social injustice and thus as a potential basis for resistance. The nostalgic mood of The Mill on the Floss is established in the very first chapter, through the narrator’s dreamy remembrances of how Dorlcote Mill and its surroundings “looked one February morning many years ago” (8; bk. 1, ch. 1; see Boumelha 20):

> Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is, with its dark changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank, and listen to its low, placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge. (7; bk. 1, ch. 1)

This is not the detached, analytic tone one would expect from a “Study of Provincial Life” – the subtitle of Eliot’s later novel Middlemarch – but the nostalgic voice of a narrator who longs for a time “when joys were vivid” (127; bk. 2, ch. 1). Instead of dismissing such nostalgic longings as sentimental, Kimberley K. Smith emphasizes their potential “as a mode of resistance” (523). Smith shows that the term nostalgia, which was coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johan
Hofer to denote a potentially fatal condition of homesickness, underwent a process of radical redefinition (509–510):

[N]ostalgia evolved from a disease into an emotion [...]. The concept broadened and complicated: Once defined simply as a desire to return home, to a specific place, nostalgia was gradually being conceptualized as a longing to return to a former time – and usually a time that was only imagined to be better. (512; original emphasis)

Eventually, Smith continues, nostalgia was reduced to a sometimes painful, occasionally pleasant, but in either case unreliable, private emotion that is inevitably unrelated to any real political harm (519). For Smith, such a view of nostalgia mirrors a progressivist distrust towards any form of resistance to change, and is therefore “integral to the emotional regime of industrial capitalism” (522) – for if those who resist change are always and everywhere ‘merely being nostalgic,’ then their political objections can be conveniently disregarded.\footnote{16 Alison Blunt likewise argues that the widespread antipathy towards nostalgia may blind us to its “liberatory potential” (14). See also John Kirk, who emphasizes that there are “forms of nostalgic memory [...] which can be enabling” (606; original emphasis).}

Accordingly, when reading the conclusion of \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, we must not simply dismiss the novel’s tone as nostalgic, but instead examine how such nostalgia contributes to the text’s critique of Bildung and the genre of the \textit{Bildungsroman}. The key for doing this lies in the problem of mourning, which according to Franco Moretti can have no more than episodic significance in the classical \textit{Bildungsroman} because it “does not contribute to Bildung” (“The Comfort of Civilization” 132). Indicating a refusal to let go of the past, mourning constitutes an obstacle to the protagonist’s smooth, evolutionary development – and, implicitly, to his or her ’progress.’ Accordingly, while in the final chapter of \textit{The Mill on the Floss} Eliot’s narrator at first seems to argue that time has the power to heal all wounds, it soon becomes clear that this is not in fact the case:

\begin{quote}
Nature repairs her ravages – repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labor. The desolation wrought by that flood had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. [...] \\
Nature repairs her ravages, but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred; if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair. (422; “Conclusion”)
\end{quote}

\textit{The Mill on the Floss} does not, then, end on a confident note of progress, but with the image of two men – Philip and Stephen – who continue to visit Maggie’s
grave, feeling “that their keenest joy and keenest sorrow were for ever buried there” (422; “Conclusion”). As Susan Meyer points out, the novel’s nostalgia “exerts a more memorable and stronger force than the energy of its forward movement” (131); the smooth river of progress finds itself checked by an indelible longing for the past. Only by forgetting the past can we hope to avoid mourning and nostalgia. However, since our identities must, for Eliot’s narrator, have immovable roots in memory, to forget or deny the past would be tantamount to surrendering one’s self – the very self so cherished by advocates of Bildung.

This is not to suggest that nostalgia ought to become a privileged discourse in our relation to the past. We should, however, be aware that to dismiss nostalgia out of hand means to surrender a potent resource for social critique. Nostalgia is, first and foremost, an experience of homelessness, and as such an indication of discontent with the present:

[W]e should recognize that remembering positive aspects of the past does not necessarily indicate a desire to return there. Remembering the past should instead be seen as a way to express valid desires and concerns about the present – in particular, about its relationship (or lack of relationship) to the past. (Smith 523; original emphasis)

Nostalgia expresses desires and values that, in themselves, are neither necessarily sentimental nor illegitimate; after all, one reason for shying away from examining the past is, as Eliot’s narrator puts it, that “mankind is not disposed to look narrowly into the conduct of great victors when their victory is on the right side” (207; bk. 3, ch. 7) – i.e. one’s own. To dismiss any kind of longing for the past as ‘mere nostalgia’ may thus encourage, in both others and ourselves, an unwarranted sense of “ironic detachment” from both past injustice and present harm (Smith 515). 17

In The Mill on the Floss, ironic detachment is in fact quite explicitly portrayed as a privilege that the dispossessed cannot afford. In a lengthy passage that is itself supremely ironic (Raymond Williams 172), Eliot’s narrator satirizes the

---

17 Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: restorative nostalgia, which “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” and reflective nostalgia, which, at best, “can present an ethical and creative challenge” (xviii): “Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home […]. This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. […] The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historical development” (50). See also Kevis Goodman on Romantic nostalgia, which she regards as an attempt “to register the growing pains of historical existence” (196).
belief that using irony implies a lofty transcendence of one’s limited, subjective point of view:

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. But then good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner-engagements six weeks deep, its opera and its faery ball-rooms; rides off its ennui on thoroughbred horses; [...] gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses – how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis? But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, [...] or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands [...]. This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis – the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony; it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. (238; bk. 4, ch. 3)

Irony, the narrator insists, is not an ideologically neutral device, but suffused with implicit value-judgments; an “unsoftened” hut is far less hospitable to “light irony” than a comfortable, wealthy home furnished with “velvet carpets.” Indeed, given the depth of social injustice (“deafening factories,” “the emphasis of want”), good society’s well-tempered beliefs appear curiously exorbitant (or “extremely moderate,” in the narrator’s elegantly oxymoronic phrase). Accordingly, it would be a profound mistake to think that holding strong beliefs necessarily indicates blind fanaticism, whereas a properly ironic distance goes hand in hand with intellectual subtlety and independence.\(^\text{18}\)

In addition, the narrator’s argument also challenges the idea that irony is necessarily subversive, for it is difficult to imagine that the tone of “good society”

---

\(^{18}\) The historian E. P. Thompson makes a similar observation on the relationship between religious enthusiasm and social standing in his *The Making of the English Working Class*: “The rational Christianity of the Unitarians, with its preference for ‘candour’ and its distrust of ‘enthusiasm’, appealed to some of the tradesmen and shopkeepers of London, and to similar groups in large cities. But it seemed too cold, too distant, too polite, and too much associated with the comfortable values of a prospering class to appeal to the city or village poor. Its very language and tone served as a barrier” (31).

For a particularly entertaining account of the relationship between class and irony, see Terry Eagleton’s remarks on “a certain kind of English patrician” (*Across the Pond* 39).
constitutes a counter-hegemonic discourse. The narrator’s point is thus not far from an observation Franco Moretti makes when noting irony’s centrality in the history of the modern novel. How, Moretti wonders, could a stylistic device that has enjoyed almost unrivalled dominance in novelistic aesthetics simultaneously constitute a grave threat to the social order (Way of the World 97)? Rather than seeing the device as subversive, we should regard irony as a stylistic correlative to what Moretti posits as the great theme and political disposition of the Bildungsroman: compromise (Way of the World 10). This becomes more readily apparent if we examine Moretti’s definition of compromise: “We can speak of compromise when conflicting principles have indeed reached an accord, but without having lost their diversity. They remain heterogeneous, and the agreement intrinsically precarious” (Way of the World 69). In agreement, but only precariously so – unified, yet remaining heterogeneous: it is a definition of compromise, but also a perfectly good description of how irony manages momentarily to unite fundamentally irreconcilable meanings: what Catherine Gallagher calls a characteristically modern “spirit of ‘ironic’ assent” (347).

Admittedly, The Mill on the Floss’s critique of irony is complicated by the fact that its narrator at the same time employs the device. There is irony, for instance, in the narrator’s description of the “fashionably drest [sic] female in grief” as a “striking example of the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilization” (48; bk. 1, ch. 7). There is irony, too, in the narrator’s attitude towards little Maggie, who, after running away from home to join the gypsies, mistakenly believes that she was really “gaining great influence over them,” and that the gypsies would want her to become their queen (92; bk. 1, ch. 11). And there is irony, to give a third and final example, in the narrator’s comments on the supposedly staggering backwardness of the past depicted in the novel:

All this, you remember, happened in those dark ages when there were no schools of design; before schoolmasters were invariably men of scrupulous integrity, and before the clergy were all men of enlarged minds and varied culture. In those less favored days, it is no fable that there were other clergymen besides Mr. Stelling who had narrow intellects and large wants, and whose income, by a logical confusion to which Fortune, being a female as well as blindfold, is peculiarly liable, was proportioned not to their wants but to their intellect, with which income has clearly no inherent relation. (139–140; bk. 2, ch. 4)

The surface meaning of the passage is that the narrator’s present is superior to the past, yet the idea that nowadays all schoolmasters are upright men, and all members of the clergy persons of enlarged minds and varied culture, is trans-
parently excessive and, therefore, highly suspicious. Moreover, if taken at face value, the link made in the passage between “female” and “logical confusion” would sit uneasily with the novel’s general gender politics. In short, there is good reason to believe that the narrator’s comments are not in fact intended to praise the present, but instead to ridicule those who subscribe to an overly optimistic progressivism.

And yet, it is important to recognize that ironic distance towards a particular ideology is not in fact the same as repudiating it. We have already examined some reasons why irony is not necessarily subversive, and Slavoy Žižek even suggests that “ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical with it” (The Plague of Fantasies 27). Accordingly, we might read The Mill on the Floss’s use of irony as evidence of just how firmly the novel is committed to the liberal ideology of progress from which it ostensibly distances itself. After all, the narrator states quite clearly that suffering simply “belongs to every historical advance of mankind” (223; bk. 4, ch. 1; emphasis added). Suffering is, in other words, regrettable – but also an inevitable aspect of progress, which itself remains eminently desirable. Moreover, even according to the narrator’s own theory of irony, the novel’s use of the device would in fact mark The Mill on the Floss as yet another product of that ‘good society’ that depends on exploitation and widespread want. From either perspective, the novel seems curiously at odds with itself: satirizing the very ‘good society’ from which it has itself emerged, and embracing an idea of progress that, at the same time, it critiques through its pervasive mood of nostalgia.

Crucially, however, there is one respect in which Eliot’s novel increasingly abandons the respectable stance of ironic distance, namely in relation to its protagonist, Maggie. We have already seen that, when still a child, Maggie at times serves as the butt of the narrator’s irony. However, as the novel’s heroine matures, the narrator identifies more and more uncompromisingly with her spiritual and emotional plight. Indeed, for F.R. Leavis it is precisely this lack of ironic distance towards Maggie’s soulful yearnings that constitute the one great flaw of The Mill on the Floss:

There is nothing against George Eliot’s presenting this immaturity with tender sympathy; but we ask, and ought to ask, of a great novelist something more. ‘Sympathy and understanding’ is the common formula of praise, but understanding, in any strict sense, is just what she doesn’t show. To understand immaturity would be to ‘place’ it, with however subtle an implication, by relating it to mature experience. (485)

19 On excessive praise as a classic strategy to create ironic effects, see Colebrook, Irony 10.
For Leavis, Eliot’s novel of education remains scandalously immature because it does not moderate its protagonist’s emotional intensity through properly ironic distance. In a similar vein, Virginia Woolf complains that the narrator’s humor “controls” Maggie only as long as she is still a child, whereas this superior ironic poise is lost as the novel’s protagonist matures — and it is this that separates it from Middlemarch, which Woolf has famously called “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” (“George Eliot” 168–169). What upsets both Leavis and Woolf, in short, is that the narrator of The Mill on the Floss progressively — or, to their mind, regressively — abandons the mature tone of ‘good society,’ opting instead for a very unfashionable, emphatic identification with the adolescent heroine’s struggle.

However, before analyzing in more detail some vital components of Maggie’s struggle, we should perhaps rephrase the argument up to this point in terms of two different levels of critique: the mimetic or referential, and the literary or intertextual. On the one hand, we have seen that The Mill on the Floss constitutes a far-reaching critique of Victorian gender norms and their adverse effects on women and, at least to some extent, on men as well. As this kind of critique is linked to the state of affairs in the real world, we may — for lack of a better term — call it mimetic or referential. Eliot’s novel highlights symbolically the extent to which Victorian gender norms are sustained by central pillars of the bourgeois order: fathers (Mr. Tulliver), preachers and educators (Reverend Stelling), as well as lawyers (Wakem). Importantly, the novel does not depict these patriarchs as a monolithic and unified front of oppression; rather, the text depicts them as engaged in deep conflict but nevertheless agreeing on one key issue: the inferiority of women as intellectually limited commodities that belong to the head of the family. The novel thus also portrays the family home as an institution that is deeply implicated in the reproduction of social injustice, even as it acknowledges the deep bonds of affection between father and daughter, or sister and brother. Moreover, like so many a Bildungsroman, it exposes important flaws in the educational system, and as such advocates social change.

Such referential critique is, however, complemented in the novel by what we might term literary or intertextual critique. This includes, for instance, the way in which The Mill on the Floss challenges some key tenets of the Bildungsroman as a genre by refusing to focus on Stephen Guest and instead juxtaposing three unsuccessful plots of formation: Maggie’s, Tom’s, and Philip’s, none of whom will find a true home in this world. In combining these three plots, the text highlights the limits to self-determination, and thus qualifies an overly optimistic conception of human agency inherent to classical ideals of Bildung. Moreover, the novel questions the political innocence of irony as a stylistic de-