Conclusion – The End of Intellectual Nomadism

The rhyme between home and roam may be one of the more hackneyed in the poetic repertoire, but it encapsulates beautifully the extent to which our inquiry into the concept of home has led us to travel wide and far.\(^1\) Chapter one, for example, among other things focuses on Ishmael’s attempts in Moby-Dick to combat alienation through discursive constructions of universal belonging, while chapter two examines the reasons why Maggie is ultimately unwilling to reconcile herself to the prospect of a ‘nomadic’ existence in The Mill on the Floss. A central theme in the discussion of Mrs. Dalloway in chapter three is Clarissa’s willingness to evade questions of political responsibility in order to maintain her sense of belonging, whereas chapter four explores Quentin’s nightmarish inability in Absalom, Absalom! to abandon his love for a home that in many ways would seem to deserve his hatred. Chapter five then turns to the parallels between crumbling houses and ‘derelict’ human bodies in Union Street, while the discussion of The Virgin Suicides in chapter six revolves around a group of boys and their ritualistic reenactment of communal identity. In Emersonian terms, one might say that we have engaged in “intellectual nomadism” in order to avoid the monotony and dullness that may easily befall a “home-keeping wit” (“History” 161–162).\(^2\)

At the same time, it is worth taking seriously Emerson’s warning that intellectual nomadism, if taken to extremes, “bankrupts the mind, through the dissipation of power on a miscellany of objects” (“History” 161) – for this warning allows us to explain some of the theoretical limitations of this study. Emerson’s idea that intellectual nomadism may involve a “dissipation of power” alerts us

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\(^1\) I would like to thank Nicole Frey Büchel for her comments on the first draft of this chapter, as well as Sarah Chevalier and Anja Neukom-Hermann for their feedback on the final version.

\(^2\) On Emerson’s discussion of nomadism see John Durham Peters (“Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 30–31). Emerson’s conflation of a historical antagonism between “Nomadism and Agriculture” with two conflicting types of mental attitudes “in the individual” is not unproblematic, as it may serve to erase the specificity of nomadic existence (“History” 161). Moreover, Emerson’s distinction between, on the one hand, the nomads of Africa (who are “constrained” to wander), and, on the other, Europeans and Americans (who follow the “nomadism of trade and curiosity”; ibid.) is clearly not immune to postcolonial critique. On nomadic thought, see also Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 45–47. The link between Emerson’s and Deleuze’s ideas is discussed in Tally, *Melville, Mapping and Globalization* 65–68.
to the fact that human beings have limited energy and resources at their disposal, and that the amount of power we are able to dissipate depends to a large extent on our past and present experience of home and belonging. We are born helpless and depend on others to take care of us during the first years of our lives. If our basic childhood needs are met, then we have a greater chance of thriving as teenagers and as adults. Similarly, if our education is suited to our talents (unlike Tom’s and Maggie’s in *The Mill on the Floss*), and if there is a reasonable degree of security in our lives, then we are free to expend some energy on nomadic thought. Should these conditions not be met, however, then intellectual nomadism may either seem like a luxury that one cannot afford, or simply constitute a task that one does not know how to perform.\(^3\) In chapter four, for instance, we noted that Thomas Sutpen’s upbringing was extremely inauspicious: inured to violence, racism, and poverty, and deprived of adequate formal education, Sutpen ends up lacking vital mental resources that, in turn, help explain his obsessive quest for a fixed and destructive idea of home. Similarly, in chapter two, we discussed the narrator’s idea in *The Mill on the Floss* that “light and graceful irony,” as well as “extremely moderate” beliefs, are of “very expensive production,” while those living in poverty and squalor tend to need strong and clear guiding principles to help them cope with “the emphasis of want” (238; bk. 4, ch. 3). If, in short, one’s physical and mental development was thwarted in childhood and youth, or if one is engaged in a daily struggle for survival, then a desire for intellectual nomadism may simply be too much to ask. In addition, there is an important difference between choosing to engage in intellectual nomadism and being driven to do so because one’s sense of home and belonging has been disrupted against one’s will. It is this emphasis on home as a material basis for, and limit to, our cognitive engagement with the world which explains the relatively minor presence in this study of poststructural, postmodern, and deconstructive theories, which too often have little to say about embodiment and human limitations – unlike postcolonial, psychoanalytic, feminist, and Marxist approaches.

Other limitations of our intellectual journey can less easily be justified. This study’s marked theoretical predilections within the disciplinary boundaries of literary and cultural studies are, for instance, compounded by a virtually complete absence of disciplines such as law (which are discussed, for instance, in Maria Donata Panforti, “The Home and the Law”), human biology (e.g. Elizabeth Cashdan, “Spatial Organization and Habitat Use”), or architecture and housing

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3 Miranda Fricker provides a useful definition of what she terms hermeneutical injustice, which occurs “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (1).
studies (e.g. Helen Long, *The Edwardian House*; Thomas Barrie, *House and House*). Similarly, the fact that all primary texts come from the core nations of the so-called Anglosphere (i.e. England and the United States), and that most of the theorists consulted are either northwestern Europeans – predominantly English, German, and French – or U. S. Americans must surely give us pause. Much has undoubtedly fallen outside the purview of this study, and our supposedly nomadic forays into the fields of home and belonging in many ways stand revealed as decidedly provincial.

And yet, this is not to say that nothing has been gained from our inquiry into home and belonging. The remainder of the conclusion will attempt to highlight the most important findings. Rather than retrace our analysis of home and belonging step by step, we will rephrase the argument by addressing three underlying themes that have rarely surfaced as explicit concerns in the six chapters that make up this study: the concept of genre and its thematic as well as formal relation to home and belonging; the recurring problem of suicide as a symptom of unbelonging that allows us to reflect on the limited power of fiction; and the idea that fiction itself constitutes a home-making practice because it offers imaginary solutions to real-life contradictions (cf. introduction). We will examine each of these three concerns in a separate section and, in so doing, provide at least some sense of closure to this purposefully meandering exploration of home.

**Genre and Home: From Content to Form**

The last of the seven precepts outlined in the introduction suggests that any critical analysis of home must focus not only on the content or ingredients of home, but also on their formal arrangements. This need to take into account both form and content also applies to the discussion of genre and its relation to home and belonging. Indeed, form is arguably the more important category of the two because, on the level of content, the link between home and genre is relatively straight-forward and, therefore, not particularly interesting. In the case of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation, for instance, we are faced with a genre that has as its key concern the problem of a young person leaving the family home in order to find his or her place in the world (i.e. to establish a broader sense of social belonging as a well-adjusted and ‘mature’ individual). We have examined this generic tradition most thoroughly in the discussion of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (see chapter two), but the specific challenges associated with the transition to adulthood also play a role in other texts dis-

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cussed in this study. In *E. T.*, for instance, little Elliott must abandon his narcissistic self-absorption and learn to consider the feelings of others, while the eleven-year-old Kelly Brown in *Union Street* must come to terms not only with growing up in a precarious home, but also with the terrible experience of rape. To some extent, Kelly thus resembles the traumatized group of male adolescents in *The Virgin Suicides*, but while the latter remain trapped in a ritualistic reenactment of their founding trauma, Kelly finds a way of reestablishing a sense of belonging in a moving encounter with a frail and desperate old woman (i.e. her meeting with Alice Bell, to whom we shall return in the following section).

A second genre discussed in this study that has a close thematic relation to home is the Gothic, which at times even intersects with the narrative of *Bildung*. As noted in chapter four, in the course of the nineteenth century, Gothic narratives increasingly turned away from sublime landscapes and gloomy castles, and instead focused their attention on more domestic settings – a variant of the genre that Fred Botting has called the “homely Gothic” (113). *Absalom, Absalom!* is one example of this subgenre: a text that examines the ideology of plantation domesticity as well as the horrors of slavery, highlighting how the material remains of a supposedly superseded racial order continue to haunt Faulkner’s protagonists, as well as the United States as a nation, well into the twentieth century (and, arguably, beyond). Moreover, we can detect echoes of the “homely Gothic” in the suburbs of *E. T.* and *The Virgin Suicides*. In the case of Spielberg’s film, we have examined closely the way in which E. T. functions as Elliott’s uncanny double, and we may now add the Gothic motif of a family home being taken over by powerful forces beyond the inhabitants’ control (i.e. the agents of a notably paranoid government bent on maintaining ‘homeland security’). Similarly, in *The Virgin Suicides*, the motifs of female incarceration and memories that refuse to stay buried have at least a remote kinship with the genre of the Gothic. The ‘derelict’ people living in the crumbling houses of *Union Street*, finally, are in some ways modern-day variants of Gothic revenants or monsters: abject and unruly bodies that lurk in the marginal spaces of society, continually threatening to encroach beyond their narrow confines, and unable to live or die in peace.

Indeed, the list of genres that have some relation to home and belonging on the level of content could be extended almost indefinitely. Among the genres discussed in this study, for instance, there is tragedy as a genre of failure and unbelonging (chapter two); pastoral as a literary tradition that tries to envision an ideal, homely fusion between nature and culture (chapters three and six); and

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realism as the genre of the everyday, the familiar, the domestic (chapter five). To these, we might add others that are not discussed in this study: the Western as a genre of European settlement and native dispossession (e.g. Bronfen 96–97); film noir and its concern with traumatized war veterans returning home (e.g. Spicer 20); or comedy, which in its narrowest sense can be conceived of as celebrating communal reintegration (e.g. Stott 1).

The truly interesting link between genre and home, however, concerns the level of form or style, and in particular the question of how genre theory conceives of texts as belonging to multiple genres. In recent decades, genre theorists from across the critical spectrum have insisted that individual texts do not simply belong to one particular genre, in the sense of being tied to the supposedly unchanging laws of a single category of texts; rather, a literary text belongs to a genre to the extent to which it participates in certain generic practices: engaging with genre conventions, revising and rejecting some of them, and as a rule combining practices associated with diverging generic traditions (e.g. Amigoni 58; Frow 3; Zagarell 502). In the case of Moby-Dick, for instance, we saw that the novel’s strange opening sections (“Etymology” and “Extracts”) are followed by several chapters that seem to set up Ishmael as the protagonist of a ‘single-focus’ narrative of Bildung – only to thwart these generic expectations later on, when the text’s focus broadens and becomes much more diffuse. Nevertheless, Melville’s text remains affiliated with the generic tradition of the Bildungsroman: not fully or exclusively at home in it, but retaining significant ties of belonging – just as individuals, too, can at least try to explore new ties without necessarily abandoning all their former associations. The discussion of other novels in the present study likewise focuses on intersecting and sometimes conflicting literary lineages (e.g. in the case of Mrs. Dalloway, which sets up a dialogue between the ‘rural’ genre of pastoral, the literary tradition of the marriage plot, and a series of texts focusing on urban flâneurs; or Union Street, which pits the conventions of novelistic, bourgeois realism against the aesthetic of the short-story cycle). Various generic affiliations may thus coexist in a primary text – sometimes peacefully, at other times uneasily – just as an individual’s sense of belonging may involve a set of diverse, potentially conflicting loyalties (e.g. familial, professional, and national).

Moreover, if we agree with critics such as Aijaz Ahmad (251), Wai Chee Dimock (1383), and John Frow (2) in regarding genres as fields of knowledge, then there is an important cognitive dimension to the idea of multiple generic

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6 Stott rightly notes, however, that comic reintegration may simultaneously be exclusionary if it relies on the “systematic humiliation of targeted groups” (105).
belonging. According to these critics, each genre constitutes a particular way of knowing the world and therefore invariably includes a set of epistemological blind spots. Each genre, that is to say, resembles Emerson’s concept of the “home-keeping wit,” which would prefer to find “all the elements of life in its own soil,” but which would quickly become dull and monotonous without salutary “foreign intrusions” (“History” 162). Put in slightly different terms: a text’s coupling of one genre with one or several others constitutes a discursive attempt to make use of various sets of knowledge in order to come to terms with particular narrative, political, and philosophical problems. *Moby-Dick*, for instance, evokes the generic tradition of allegory – with its historical link to the discourse of religion – as well as the secular empiricism of realist narration in its attempt to grapple with man’s existential place in the world. It is an uneasy combination at best, and one that helps us to relate the particular concerns of Melville’s text to broader cultural and historical rivalries.

This also implies that, in tracing the affinities and contradictions between a text’s generic lineages, we can gain a better understanding of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the “basic social tone” of a text’s individual style (“Discourse in the Novel” 259). The discussion of *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, has shown how the realist novel’s appreciation of the common life serves as a corrective influence on tragedy’s aristocratic prejudices, just as tragedy’s focus on intractable moral dilemmas tempers the *Bildungsroman*’s ‘realistic’ aesthetic of home-coming, compromise, and social adjustment. Similarly, if *Absalom, Absalom!* is in part a Gothic tale, it also evokes traditional versions of the historical novel (with Thomas Sutpen’s stallion explicitly “named out of [Walter] Scott”; 63), thus combining one genre’s focus on the dark recesses of the human psyche with another’s interest in the way broader political conflicts shape the individual. To the extent that a given text participates in more than one single generic tradition, it formally enacts the cognitive implications of multiple belonging: its productive opening up of new horizons, but also its potential to lead to conflict and contradictions that may prove daunting and, at times, psychologically crippling. It is this formal process of generic ‘cross-examination,’ rather than any particular theme or content, that constitutes the most productive way of linking the concept of genre to the ideas of home and belonging.

**Not-Being-at-Home: Suicide and Unbelonging**

The second underlying theme that we need to explore in this concluding chapter is the problem of suicide, which features explicitly in many of the primary texts discussed in this study: the traumatized war veteran Septimus Warren Smith, who throws himself out of a window in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Alice Bell in *Union*...
In addition, there is a character in *Absalom, Absalom!* that does not appear in the discussion of the novel in chapter four: Clytemnestra, the daughter of Thomas Sutpen and a slave woman, who at the end of the novel sets fire to Sutpen’s plantation manor, perishing in the flames together with her half-brother Henry.

Street, who prefers to end her life rather than move to an old people’s home; or the five Lisbon sisters, whose suicides continue to haunt a group of neighborhood boys in *The Virgin Suicides*. There is, moreover, something markedly suicidal about Ahab’s quest for the white whale in *Moby-Dick*, and we know that Ishmael regards going to sea as a “substitute for pistol and ball” (i.e. for committing suicide; *Moby-Dick* 18; ch. 1). In addition, we have seen that the conclusion of *The Mill on the Floss* in fact constitutes a fantasied fulfilment of an only half-admitted death wish on Maggie’s part. *Absalom, Absalom!* finally, is haunted intertextually by Quentin’s suicide in Faulkner’s earlier novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), and Quentin’s sense of despair at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* does little to lay this fearful specter to rest.7

The reason why it is important to acknowledge the pervasive presence of suicide in the primary texts chosen for this study is that acts of suicide can be understood as an extreme expression of unbelonging. In chapter six, we observed that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides are in part a fundamental act of rejection: a disavowal of any claims on them by other human beings, including the group of neighborhood boys. Accordingly, when Eugenides’s narrator speaks of “the outrageousness of a human being thinking only of herself” (248), then this is to register that suicide not only constitutes an act of self-violation, but also – in effect, if not necessarily in intention – a violent misdeed against all those whose sense of self is bound up with the person who decides to put an end to his or her life. Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet describe the “disproportionate” effect of a suicide on the lives of others:

Mourning following a suicide is not like any other mourning. [...] It’s distinguishing feature is an intense expression of suffering, but also of shock. It is a traumatic form of mourning that lasts longer than other forms and is more likely to generate more depression, anxiety, negative and painful feelings, and feelings of guilt and shame. The scars it leaves on the suicide’s relatives remain indelible. The feeling of guilt it generates is often so painful that it drives some to punish themselves or even to commit suicide in an attempt to assuage their guilt. The suicide’s closest relatives are the first to be affected, but the shock waves spread far beyond the inside circle. (2)

Accordingly, while some have argued that suicide can be seen as an assertion of freedom (e.g. Seneca; see Dollimore 32), there are also those who, like Jennifer Michael Hecht, emphasize that one reason why “suicide is wrong” is that “sui-
The fact that suicide rates worldwide have increased by 60 percent in the past forty-five years (Hecht 4) could thus be read as an indicator of increasing global unhomeliness. In other words, while suicide may constitute an act of liberation or self-assertion for the person who takes their own life, it can also rend apart existing communal and affective ties, thus escalating rather than protesting against existing violent dynamics.

In addition, while on the one hand the rejection implied in suicide may forcefully unsettle the sense of home and belonging of those who are left behind, on the other hand there is also strong evidence that suicide in fact arises from problems associated with the family home and the wider community. According to Mark A. Reinecke and Elizabeth R. Didie, for instance, suicidal behavior correlates strongly not only with “stressful life events” – e.g. “work or legal problems, [...] the loss of a loved one, and changes in residence” – but also with experiences in childhood or adolescence of “negative peer relationships, abuse and neglect, family instability, and a chaotic home environment” (214). Disrupted family homes thus feature prominently among the factors that influence suicidality (as, indeed, they do in the case of Ahab and Ishmael in Moby-Dick and, to a lesser but still important extent, Maggie’s in The Mill on the Floss). At the same time, the existence of “at-risk populations” – including LGBTQ individuals, Native Americans, military personnel, the homeless, and incarcerated men and women (Worchel and Gearing 291) – suggests that larger socio-cultural factors also play a crucial role in individual experiences of unbelonging.

Moreover, in addition to unhomely pasts or socio-cultural conditions hindering belonging, the problem of suicide also involves a frequently neglected dimension of home: the future as a subjective horizon of expectations. Reinecke and Didie, for instance, emphasize the importance of hopelessness in triggering suicidal behavior (209), and other researchers agree that a persistent lack of hope is among the main indicators for an increased risk of suicide (e.g. Vaillant and Blumenthal 4; Worchel and Gearing 92–94). If, in other words, a person stops believing that he or she could ever again feel at home in the world, then suicide becomes increasingly likely (as is the case with Alice Bell in Union Street, who – unlike Kelly Brown – is no longer able to envisage a more homely future for herself).

To the extent that literary narratives can mitigate stressful life experiences or underlying feelings of alienation, fictions of home can quite literally become a matter of life and death. Coming-out narratives, for instance, may alleviate a gay or lesbian teenager’s current feelings of isolation and even help him or her to imagine a future of communal belonging. More generally, fictional genres

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8 The fact that suicide rates worldwide have increased by 60 percent in the past forty-five years (Hecht 4) could thus be read as an indicator of increasing global unhomeliness.
familiarize individuals with a wide range of different story templates, which they can then use as cognitive resources when it comes to narrativizing their life experiences – an ability that is widely held to be a crucial factor in maintaining mental health (e.g. Engel et al., Narrative in Health Care). Conversely, the reiteration of negative stereotypes in fiction may have averse emotional effects, particularly on those who already suffer from a precarious sense of belonging (witness, for instance, Maggie’s complaint in The Mill on the Floss that women who are “dark” like her always lose out against their “light-complexioned” rivals – a conventional pattern that Eliot’s novel repeatedly associates with racist prejudices against ‘darker’ races; The Mill on the Floss 270; bk. 5, ch. 4; see also the discussion of Victorian views of gypsies in chapter two).

At the same time, we ought to be wary of overestimating the power of fiction to avert the tragedy of suicide (or any other real-life tragedies, for that matter). In Mrs. Dalloway, for instance, a quotation from Shakespeare’s Coriolanus repeatedly provides Clarissa Dalloway with a sense of consolation – but the very same passage fails to prevent Septimus from committing suicide. In a similar vein, the group of boys in The Virgin Suicides try to console the Lisbon girls with rock songs played to them over the phone, but hopeful lyrics prove insufficient in preventing the sisters from taking their lives. Likewise, though the recognition of shared suffering constitutes a vital element of emotional support – e.g. for Ahab and Pip in Moby-Dick, or for Alice Bell and Kelly Brown in Union Street – the varied outcomes in each of these cases suggest that other factors play an equally decisive part. Indeed, the argument in chapter four regarding Absalom, Absalom! suggests that therapeutic storytelling has the power to alleviate the symptoms of unbelonging, as well as to alert us to the roots of this condition, but that long-term improvement may require more than continual narrativization – including a willingness to engage in, and fight for, material changes to communal homes. Fiction, in short, has the power to console, to raise our awareness of hitherto unsuspected dimensions of human experience, and even to instill us with utopian hopes for a better and more homely future. Nevertheless, in the final analysis it is collective human agency – and not narratives of belonging alone – that will change the world and, perhaps, make it a more hospitable place.

**Home-Making: Imaginary Solutions to Real-Life Contradictions**

Let us take stock. The first section of the conclusion focused on genres as fields of knowledge that intersect with one another in literary texts, in a manner that is akin to an individual’s multiple and potentially conflicting ties of loyalty and belonging. We then turned to suicide as an extreme expression of unbelonging,
and though fiction may at times serve to alleviate alienation, it is also crucial to retain a realistic sense of the limits of fiction’s transformative, therapeutic power. This latter point, in turn, requires us to reexamine the claim made in the introductory chapter that fictions are best understood as home-making practices. What the discussion of suicide forces us to state more clearly is that fiction constitutes an attempt to enhance our sense of belonging. More precisely, the fictional compromise tries to provide us with imaginary solutions to real-life contradictions – which not only leaves open the possibility that the form of a particular fictional compromise may be entirely unconvincing, but also acknowledges that even the most accomplished imaginary compromise may fail to have any palpable effect in a given real-life situation. Fiction is a home-making practice, and like any such practice it may very well fail. At the same time, this does not reduce the heuristic value of fiction for cultural analysis, as it is the formulation of a particular problem, rather than the success of its imaginary solution, that tells us most about historical pressures and cultural needs.

In the case of *Moby-Dick*, for instance, one key contradiction that the novel attempts to resolve is the clash, in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, between a political culture embracing the value of individualism, and social pressures on a steadily increasing fraction of the population toward economic dependence and conformity. More precisely, cultural ideals of independence and the free individual’s pursuit of happiness conflicted sharply with the reality of increasing social inequality, the spread of standardized industrial production, and the concomitant disciplining of a growing workforce engaged in semi-skilled wage labor: “a form of dependency that seemed to contradict the republican principles on which the country had been founded” (McPherson 23). In terms of its story, *Moby-Dick* rejects the sovereign individualism of Ahab (who dies at the end of the novel), and instead sides with the conformist wage-laborer Ishmael (who survives the disaster to tell the tale). In terms of discourse or style, however, few literary texts are as idiosyncratic and non-conformist as *Moby-Dick*, and we can therefore say that the novel’s form salvages the very ‘extremist’ individualism that it rejects on the level of the story. In this way, *Moby-Dick* attempts to have its cake and eat it: a (more or less) elegant imaginary solution to an intractable real-life problem.

The distinction between story and discourse also allows us to understand how *The Mill on the Floss* tries to reconcile a Victorian ideology of progress with a political system built on the so-called respect for tradition. On the one hand, the mid-nineteenth century constituted a period of relief in Victorian England: “the huge debts left by the wars against the French had not proved crippling, the working classes had not revolted, the Chartist movement of the 1830s and
1840s had collapsed” (Colin Matthew 8). In addition, the hitherto fitful – and possibly negative – development of workers’ living standards first stabilized and then began to improve in the course of the 1850s (e.g. Floud et al. 162–163; Hoppen 78–79); the concept of ‘evolutionary’ (as opposed to revolutionary) progress “came to permeate every aspect of Victorian life and thought” (H.C.G. Matthew 523). However, British political culture was at the same time deeply averse to change, dominated by an aristocracy that was not only the richest in Europe (Osterhammel 1068), but that had also been able to maintain a socio-political position that was nearly as strong as it had been a hundred years earlier (Niedhart 39–40). More generally, a ‘respect for tradition’ was as strong a force as the belief in scientific and moral progress, and it is this conflict that lies at the heart of The Mill on the Floss. On the level of the story, Eliot’s novel aligns itself squarely with the forces of progress (e.g. Stephen Guest), and either kills off or condemns to a childless, ‘barren’ existence all the characters who cling to the past (Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver, Maggie, Tom, and Philip). On the level of discourse, however, the narrator’s nostalgia belies the story’s endorsement of progress, and while the story’s ‘reality principle’ works steadfastly and remorselessly towards Maggie’s extinction, the novel’s discourse increasingly abandons any signs of ‘mature’ ironic distance toward the female protagonist. It is a strained compromise, to be sure – but a compromise of sorts, nevertheless.

If The Mill on the Floss revolves in part around the conflict between faith in progress and respect for the past, then a key conflict in Mrs. Dalloway is the clash between, on the one hand, the freedom from interference, and, on the other, the freedom to belong. Woolf’s novel, we saw in chapter two, revels in the experience of urban anonymity even as it associates modernist fragmentation with illness, trauma, and the continual misreading of some of its characters by others. More precisely, on the level of the novel’s story it is Clarissa and the other members of the Dalloway circle who appreciate most fully the freedom of moving through the imperial city, while Septimus and Lucrezia are the characters who feel most isolated and beleaguered amongst London’s teeming multitudes. At the same time, the sections focusing on the Dalloway circle are stylistically more conservative (i.e. closest to the model of classic realism), while the sections revolving around Septimus and his wife embrace most fully the urban aesthetics of modernist fragmentation. Put differently, on the level of the story the Dalloways are associated with the pleasure of solitary urban wanderings (i.e. the freedom from interference), while the story of Septimus and Lucrezia revolves around the lack of human connection (i.e. the freedom to belong). Stylistically, however, it is the sections centering on the Dalloways that emphasize connection and coherence in point of view, whereas Septimus and Lucrezia’s
perspective appears in free-floating combination with various and contiguous others. This chiastic structure creates a sense of formal balance – and thus attempts to reconcile, in imaginary form, the class conflict between the small social set of the Dalloways and the multitude of perspectives associated with Septimus and his Italian wife.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the real-life problem that only too clearly confronts the United States of the 1930s is the seemingly intractable history of racial conflict. And yet, while Faulkner’s novel pits against each other conflicting interpretations and elaborations of this traumatic past (e.g. Miss Rosa’s and Grandfather Compson’s), shuttling back and forth from one level of time to another, its breathless, interminable sentences provide the novel with an underlying and unified stylistic rhythm. Using the terms developed in chapter four, we could say that the stylistic technique of uncanny narration, used throughout the novel, serves to reconcile the story’s conflicting interpretations of the past, as each of the characters appears equally burdened by the novel’s onerous syntax. However, the novel’s thematic insistence on the crushing weight of history is in some ways mitigated by the ease with which the narrative shifts from one temporal level to the next. If, in short, Faulkner’s story presents us with characters locked in historical conflict, the novel’s discourse flows like one great single stream across periods and individuals, counteracting the story’s centripetal forces.

In *Union Street*, the conflict between fragmentation and unity is important, too, but here it revolves more specifically around the conceptual nexus between human agency and class. On the one hand, the novel continually insists on the extent to which its working-class characters are the victims of social circumstances, determined by environmental forces far beyond their individual control. On the other hand, *Union Street* tries to overcome its protagonists’ entrapment in a single, overarching social structure by breaking its story up into seven discursively discrete segments that, taken together, provide us with a synchronic panorama of simultaneously independent and interconnected lives. At the same time, the novel tries to reintroduce a sense of diachronic movement because an emphasis on synchrony threatens to dissolve history and, along with it, any room for human agency (i.e. if there is no horizon of temporal progression, then it is difficult to see how one could possibly construct a better future). As discussed in chapter five, *Union Street* attempts to overcome this potential deadlock by arranging its seven stories in such a way that its more or less synchronic ‘story-time’ is combined with a discursive ‘life-time’ progression from Kelly Brown, the youngest character, through to the oldest, Alice Bell. Barker’s novel thus imaginatively opens up a space for historical transformation – at a time...
when the real-life industrial working-class of Thatcherite Britain was all too evidently in disarray (Marwick 153: “The overriding economic fact was the shrinkage of Britain’s industrial base”; cf Harris 112–115).

*The Virgin Suicides*, finally, attempts to reconcile two conflicting interpretations of American history in the second half of the twentieth century. According to the first of these interpretations, the postwar years up until, roughly, 1963 not only saw the United States at the height of its economic power; the period was also a time of social stability and a broad political consensus directed against the evils of Soviet communism. Over the next decade or so, this consensus fell apart, as ‘special interest groups’ supposedly precipitated the country’s material and moral decline, resulting in the culture wars that continued to cripple U.S. political culture in the early 1990s. According to a second, competing narrative, the 1950s were a period of mind-numbing conformism and widespread oppression of women, ethnic minorities, and everyone who could be considered ‘deviant’ or ‘queer.’ It was only in the 1960s that the new social movements began finally to challenge these hegemonic structures, leading to landmark civil rights legislation and culminating in the exposure of government corruption from Vietnam to Watergate. The economic downturn of the 1970s then paved the way for a resurgence of the political right, which remained in power until January 1993 – and thus until the beginning of the year in which *The Virgin Suicides* was published. While in the first narrative, identity politics appears as one symptom of what went wrong with the country, in the second it constitutes the very foundation of the nation’s social and political progress. At the same time, the early 1970s feature as a negative watershed in both these conflicting narratives, and it is precisely at this point in time that the Lisbon sisters take their lives. The key traumatic event of Eugenides’s novel is thus linked to a moment in U.S. history that symbolizes a kind of negative consensus. Moreover, while the characters who remain traumatized by these events are male, white, middle-aged heterosexuals (i.e. the social group most strongly associated with the first historical narrative), their representation as a group is formally analogous to the wounded collective subjectivity that underpins the projects of identity politics commonly linked to the second interpretation of the nation’s history. In this way, *The Virgin Suicides* proposes an imaginary solution to the U.S. culture wars, which in real life were (and still are) far from abating.

Admittedly, none of the fictional compromises outlined above will hold up to critical scrutiny, as it is always possible to detect imbalances, contradictions, and questionable assumptions that undermine or at least problematize the imaginary solution that a given text proposes. However, to unravel a fictional compromise tends to require a considerable amount of time and interpretive effort. If one