simply reads a text without thinking about it a great deal, then even a rough, makeshift compromise may work perfectly. Indeed, a lack of stringency and closure may in fact turn out to be an advantage because this renders the compromise more pliable and thus less likely to cause palpable ideological friction.¹⁹ In addition, we need to bear in mind that, like the symbolism of dreams, literary fictions involve various kinds of displacement and condensation; they are overdetermined and may therefore simultaneously fulfill various functions for one and the same reader, as well as different functions for different readers.

Nevertheless, if a given work of fiction enjoys widespread success, then it is at least plausible to assume that some aspect of the work speaks to a common social need. The intellectual labor of literary analysis may then help us to unearth this shared socio-cultural need – and, more importantly, allow us to define the underlying conflict(s) from which the need for a fictional compromise arises. In this way, fiction and literary criticism, together, assume a diagnostic function: unable to solve any real-life conflicts, they can – potentially – alert us to hitherto unrecognized social problems. And since we must first recognize a problem before we can attempt to solve it, the joyfully pointless game of fiction may at the same time have a more directly practical use. By alerting us to unacknowledged real-life contradictions, fiction and literary criticism may – just possibly – contribute in some small way to our efforts at making this world a more just, more welcoming, more homely place for all.

Leave-Taking

Let us not be deceived: as mortal creatures, we will never be fully at home in this world; no matter how strong our ties of belonging, they will always remain haunted by the repressed but ineluctable knowledge that death will one day rend them apart. At the same time, we are united in our finitude, and this shared vulnerability must serve as the starting point for any truly progressive politics.¹⁰ Moreover, as noted in the discussion of Moby-Dick in chapter one, we must distinguish between, on the one hand, our human finitude as the precondition for alienation, and, on the other, alienation proper, which to a large extent derives from social arrangements that inadequately distribute the burdens of human existence (Richard Schmitt 46–51). Unlike the existential trauma of human mortality and incompleteness, social arrangements may in fact be ameliorated, in the hope that they will one day approach more closely the ideal of

⁹ See Franco Moretti’s point that “hegemony doesn’t need purity – it needs plasticity, camouflage, collusion” (“The Novel” 177).

¹⁰ Writing from a Jungian perspective, Edward F. Edinger similarly emphasizes that “[a]ll human relationship is based on the fact of human weakness” (129).
a society that makes claims on each according to his or her abilities, and that attempts to provide for everyone according to their needs (Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program” 321). In such a society, we would still not be completely at home, but freer to belong to one another as equals who might even feel like saying, before the time comes for the parting of the ways:

It’s wonderful to be here,
It’s certainly a thrill.
You’re such a lovely audience,
We’d like to take you home with us,
We’d love to take you home.
(The Beatles, “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”)

In the meantime, for some of us at least, Marx’s ideal of a society that is more attuned to the needs and abilities of each of its members remains the most inspiring fiction of home.  

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11 "Jeder nach seinen Fähigkeiten, jedem nach seinen Bedürfnissen!" (Kritik des Gothaer Programms 282).
12 In addition to the friends I have mentioned already, I would like to thank Daniela Landert and Nicole Studer-Joho for allowing me to test even the oddest ideas during coffee breaks, lunches, and other more or less ill-suited occasions.