Wayward orphans and lonesome places: the regional reception of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*

I have half wondered whether another character might not be introduced into … [*North and South*] … the orphan daughter of an old friend in humble, retired country life on the borders of Lancashire … I know the kind of wild wayward character that grows up in lonesome places, which has a sort of Southern capacity of hating and loving (Letter from Elizabeth Gaskell to John Forster, 23 April 1854. Chapple and Pollard 281).

**I.**

In this almost throwaway remark, made during her epistolary musings to John Forster about the shape her planned new novel *North and South* might take, Gaskell touches on what has become a key debate for scholars of the mid nineteenth-century English novel: how to understand without over-simplifying its preoccupation with life outside the metropolis. The rapid pace of internal geopolitical change in Britain during this period has famously complicated attempts to define the parameters of the ‘regional novel’ that sought to respond to them; definitions tend to collapse in the face of the period’s shifting town and county boundaries, and the fluidity of its social allegiances.

This essay aims to contribute to the long-running critical debate about how mid-century ‘regional’ fiction might be defined and understood by examining new evidence about its relationship with periodical culture drawn from digitised newspapers. This was the era of new power for the provincial press: non-metropolitan periodicals had banded together and self-organised as the Provincial Newspaper Society in 1836, but their realignment as the Press Association in 1868 – still driven largely by provincial papers - is indicative of a renewed responsiveness in this period to global news disseminated by telegraph, and of a corresponding focus on realigning regionalism in a fast-developing global news economy (Brake and Demoor 501). I hope to show here the unexpected but crucial part new literary fiction concerned with regional identities played in this realignment, and in so doing to offer what I hope will be a useful adjustment to previous attempts to characterise and contextualise this elusive genre.

One of the most influential recent generic definitions the essay will address has come from Ian Duncan, for whom the ‘regional novel’ must be seen as a ‘variable’ form precisely because it is ‘historically produced,’ but for whom also distinct patterns are nonetheless both identifiable and useful. In Duncan’s model fictional regionalism as we now understand it first emerged in the late 18th and early 19th century in the nostalgic local worlds of Edgeworth and Scott, and was renewed as the radical, regionally-sited ‘Condition of England’ novel in the 1840s. This revival lost its edge during the economic stability of the 1850s and was replaced by the more conservative ‘provincial’ novel, before returning in a new form with Hardy in the tougher climate of the 1870s (322). Duncan suggests that recognising these two interlinked but subtly different subgenres of realism – the ‘regional’ and the ‘provincial’ – can help us to understand the changing relationship between lived regional identities and what Raymond Williams characterises as the novel’s fictional ‘knowable communities’, which ‘show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways’ (Williams 321). For Duncan, implicitly, the regional novel is always overtly political, the provincial novel less so, and therein lies the retrospective usefulness of the distinction: it enables us to capture some of the nuances of changing socio-historical forces. The two forms can best be differentiated, he suggests, by the specificity of their settings: ‘the region is a place in itself, the source of its own terms of meaning and identity, while the province is a typical setting defined by its difference from London.’ Thus, ‘regional settings are more closely tied to a real historical geography, locatable on the map of Victorian Britain’, while the ‘provincial country town or parish becomes the generic and typical setting of a traditional England’ (Duncan 323), an allegorical rather than a mimetic construction. The works of Elizabeth Gaskell play a key role in Duncan’s mapping of this subtle formal shift from the concrete to the emblematic: in the space of less than a decade, he suggests, ‘The Manchester of *Mary Barton* had become the offstage, allegorical Drumble of *Cranford*, and when Gaskell revisits the setting, and the industrial novel genre, in *North and South*, both the schematizing title and the abstraction of Manchester as ‘Milton Northern’ reflect the hegemony of a provincial mode’ (331).

Duncan’s insistence that ‘Historical change – modernization – is the condition through which the province or region becomes narratable’ (324) is certainly one of the clearest delineations we have of the vital, responsive role fiction played in Victorian culture, and of that culture’s keen awareness of its own capricious regional tensions. However, as Josephine McDonagh has recently pointed out, in some respects this model is overly formally prescriptive: as she suggests, in fact ‘regional and provincial novels are less distinct than Duncan would have it,’ particularly if one looks beyond the volume form of the novel, and out into its habitual serialisation in the press. McDonagh reminds us that ‘the provincial is produced out of the print culture of newspapers and magazines rather than exclusively via book production, as Duncan implies’, and it is particularly associated with women writers, and with particular networks of distribution, and particular reading communities (McDonagh 400-1). Her intervention invokes a vibrant, global mid-Victorian print culture of which books were but a part, returns us to the multiple contexts through which the ‘imagined geographies’(399) of the provincial mode were conceived, and rescues the ‘provincial’ novel from the implicit charge of conservatism. It is unfortunate, then, that her analysis has no room for a re-examination either of how ‘regional’ fiction might also be differently constituted through periodical culture, or of the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, who provides one of Duncan’s main evidentiary career trajectories from the regional to the provincial mode across the 1840s and 50s.

In fact, the relationship between Gaskell’s fiction and the press demonstrates that ‘regions’ too were ‘imagined geographies,’ and that they too were subject to contrasting and sometimes contradictory political forces, both radical and conservative. While, as McDonagh reminds us, modern periodical culture certainly meant that even those regions far from London ‘were neither isolated nor introverted, but connected to networks of communication that extended throughout and beyond national boundaries’ (404),[[1]](#footnote-1) the digital archive reveals that within that same mid-century network of newspapers and periodicals giving respectful houseroom to ‘Foreign’ news that made them part of a global network, a distinct kind of regionalism continued to flourish, particularly among the smaller regional (county level) and local (small town or district level) papers .[[2]](#footnote-2) Such papers continued to publish snippets of local news and factual articles, jokes in dialect, and general small-community news items reflecting on the quirks and strengths of various regional characteristics; and they were often also very clearly ‘writing back’ to the Southern metropole. This somewhat complicates any notion that the varied and variable industry we have tended to metonymise as ‘the periodical press’ was predominantly outward-looking; in reality it was simultaneously capable of a great deal of proud insularity; the more so, perhaps, as globalisation and modernisation began to erode local customs and their associated discursive practices.

This sense (or perhaps fantasy) of thriving regional identities performed in the press manifested itself in a variety of ways, but one of the most intriguing emerges through the reprinting of carefully selected short extracts of new novels, penned by big name authors such as Gaskell and Dickens, which foreground regional settings, characters or themes. Such extracts were not part of reviews, and did not require their authors’ permission, falling as they did between the various Copyright Acts of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which granted copyright on works such as novels but failed to mention extracts, and the Copyright Act of 1911, which explicitly stated for the first time that ‘fair dealing’ covered only ‘newspaper summary’, not extracts, and that only school books were permitted to reproduce ‘substantial extracts’ of in-copyright works.[[3]](#footnote-3) I have found no objections to these extracts in any author’s correspondence: even a seasoned rights-watcher like Dickens did not seem to see them as piracies.[[4]](#footnote-4) They are, in effect, orphans, abducted from their parent texts and made to forge a new role for themselves in entirely new surroundings populated by a motley assortment of regional articles, stories, other extracts, and jokes. Thus situated, they take on a fascinating new semantic life, and the pages of which they form an integral part become rich, intimate mosaics of local and regional self-fashioning. These offer us a rare opportunity to understand more about how regional identity was ‘staged’ in the press in mid-century, to use an evocative term invoked by rural historian Keith Snell (39), and how it may have changed over time. As I will demonstrate, far from dying out with the advent of better communication and better economic conditions, as Duncan’s claims about the rise of topographically vague and politically conservative ‘provincial’ fiction in the 1850s might lead one to expect, the practice of reprinting selected fiction extracts in the service of regional flag-waving seems to have been fairly common in many areas of the country from the late 1830s at least until the 1860s,[[5]](#footnote-5) and this suggests that regions did not readily allow their self-managed identities or their politics to be subsumed and tamed in the interests of the wider nation state, even in good times. The history that emerges from the archive is seldom so obedient, or so neat, as Duncan implies.

Throughout this period, regional and local newspaper editors seemed to recognise a need to reassure readers of the robustness and significance of their traditional communities in an era marked by the rapid erosion of cultural and spatial barriers, and - equally important - the decline of early 19th-century *laissez-faire* economics, whose replacement by successive pieces of legislation designed to protect society’s most vulnerable undeniably benefited some regions more (or more quickly) than others. As a result, the provincial press as a whole remained fully and fiercely engaged in domestic politics throughout the 1850s, 60s and 70s, and deeply interested in literary fiction, and it was largely successful in its appeal to specific communities of readers. As Rachel Matthews has recently suggested, the smaller papers in this period were ‘a ritualistic part of community life’ (1) to which readers became deeply attached. What neither she nor any other historians of the periodical press have ever fully investigated, though, is the extent to which abducted extracts from novels once played a key role in that ritual. Where previous scholarship on the practice of extracting does exist, it has tended to treat the phenomenon either as solely part of the reviewing process (Rodgers, 2018), as confined to the radical press (Feely, 2014 and LeGette, 2017), as simplified intellectual fodder for the mass market (Menke, 2014), as evidence of trans-national piracy (McGill, 2003), or as part of the culture of anthologising (Price, 2000). Of these, Price comes the closest to positing a workable theoretical model of the extract for my purposes when she contends that practices of excerpting in anthologies ‘are more than a referendum’ on the relative values of what is included and what left out; they also determine ‘who reads, and how’ (3). A critical hermeneutics that takes account of the needs of specific reading communities is of obvious value here. But this model, too, is unable to account fully for the extracting phenomenon I describe: elsewhere she states categorically that ‘For a novelist, to be excerpted was sometimes an honour … sometimes an embarrassment… but always an anomaly’ (p. 6). Yet between the 1830s and at least the late 1860s, many British newspapers that were neither radical (in the sense we would now understand it) nor interested in reviewing regularly appropriated sections of new novels for reprinting in their pages. This discovery, made possible by digital archives, provides us with an essential piece of evidence about the constitution and operation of regional and provincial novels that has been missing from previous accounts.

In what follows, I focus on the reception of two of the most representative novels of Gaskell’s career according to Duncan – the ‘regional’ *Mary Barton* (1848) and the ‘provincial’ *North and South* (1854-5) – in order to examine the relationship between these different sub-genres and the surprisingly widespread practice of excerpting. I aim to demonstrate here that when we situate mid-century fiction within periodical culture as fully as the available digitised resources will allow, we are able to refine somewhat our understanding of how their ‘regional’ or ‘provincial’ modes of address to readers (and the politics that accompany such modes) are constituted, and to recognise that their formal properties (setting, location-naming, distinction from the metropolis, and so on) only form part of their rhetorical effects. In the creative re-use of fiction by newspapers *outside* of its legitimate publication, we find different layers of available meanings that work differently at the national, local and regional levels. More importantly, we find that although both ‘regional’ novels with recognisable, named topographies and ‘provincial’ novels with metonymic, non-London settings continued to supply the raw material, each subgenre offers subtly different potentialities for a ‘staging’ of identities. The essay thus seeks to suggest ways in which we might usefully, if subtly, adjust Duncan’s model by using the culture of extracting to switch the focus from form to function and redefine the regional and provincial as literary sub-genres at the point of reception, where Williams’s fictional ‘knowable communities’ meet real ones; or, to put it another way, where Duncan’s formalist ‘what’ of novel-reading becomes Price’s socio-political ‘how’ and by whom.

My first section provides some historical context by offering an update to Angus Easson’s foundational 1991 anthology of reviews of *Mary Barton* in the leading periodicals. By analysing reviews in smaller London, regional and local periodicals and newspapers, I demonstrate that contemporary responses to fiction as they are now recoverable through the digital archive were more plural, politically engaged, and regionally partisan than we have tended to assume, and that ‘literary reviews’ often far extended their own generic boundaries, using the novel as a kind of soapbox from which to air opinions on all sorts of subjects. These rebellious reviewing practices serve to highlight the nature of the complex relationship between fiction, politics and periodical culture in this period, and they help us to understand what is at stake when provincial newspapers with an axe to grind take the very short step to non-review extracting in this same period.

I then track *Mary Barton*’s reception into the matrix of provincial cut-and-paste journalism to show what a crucial role it also played in the formation of local and regional ‘imagined communities’, to use Benedict Anderson’s still-useful term, constituted through print. My final section tests the boundaries of Duncan’s sub-generic categories ‘regional’ and ‘provincial’ by examining how well *North and South* fared in a regional cut-and-paste game to which it seems intrinsically ill-suited, given that - as her musings to Forster reveal - Gaskell’s intention was clearly to use it to investigate and problematize, not entrench, regional typologies.

**II.**

It has become something of an axiom to claim that *North and South* was ‘written to redress the perceived imbalances of *Mary Barton’*, which, according to many critical histories, had a very hostile reception (see, for example, Surridge 333, 337). Gaskell’s depiction of the masters had certainly been savaged by some members of the Manchester mill-owning class, as well as by some critics, particularly in the *Edinburgh Review* and the *British Quarterly Review* (both of which thought she was overstating the case), to the point where Gaskell admitted that ‘for a time I have been shaken and sorry’ (Chapple and Pollard 70). However, the accusations of unfairness in the depiction of master-men relations in *Mary Barton* were often motivated by highly partisan politics, and that meant the novel’s reception was far from predominantly hostile, even within Lancashire. Gaskell herself acknowledged this, revealing her own political hand as she did so: ‘Half the masters are bitterly angry with me,’ she admitted to her publisher Edward Chapman, but ‘half (and the best half) are buying it to give to their work people’s libraries’ (Chapple and Pollard 68). The positive responses increase when one looks beyond the major review periodicals. Even recent scholarly work touching on the reception of Gaskell’s novels has tended to depend on Angus Easson’s 1991 *Critical Heritage*, which focusses exclusively on the larger metropolitan papers such as the *Athenaeum*, *Examiner*, *Manchester Guardian*, and *British Quarterly Review* that were easily accessible in archives. Now, through large periodical digitisation projects such as the British Library’s, hundreds of lesser-known responses to these novels are available, and they reveal that just as many reviewers recognised and even applauded Gaskell’s aims in *Mary Barton* as censured the work - though it seems clear they were often doing so for purposes far beyond an assessment of the novel’s literary merits.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This more varied reception picture holds true even among London-based periodicals and newspapers. The conservative, anti-Catholic periodical *John Bull*, for example, felt that ‘The descriptions which the talented author of these volumes gives, of the different aspects of life in a manufacturing town, are deeply and painfully instructive; and many a useful lesson, affecting the interests and the welfare of both masters and workmen, may be gathered from this well-imagined and well-executed fiction’ (4 Nov 1848). The whiggish, anti-*Times* London paper the *Morning Chronicle* agreed, calling the novel ‘A work of singular pathos, earnestness and power … a signal literary success’(26 Dec 1848), and many other papers that have escaped Easson’s net such as the highbrow *Critic*, the free-trade *Economist*, and the non-denominational but still theologically conservative *Eclectic Review* (all London-based) were equally supportive and emphasised the novel’s ‘truthfulness’ in its depictions of working-class life.

Alongside the more objective tone of these sorts of reviews, *Mary Barton* was also appropriated as a weapon in a number of contemporary, more partisan political rivalries. The populist *Daily News* (started by Dickens as a rival to the *Morning Chronicle*), while feeling that Gaskell went too far in her depiction of the divide between masters and men and failed to acknowledge the social and familial ties between them, recognised the power and timeliness of the novel and used its review to attack its conservative political opponents, including the *Morning Post* and *The Times*:

The *Morning Post*, enveloped like a mummy in its old tradition, may affect to sneer at “Manchester men” and the “Manchester school” – the *Times* in its flippancy may alternate between worshipper and reviler, as suits its weathercock genius – but these earnest men and this liberal school constitute a power too real, popular and substantive to be shaken evermore (28 Dec 1848).

Such hostility is inexplicable unless we understand the political rivalry at its heart: this is clearly not a riposte to the *Post*’s review of *Mary Barton* from the previous month, since this is (surprisingly, if we are to believe the charge of habitual ‘sneering’ at Manchester life) positive about the novel, if a touch cynical about the limits of Manchester mill owners’ philanthropy:

We heartily approve of the benevolent purpose which actuates the author of these interesting volumes … There is no false sentimentality about him, no desire to bring the rich into contempt, while the obvious scope and tendency of the entire work is to elevate and improve the condition of the poor. The author’s feelings have evidently a favourable preponderance towards the working classes; but there is no inclination manifested to disparage or excite antagonistic feelings against the employer... We hope the work will have the effect of calling the attention of the master manufacturers to the true condition of their operatives, and of leading them to treat that much-neglected class with more kindness and consideration than hitherto have been exhibited towards them’ (24 Nov 1848).

Clearly, a discussion of this novel’s literary merits was a stalking horse for other issues, particularly various inter-metropolitan and north-south rivalries. Simultaneously, the liberal-conservative *Morning Chronicle* was seeking a cautious and conciliatory middle ground, claiming:

Neither in the substance, nor in the tone, of this work, do we find any offence against ‘political economy’, or against any ‘theory of trade’ that is current among reasonable people ... Mary Barton is not a partisan book … we are never allowed to forget, in our momentary sympathies with the party immediately under our view, that there are two sides to the question … We take leave of these volumes, and of their benevolent and gifted author, with feelings of admiration and gratitude (26 Dec 1848).

The *British Quarterly Review*, on the other hand, stuck to its free-trade, non-Conformist principles and had ‘no hesitation’ in declaring ‘much of that state of things which the tale before us exhibits to be in part greatly exaggerated, as compared with what has at any time existed, and quite out of date,’ and that the author has, in particular, done ‘great injustice to the employers’ (Feb 1848). The *Manchester Guardian*, written largely for anti-Corn Law Northerners, also, unsurprisingly given its support for the mill owners, printed an attack on the novel’s ‘one-sidedness’ in February 1849 (Easson 119-130).

Some papers abandoned the review genre altogether in favour of direct assault, using Gaskell’s novel as a blunt instrument. On 16 Jan 1849, for example, the liberal *Liverpool Mercury* ended an impassioned article titled ‘The Ten Hours Agitation Redivivus: Physical Force Philanthropists,’ which roundly condemned the MP Charles Hindley for calling for a strike, with the words:

To Mr Hindley and the seventy delegates who cheered his sentiments we would commend the perusal of “Mary Barton, a Tale of Manchester Life,” where they will find the case between the manufacturer and the operative stated in the spirit of that Christian charity, the absence of which is so glaringly manifest in the speeches of politicians calling themselves, *par excellence*, the friends of the working classes.

But such newsprint battles over organised labour movements, owners’ rights and responsibilities, and fair conditions for workers do not account for all *Mary Barton*’s appearances in the press. Much more numerous than such passing appropriations is the publication of stand-alone extracts, and the careful positioning of sections of *Mary Barton* in papers from various regions of the country demonstrates that the rivalry between papers – and between the regions and the metropolis - was centred as powerfully on the construction of imagined communities as on parliamentary politics.

In some, politics still figures, albeit subtly. The liberal *Examiner* - for which John Forster had reviewed *Mary Barton* quite kindly on 4 November 1848 (Easson 67) - reprinted the opening of Chapter VI (52-54), the section immediately following Jem Wilson’s rescue of his father and another mill hand from the Carsons’ mill fire. The extract begins ‘John Barton was not far wrong in his idea that the Messrs Carson would not be over-much grieved for the consequences of the fire in their mill …’ and the paper cannily truncates it after the narrator’s comment: ‘The vices of the poor sometimes astound us here; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree. Of this I am certain’ (28 Oct 1848). The extract thus serves to highlight the contrast between the innate goodness of the workers, and the heartlessness of the well-insured mill owners who were oblivious to the suffering the accident has caused. The point is further underscored by the extract’s title -‘Consequences of a Mill Fire in Manchester’ – which, though it comes from Gaskell’s own comment at the opening of this chapter that ‘John Barton was not far wrong in his idea that the Messrs. Carson would not be over-much grieved for the consequences of the fire in their mill,’ ramps up the political use-value of the statement by excluding all Gaskell’s other narrative ‘consequences’ such as the increasing of the workers’ hardships to drive forward the plot, and the proof that heroic Jem is a suitor worthy of Mary. On 2 November the *Fife Herald* *and Kinross, Strathearn and Clackmannan Advertiser* reprinted this same extract on a ‘Compendium’ page that also included a romantic piece on the beauties of a Scottish region (‘The Birks of Aberfeldy’ made famous by Robert Burns), and an article on ‘The Celtic and Saxon Races’ by Robert Knox M.D., whose racial hierarchy of ‘progress’ places the Scots above the Irish and Welsh, but firmly below the English. Thus situated, the *Mary Barton* extract seems to speak out for underdogs everywhere – English upper-class hegemony is the common enemy. The conservative *Bristol Mercury* – serving a largely mercantile readership - also reproduced this extract under the same title on 4 November 1848, perhaps by way of a gentle warning to its business-owning readers (or as a sly dig at the avarice of the businessmen in its rival metropolitan centre, Manchester).[[7]](#footnote-7) The reformist, Liberal *Liverpool Mercury* followed suit on 17 November, juxtaposing the extract with a piece on the ‘stout arms and stout heart’ of the English labourer who, it claimed, ought to be selected as a prime candidate for emigration (a piece reprinted from *Sidney’s Australian Hand Book*), and a snippet from the 18th-century clergyman, [William] ‘Jones of Nayland’,asserting ‘Let a man have all the world can give him, he is still miserable if he has a grovelling, unlettered, undevout mind.’[[8]](#footnote-8) The implication here that reading (even novels) is good for the souls of those ‘stout hearted’ workers could not be clearer.

In others, the motivation behind the choice of extracts seems to be rooted in class anxiety: on November 29 1848, the conservative *Blackburn Standard*, serving one of the country’s largest communities of coal miners, elected to reprint two sections in close proximity under the titles ‘The Case of Many a Unionist’ and ‘The Opium Eating of the Poor’.[[9]](#footnote-9) The first is taken from Ch. 17, in which John Barton travels to Glasgow to ask for Union support, and the kindly Job Legh, Mary’s Grandfather, pays a neighbourly visit just at the moment of departure (174). It cuts out all Mary’s emotions about her father’s situation and all the agony of John’s dilemma, and simply reproduces Job’s opinion on being forced into union membership, ending:

‘You see my folly is this, Mary. I would take what I could get; I think half a loaf is better than no bread. I would work for low wages rather than sit idle and starve. But, comes the Trades' Union, and says, 'Well, if you take the half-loaf, we'll worry you out of your life. Will you be clemmed, or will you be worried?' Now clemming is a quiet death, and worrying isn't, so I choose clemming, and come into th' Union. But I'd wish they'd leave me free, if I am a fool’ [ellipsis in original].

This is followed immediately by the ominously titled ‘The Opium Eating of the Poor’, taken from Ch. 15 (149-50), which begins: ‘And so day by day, nearer and nearer, came the diseased thoughts of John Barton …’ then continues with the narrator’s acknowledgment that ‘opium gives forgetfulness for a time … Poor wretches!’ and ends with Gaskell’s dark warning, ‘But have you taught them the science of its consequences?’ Taken together, the extracts condemn a fatal wrong-headedness emerging among the poor, here posited as being due equally to ignorance and radical politics and – moreover - unashamedly conjoining opiates and trade unionism.

A third segment is reproduced in this paper on 6 Dec 1848. Titled ‘A Factory Girl’s Housekeeping,’ it reproduces the section from Ch. 10 (107-8), in which the newly bereaved Jane Wilson reminisces about her naivety as a housekeeper during the first days of her marriage and admits to over-boiling the potatoes. Removed from its context, given a generalising title and placed immediately after a brisk article on the advantages of ironing one’s own linen while traveling abroad because English servants are ‘useless’, the extract is stripped of its warmth and humanity and becomes a warning about working-class idleness. This effect is further heightened by the close proximity to these two of another extract taken from *Fraser’s Magazine* about the slum children of Edinburgh, who, appearing ‘too ugly to be loved’, swarm like ‘locusts’ on the streets while ‘every slut of a woman carries a baby on one arm, and a bundle of herrings on the other.’ While we must remain conscious that readers were in no way obliged to read the articles in juxtaposition, they are numerous enough to be hard to avoid, and it is difficult not to feel these extracts were cynically placed to warn the working poor that sobriety, obedience and respectability are paramount social obligations, and that dire consequences are likely to attend non-compliance.

Equally common in other regional papers, though, is the reprinting of episodes selected and arranged to provide a more sympathetic and supportive view of the working classes. On 18 Nov 1848 the free trade, radical local daily the *Manchester Times* reprinted the actual scene of the factory fire (as opposed to its ‘consequences’) with the dramatic rescue of Wilson senior and another mill hand by Jem (49-51). Separated from its narrative function, it serves to glorify the stalwart Northern character, an impression consolidated by the fact that the paper inserts it prominently into the middle of a page filled with crude caricatures of national stereotypes clipped from other papers, from a disparaging article on the ‘cowardice’ of the Irish revolutionary Napper Tandy, to meditations on the ‘strangeness’ of Germans and the current ‘crude stream’ of contemporary American journalism.

Regional and local pride both come into play here. The *Manchester Times* (serving both the city of Manchester and the surrounding area, and at one time even advocating county-level self-government) got a great deal of mileage out of extracts of *Mary Barton*, invariably selecting its most positive depictions of Mancunians and Lancastrians.[[10]](#footnote-10) On 4 Nov 1848, for example, as though to counteract a prevailing prejudice about dark satanic mills, it reprinted the novel’s opening scene in sunny, carefree Green Hayes fields (7-8), following it with an article on the stark differences between the lives of the poor in various regions of America and Britain that admired the healing effects of America’s wholesome open spaces. On 7 Nov 1848 it reproduced the scene from Ch. 2 (15-16) which describes the cheerful, clean and godly contents of the Bartons’ home before Mrs Barton’s untimely death pitches the remaining characters into poverty and tragedy – a potential, if perhaps unintended, trigger for the *Blackburn Standard*’s depictions of the labouring poor as slovenly and their children as unlovable ‘locusts’ a month later. Indeed, it is tempting given the dates concerned (the space of just over a month at the end of 1848) and the overlapping circulations of these two papers (Manchester and Blackburn are a mere 25 miles apart, and the *Manchester Times* was circulated in both towns), to imagine this as a kind of rivalry over the right to identify, represent and manage the image of ‘true’ working Lancastrians.

Other, smaller, Lancashire papers were equally proactive in their ‘staging’ of local identity, and it seems significant that they somehow managed to survive in this period even if to some degree they shared the *Manchester Times’s* proud regionalism and thus, at face value, might have struggled to differentiate themselves. But they may well have captured an additional readership precisely because they were small and local; many readers took more than one paper in this period simply because one provided metropolitan, global and/or provincial information, the other more parochial news at the community level. Proof enough of the extraordinary granularity of self-fashioned identities as reflected in newsprint in this period. On 4 Nov 1848, for example, the *Preston Guardian* (published a mere 10 miles from Bolton and 33 miles from Manchester) reprinted not only the Mrs Barton section, but also the ‘Consequences of a Mill Fire’ extract, and a stand-alone piece on the unsung botany skills of what it calls ‘The Manchester Naturalists’ (taken from Ch. V, 37), which, in the novel, comically and fondly describes Job Leigh’s remarkably wide fame as an amateur botanist. Shorn of any reference to the novel’s characters, the extract (aided by its title) reads like a factual article on the intellectual pursuits of real Mancunians, clearly constituting an example of what Andrew Hobbs has called ‘local patriotism,’ which some newspaper editors in this period exploited as they ‘performed local identity in print’ to boost circulation (103).

The positive spin on Lancastrians produced by such careful editing and reprinting in these local and regional papers is sometimes countered by other, different, editorial decisions further south, many of which echoed the patronising sentiments of the *Blackburn Standard* by cutting and pasting in a different way. On 16 Nov 1848, for example, the old Tory paper *Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*,serving England’s southwestern-most counties including Devon, extracted part of the story of Job’s London jaunt, told to Mary to cheer her up (94-5). Focussing on the dialect-heavy comedy of Job dressing in a chamber-maid’s cap to quieten an orphaned baby, it is immediately preceded by an article, reprinted from the Oxfordshire *Banbury Guardian*, which pokes fun at communities that hang on to their regional accents. As a result, the familial warmth and community spirit of Job’s tale is entirely lost and what remains is an image of backward Mancunians stubbornly uttering the indecipherable (and perhaps serving as a warning to similarly linguistically unevolved Devonians).

It becomes clear from an examination of such extracts that *Mary Barton* was launched into a world not only rife with bitter political rivalries, but also with a complex range of opposing metropolitan/provincial, North/South, middle/working and various regional and local identities, and that it was somehow textually permissive of some highly wayward appropriations in the service of many or most of these. While the recognisable topography of its setting undoubtedly qualifies it as a ‘regional’ novel under Duncan’s rubric, then, its multiple appearances in these different guises suggests that ‘regional’ fiction might be more accurately defined in light of its intrinsic linguistic and thematic availability for such purposes, rather than its more obvious extrinsic formal features such as setting. Equally, the issue of period - the ‘Hungry Forties’ - might be less important than we have thought: significantly, both Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) proved unsuitable for regional identity staging (despite their proud focus on ‘lonesome places’); while the famous section of *Jane Eyre* beginning ‘women feel just as men feel’ (CH. 12) was occasionally extracted (for example in the *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* on 30 December 1847, the *Galway Mercury and Connaught Weekly Advertiser* on 1 January 1848, and the *Kentish Gazette* on 25 January 1848), it was usually under the mocking title ‘Can she Make a Pudding?’ and in the last example it directly followed a joke about the wearisome garrulousness of women. Only the *Staffordshire Advertiser* seemed to take Jane’s impassioned plea seriously, printing it under the title ‘The Employment of Women’ (24 December 1847). No other extracts of *Jane Eyre* were reprinted anywhere; and Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* was not extracted at all. Tim Dolin is right to characterise these novels as ‘radical provincial’ (201), a designation that serves to complicate Duncan’s suggestion of a formal and political teleology across this period.

Can we say the ‘regional’ novel ever shades into the ‘provincial’ in Duncan’s terms, then? Does the revolutionary mood of one decade give way to a new, softer zeitgeist in the next? To approach these questions, I turn next to Gaskell’s third novel, *North and South*, a work in which, following the humorous self-parodic pastoralism of *Cranford* and the controversial *Ruth*, she returns for the first time since *Mary Barton* to serious issues of regional identity.

**III.**

It is worth noting that while the ‘provincial novel’ *Cranford* was widely extracted in newspapers across the country, it was seen purely as the provider of humorous scenes of up-tight ageing Amazons and proud but shabby gentility, and as often attributed merely to ‘Dickens’s Household Words’ as to ‘the author of Mary Barton.’[[11]](#footnote-11) It is, in effect, simply one of many parts of Dickens’s well-known journal that made it into the papers. As for *Ruth*, beyond the reviews (which ranged from cautious approbation to outrage) there was – predictably - a deafening media silence. Neither, it seems, furnished enough of the recognisably regional for extracting in the same way as *Mary Barton*; and, as Duncan explains, *North and South*’s ‘schematizing title’ alone suggests that it might experience a similar fate. Milton Northern is not quite Manchester, Helstone is not a real village, and while both approximate certain typological qualities of the ‘north’ and the ‘south’ of England, one could not trace their characters’ footsteps on a literary pilgrimage, map in hand, no matter how hard one tried. By the early to mid-1850s, too, in Duncan’s model the provincial had already eclipsed the regional as the preferred *modus operandi* of the middle-class novel.

What did the regions it attempted to approximate make of Gaskell’s new work? Did they feel the anxious period of political neglect and misrepresentation of the Forties was over? Not entirely. Dickens made sure the novel was prominently announced in the press nationwide, and in spite of the lukewarm reception recorded by Easson in many major urban periodicals, some of the reviews in smaller papers – especially in Northern England and Scotland - were initially promising, and tended to focus in particular on the depictions of the manufacturing districts and the plight of the poor. For these papers, the novel’s politics still had real resonance. The *Caledonian Mercury* (based in Edinburgh) called it ‘a timeous and graphic daguerreotype of workmen’s strikes’ (11 Dec 1854). The Northwestern English *Carlisle Journal* had earlier used almost exactly the same language in calling Gaskell ‘that clever daguerreotypist of provincial life’ (8 Sept 1854). The *Manchester Times* got her name wrong, calling her ‘Our talented writer Mrs Gaskill’ (2 Sept 1854), but the proud possessive speaks volumes. The *Derby Mercury* (circulating in the region between Birmingham in the Midlands and Sheffield in the North) called the novel the ‘great feature’ of the current number of *Household Words*, and felt it was ‘in every way worthy of the reputation earned by’ *Mary Barton* (15 Nov 1854). The *Dundee Courier* (based on the border of Eastern Scotland) also got its facts wrong, but it liked the opening sections of the novel nonetheless: ‘The tale by Mary Burton [sic] entitled “North and South” displays a deep insight into human nature and the hand of a skillful delineator; it promises to be a tale of great interest’ (24 Nov 1854). The nearby *Fife Herald* was still more fulsome in its praise at the serial’s conclusion, recognizing that Gaskell had tried to produce a balanced portrait:

Breadth, pathos and naturalness – a deep sympathy with the poor, yet no meaningless condemnation of the rich – are the pervasive characteristics of a tale which marks out the author of “Mary Barton” as one of the leading writers of our day (18 Jan 1855).

The *Inverness Courier* (based in Scotland’s Highlands, and addressing a readership living in and around the Northernmost city in the UK) picked out the politics that it felt lay at the novel’s heart: ‘this work shows very clearly what has been proved again and again by experience, that any attempt to regulate prices and the labour market by the strong hand, is far more ruinous to the thousands who are thrown out of employment for a trifling gain, than to the units who are put only to temporary inconvenience’ (8 March 1855).

The attention the story received from the Scottish press suggests, indeed, that the ironic battle lines drawn by its ‘schematizing title’ - chosen, in fact, by Dickens, not by Gaskell, who wanted to call it *Margaret Hale* (Uglow 360) - resonated far beyond the English provinces in which it is set. The Scots focus almost exclusively, and highly sympathetically, on the Northern English scenes of poverty and the high human cost of market forces, temporarily embracing their near-neighbours across the border in unity against the common enemy – the South. Gaskell’s home territory also, again, took the story to its heart: the *Manchester Weekly Advertiser* particularly liked the ‘firm friendship’ between North and South because it was based on ‘the appreciation that arises out of better knowledge’, and it thought the novel vastly superior to Dickens’s *Hard Times* in its depiction of the manufacturing classes (Easson 338).

Several Southern papers were impressed also; though, interestingly, they pay far less attention to the depiction of Northern suffering, enjoy (or even reinforce) the novel’s regional archetypes more, and almost entirely fail to take its politics as personally or interpret them as sensitively as Northern editors. The London Whig paper the *Globe and Traveller* applauds Thornton’s callous early speech about the suffering poor ending ‘”I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character”’ (Ch. 10, 86), making the comment: ‘This is ever the feeling of the men who have a strong will, and great experience joined to a clear and penetrating intellect.’ The *Globe*’s reviewer also calls workers’ strikes ‘the great manufacturing evil of our time,’ and is content to see Margaret as ‘the personification of the south’ and Thornton as ‘representative of the north’ (16 August 1855). For the *Morning Chronicle*, too, provincial stereotypes are comfortably unruffled:

The contrast between the north and the south – between the commercial character represented by Mr Thornton and the aristocratic character represented by Margaret Hale – the manufacturing plebeianism of a northern industrial town, and the agricultural gentility of a southern county - is strongly portrayed, and the differences between working men of progress and unenterprising men content with things at a stand-still is strikingly sketched (23 July 1855).

Neither of these papers pays much attention to the steady dissolution of regional, provincial, class and gender stereotypes on which the plot depends; the *Morning Chronicle*’s review quoted above put the successful conclusion of the marriage plot down to the fact that ‘extremes are prone to meet,’ and while the *Globe* felt that ‘The reader is as much pleased when Thornton and Higgins get to understand each other, as when the former wins Margaret’s hand,’ it reads this denouement as proof that Gaskell meant simply to show the ‘short-sighted policy and moral wrong’ of organised labour (16 Aug 1855).

This is a less politically incendiary and factionalist reception picture than *Mary Barton*’s, but the regional differences are unmistakeably still there, albeit more loosely constituted. This suggests that even some ‘provincial novels’ without named settings have their uses in the performance of different regional identities. There is clearly a limit to such a novel’s regional re-use value, however: intriguingly, there appear to be no extracts of *North and South* reprinted in any newspapers in the service of regional or local identity ‘staging’ no matter how one frames the search. This fact could, as Duncan suggests, be a result of a gradual cultural shift away from fractious regionalism that was simply being mirrored in literature, as the threat of revolution receded and national fortunes improved in Britain’s ‘Golden Years’ (Porter Ch. 3), and at face value it would tend to confirm his hypothesis that this moment marks the birth of an almost twenty-year reign for the provincial novel. But the empirical evidence somewhat complicates the notion of a straightforward, socially mimetic evolution of form.

Even the reviews admitted that *North and South*’s aim to complicate regional stereotypes made it difficult to extract, particularly for purposes of regional flag-waving. Jeffrey E. Jackson has pointed out that ‘both North and South are so internally divided [in this novel] that they do not work as monolithic oppositions; a review in the *Leader* called the work a contrast between the “exceptional North” and “uncharacteristic South”’ (Jackson 69). He is right. Summing up its confusion, the *Leader* goes on to describe the book as:

an exceedingly good novel of life in – the Midland Counties. By this paradox we mean to say that the book under notice is a good novel in all the generalities that make a novel good, wherever the scene may be laid; but, as it relates to anything special to either the North or the South, or to those two Districts in contrast, it is not so successful: is, not to mince matters, a failure (Easson 333).

The *Inverness Courier* is kinder, but agrees that the intermingled web of identities in the novel means it ‘is spread over too large a surface to be illustrated by quotation, for the point is argued … in descriptions which are interwoven with the narrative as a whole’ (8 March 1855). Proof of Gaskell’s formal originality aside, this reception suggests that *North and South* was not a ‘provincial’ novel merely because its author recognised that regional needs in the 1850s had changed and responded with allegory; it is a ‘provincial’ novel precisely because - though regional needs have *not* entirely changed - like the work of the Brontës from the 1840s, it is structurally and politically unable or unwilling to serve them.

We can test this hypothesis further by exploring how other novels that Duncan would define as ‘provincial’ were received by the press during the 1850s. Throughout this period, provincial newspapers continued toreprint extracts of other novels, and other parts of *Household Words*. Most significantly of all, they also reprinted parts of Dickens’s ‘provincial novel’ *Hard Times*, untroubled by its setting in ‘Coketown’ (‘somewhere in the manufacturing districts outside London’), its unidentifiable ‘Northern’ accents, and its crude regional stereotypes, and they continued to do so in ways that suggest performative regional pride, in some locations at least, was very far from waning.

Of course, Dickens was more likely to be reprinted because his name sold copy nationwide. But the nature of *Hard Times*’s reception suggests it may have been more than a high-profile anomaly or the exception that proves the rule; the ‘staging’ of regional identity through the re-use of fiction appears to have been more dynamic, opportunistic and historically unruly than Duncan’s model can entirely accommodate. For one thing, *Hard Times* was largely dismissed by the Southern papers, despite Dickens’s fame. *Bell’s Sporting Life* was gentle enough (if oddly geographically vague), calling it ‘a somewhat melancholy, but, we fear, too true sketch of the manner in which the educational and managerial systems are carried on in the midland counties.’ But few other London or Southern regional papers agreed with *Bell*’s that the story had any merit at all. *Reynolds Newspaper* called it his ‘most undramatic, confused and incongruous tale’ (27 Aug 1854). The *Morning Post* thought, ‘Mr Dickens ought to have reflected more carefully on the new system of producing ornamental design, before he indulged in a reckless style of writing, which from its very boldness is calculated to make ill-conceived frivolity pass for firm conviction’ (15 July 1854). The *Morning Chronicle* also regretted that ‘a writer who had done so much to improve the condition of the poor and to disseminate a feeling of universal benevolence should have taken so distorted a view of economic science, and propagated such erroneous opinions of the object it was intended to serve’ (16 June 1854).

Not so the Northern papers, most of which liked *Hard Times* a lot better and reprinted sections of the story in exactly the way they had done with *Mary Barton*, situating abducted orphan snippets of Dickens’s descriptions of Northern factory town life in among their own factual reports, adverts and jokes, and thus embracing the story as one of their own. The *Leeds Mercury* re-printed ‘Mr Bitzer’s Philosophy’ about the pecuniary advantages of self-interest, clearly revelling in its irony (26 Aug 1854). The *Huddersfield Chronicle* re-printed ‘Coketown on a Summer’s day’ (3 June 1854), situating it among some other sprightly regional news which celebrates local identity; Dickens’s ironic descriptions of workers sweltering under the hot sun and a blanket of smoke and oil fumes seems to have been taken as a compliment, even forming part of how West Yorkshire readers thought of themselves (not just a ‘somewhere-outside-London’ province, then, but a proud region). *The Falkirk Herald* re-printed one of Stephen Blackpool’s most tragic speeches under the title ‘A Working Man’s Notion of a Working Man’s Grievances,’ as though what Dickens had written was taken verbatim from the heart and mouth of a working man (29 June 1854). Many Northern papers also focussed with some relish on the novel’s depiction of the unscrupulous MP James Harthouse and speculated on the identity of his real-life counterpart: there were apparently few things that could draw the various branches of the provincial media together as successfully as a satirical attack on Westminster, which, even in a period of relative prosperity, it continued to feel failed to represent regional interests and concerns.

Clearly, the press was easily able to carve regional motifs out of some of the novels Duncan’s model would formally designate ‘provincial’, effortlessly reducing the metonymical to the literal through the embedding of extracts in a newsprint montage that encouraged locally specific interpretations. But there is, just as clearly, a limit to some novels’ potential for cannibalisation by different regional communities in this way, and the differences don't always adhere to any attempt at neat periodicity: *North and South* and Charlotte and Emily Brontës’ first novels are three such examples, and there are many others.

I suggest that this highly relative re-use potential might help us to understand a little better the socio-political tensions attendant on the sometimes trickily diaphanous generic boundary between the ‘regional’ and the ‘provincial’ novel. The distinctions between these two related subgenres are clearly useful; but Duncan’s twin foci on setting as a definitive measure, and on a related and historically constituted politics of form, may be less so. While many a novel might have traits of both subgenres as far as the periodical press was concerned, as I have shown, it may be that it is where the potential for its re-use as part of a performance of regional identity fails, that the true abstraction of the ‘provincial novel’ comes into being. That this moment is historically unstable should not, by now, come as a surprise; but we can learn a great deal by tracing the footprints its erratic progress has left in a periodical press that was as responsive to the fraught relationship between local needs and national interests as the mid-Victorian novel itself.

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1. The term ‘periodical culture’ is used to refer to the publishing of all ephemeral forms of print media, from daily newspapers to ‘quality’ quarterlies since, as the editors of the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* explain, they are ‘part of a single industry’ (v). However, historians of print media tend to differentiate between ‘newspapers’ – daily or weekly publications - and ‘periodicals’ – monthlies or quarterlies. I adhere to this latter terminology. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have adopted to Rachel Matthews’s useful definitions: ‘National titles are here defined as those headquartered in London but circulating across Britain ... [Provincial] signifies those titles which are based outside of the capital … [and the term is subdivided into the] ‘regional’ press which circulates across larger geographical areas such as English counties, … [and the] ‘local press’ … largely understood to focus on a town or district level’ (2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Copyright Act of 1911, Section II.iv <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/1-2/46/section/2/enacted> [accessed 22.9.2017) and <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1911/dec/04/copyright-bill#S5LV0010P0_19111204_HOL_18> [accessed 6.10.2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Reprinting the whole novel was another matter, and astute authors knew their rights: Dickens used his publisher to challenge the *Belfast Mercury* which, throughout the spring of 1854, was reprinting the whole of *Hard Times* without his authority. The paper responded waspishly to the resulting interdiction: ‘We shall not, therefore, publish any more of it, and are not sorry that we have thus got rid of what was growing tedious.’ The *Belfast Mercury*, 12 May 1854. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Eighteenth-century examples of extracting are fairly widespread, but they appear to be less regionalist than their nineteenth-century counterparts. See Ronan Deazley, *On the Origin of the Right to Copy: Charting the Movement of Copyright Law in Eighteenth Century Britain* *1695-1775*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A brief caveat: digital resources such as the ones I draw on here must be used advisedly, since, as Laurel Brake has reminded us, we are always at the mercy of critical trends, funding pots and the limits of human imaginations that re-cast print history in particular ways (Brake 225). This caveat aside, as I have said elsewhere, I believe that digitised titles have now reached sufficient numbers to enable us to draw some useful conclusions (Hammond, 2015). All extracts are reproduced here with kind permission of The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/bristol-mercury> [accessed 22/9/2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/liverpool-mercury> [accessed 22/9/2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/blackburn-standard> [accessed 22/9/2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/manchester-times> [accessed 22 September 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, ‘Genteel Poverty’, *Monmouthshire Beacon*, Saturday 27 December 1851; ‘Genteel Poverty’, *Derbyshire Courier*, Saturday 20 December 1851; ‘Cranford and its Ladies’, *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, Wednesday 17 December 1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)