

Provincial

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TO be provincial is to mistake one's narrow milieu for the world: it is to embark on an error of scale. Yet as a literary-historical setting—in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, a chronotope—the provinces can also be construed as a homeland (whether mourned, fled, imagined, or some combination); they are often gendered as spaces of reproductive fertility and maternal care.

Victorian literature testifies to this contradictory status. On one hand, the provinces are static, barren backgrounds to action, characterized by what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “a purely idyllic relationship of time to space.”¹ In the tradition of the bildungsroman, the provinces exist only to be left behind, with protagonists’ “longing for modernity,” as Jed Esty has argued, spatialized “in their trek from the province to the metropolis.”² On the other hand, the “provincial novel” is a well-recognized subgenre of literary realism, one that, from *Cranford* (1851–53) to *Middlemarch* (1871–72), takes on a synecdochal relationship to Englishness itself. Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* famously historicized the yearning for a once-stable, once-idyllic countryside over the longue durée. In Ian Duncan’s more recent account, the provincial (unlike the regional) novel is defined “more simply by its difference from the metropolis”; its consolidation in the 1850s imbued “an earlier, minor and idyllic provincialism with the critical ambition of national representation” initially developed on Irish and Scottish peripheries.³ Building on Duncan’s taxonomic approach, other critics have recently turned with renewed attention to provincial literature’s imbrication with national and imperial networks. Josephine McDonagh, for instance, has analyzed the transatlantic circulation of Mary Mitford’s village tales as a portable localist idiom adaptable across various cultural contexts, including Britain’s overseas colonies.⁴ “Provincialisms” were also, in the Victorian period, a linguistic phenomenon, with dialect dictionaries, linguistic societies, and historical and comparative philology deployed to study

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(and sometimes contain) provincial difference.⁵ In a more abstract register, John Plotz has compared the “semi-detached” nature of the provincial novel to the “semi-detached” experience of reading itself.⁶

Linguistic and spatial, literary and journalistic, the provinces offered a powerful origin story and geographical core within Britain’s expanding empire.⁷ Yet what Williams called a “knowable community” is far from an unproblematic descriptor of the provincial novel: the knowable community, in his words, was a “first way of thinking,” a *problem* of mediation across diverse social realities.⁸ As part of a recent effort to “transnationalize” Victorian studies, Sharon Marcus has asked what Williams’s oeuvre might look like “if those books took Europe rather than England as their subjects?”⁹ France has its own binary Paris/province division, taking shape most notably in Honoré de Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine* (1829–48); a more comparative account might tackle the Brazilian sertão, the Argentine pampas, or the Russian provinces of Gogol and Turgenev. If we shift from a taxonomic approach (defining “the provincial novel”) to a heuristic one, the provincial becomes a conceptual tool for interrogating, more generally, the spatial hierarchies of capitalist and colonial modernity.

For the early Marx, “the most important division of material and mental labour is the separation of town and country.”¹⁰ Marxist theory’s notion of combined and uneven development has served as a powerful motif in critiquing not only the subordination of the countryside but also the enforced dependencies of colonialism.¹¹ And it finds an aesthetic and epistemological analogue in Ernst Bloch’s notion of non-contemporaneity (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*), which has offered fertile ground for recent critical studies of juggled temporalities and literary form.¹²

Thomas Hardy described his own semi-imagined, semi-historical Wessex as an Anglo-Saxon “anachronism” but also as “a modern Wessex of railways . . . and National school children.”¹³ Hardy’s *Tess* grasps something like this at work in the various kinds of distances—psychical, economic, geographic—that divide Talbothays Dairy from London, joined by a train whose “fitful white streak of steam at intervals upon the dark green background denoted intermittent moments of contact between their secluded world and modern life.”¹⁴ “Fitful” and “intermittent” at best, such points of connection suggest an unstable, uneven sense of place, where some boundaries collapse while others are all too rigidly maintained, and where mobility can be easier for commodities than for characters. Rather than attempting to fix Victorian literature’s provinces onto a map, we might instead take a

cue from critical and feminist approaches to cartography that interrogate “acts of mapping” at various scales.¹⁵ As dynamic, contested terrains, the provinces—perhaps even more than the modern city—are where the spatial and temporal dislocations of modernity come into clearest view. Scrutinizing the hierarchical divisions of scale even within the Victorian literary provinces thus offers a way to “provincialize Europe” in rather another sense, though in much the same spirit, of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique.¹⁶ While literary works are adept at jumping scales, they can also testify to the stubborn viscosity, the nonscalability, of heterogeneous forms of life.¹⁷ As an approach to scalar literary analysis, the provincial offers a way to examine uneven geographies beyond the text, as well as those assembled within it.

NOTES

1. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 229.
2. Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.
3. Ian Duncan, “The Regional or Provincial Novel,” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by William Baker and Kenneth Womack (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 322.
4. Josephine McDonagh, *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People, 1815–1876* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
5. See Linda C. Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), esp. 3–45.
6. John Plotz, “Virtual Provinces, Actually,” in *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience Since Dickens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 102–21.
7. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 2012); for more recent approaches to the pressures of geopolitical distance on literary form, see Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Nathan K. Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 170.
9. Sharon Marcus, "Same Difference? Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2003): 683–84.
10. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 5:64.
11. Timothy Brennan, "On the Image of the Country and the City," *Antipode* 49, no. S1 (2017): 34–51.
12. See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
13. Thomas Hardy, *Personal Writings: Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences*, edited by Harold Orel (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 9.
14. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891; New York: Penguin, 2003), 186.
15. See Doreen Massey, "Questions of Locality," *Geography* 78, no. 2 (1993): 142–49; and Denis Cosgrove, "Introduction: Mapping Meaning," in *Mappings*, edited by Denis Cosgrove (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 2.
16. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
17. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (2012): 505–24; as well as Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale," *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 55–81.

