II

*Testing the Model: Interventions in Texts*
Engaging Strategies, Earnestness, and Realism:

Mary Barton

In 1848, *intervention* would have had no connotations of anything as rarified as narrative theory. In the language Elizabeth Gaskell spoke, the term referred to one of two controversial alternatives for facing the economic transitions affecting the British working class. Confronting the rapidly widening gap that the industrial revolution was establishing between "masters" and "men," mid-nineteenth-century political theorists debated the advisability of a laissez-faire system that would allow the free market to expand uncontrolled, taking its victims where it would, versus the policy of "interventionism." As Joseph Kestner has pointed out (8), the question of whether the state ought to intervene in economic matters that were adversely affecting the lives of the working poor preoccupied several women who were writing protest novels at the time, among them Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Tonna.

Kestner argues that the rise of the "novel with a purpose" reflects women novelists' attempts to intervene in the process of political decision making. As he puts it, "writing social fiction allowed women, although not enfranchised, to participate in the legislative process" (13). Kestner is concerned (as was Robert A. Colby before him) with the "story" in these novels-with-a-purpose: the idea of narrative intervention enters his discussion no more than it would, perhaps, have entered Gaskell's own description of her novelistic goals and techniques, had she ever attempted such a description. Gaskell did favor the notion that the state should intervene in
the establishment of economic stability for the working class, but—as a look at the preface to Mary Barton will reveal—her interests lay not so much with the details or results of legislation, as with the conviction that the poor would benefit from recognizing any sympathetic gesture that the middle and ruling classes could extend to them. Gaskell's narrative interventions, then, are related to her adherence to interventionism. Both would function primarily, from her perspective, as signals to the working poor, signs that would indicate a middle-class interest in their plight. The writing of Mary Barton therefore embodies two kinds of "gendered interventions": a woman's means of participating in public policy formation was to write a novel, and Gaskell's means of attempting to ensure that her first novel would serve its purpose was to employ earnest, engaging narrative techniques among the realist conventions she adopted.

That a social-problem novel should be realistic to be effective has been taken for granted by commentators on the genre from Louis Cazamian to Kestner, who have tended to emphasize novelists' reliance on documentary fact as the primary indicator of the verisimilitude of these texts. On this scale of realism, Mary Barton has often ranked rather low, because of the plot's notorious shift from depiction of the everyday lives of Manchester factory workers to a sensationalist (some have called it Gothic) tale of seduction, murder, and happy-ending romance escapism. To look at this novel in terms of plot is not to see it as entirely or consistently realistic, for despite a conscientious depiction of the circumstances surrounding the rise and fall of the Chartist movement, and a careful representation of the sights and sounds of life in Manchester, the story of Mary Barton (and I use "story" here in the narratological sense, to include the characterization and scenic setting as well as the events in the fiction) diverges in many respects from verisimilitude. Gaskell's narrative discourse, however, reveals a concern with the "real" that establishes a pattern for engaging narrative in nineteenth-century novels.

Throughout Mary Barton, the consistently engaging narrative interventions reveal Gaskell's attempt to collapse the intra- and the extradiegetic, to bring together the worlds within and outside the fiction, as though both existed on the same plane of reality. Gaskell's is the definitively engaging narrator, in that she frequently signals a precise identification of her narrative "I" with the actual author and her narrative "you" with the actual reader. The conflation of the real and the textual occurs in three
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different phases of *Mary Barton*’s writing: first, in Gaskell’s decision to write a social-problem novel as a means of reconciling herself to loss and suffering in her own life; second, in her declared intention to stir real readers’ sympathy for the poor, thus potentially improving the morale of actual working-class people; and finally, in her narrator’s reliance on engaging interventions. In each of these respects, Gaskell’s first novel represents an attempt to establish a connecting route between the real and fictive worlds, a bridge of sympathy which her strategies encourage the actual reader to cross in responding to the fiction and carrying that response over into extra-diegetic life.

The circumstances in which Gaskell decided to write her first novel are very familiar to Gaskell scholars, and have provided introductory material for many critical essays on *Mary Barton*. By the summer of 1846, Elizabeth Gaskell had written some stories for her own and her children’s amusement and for her clergyman-husband’s use in teaching courses for working people in Manchester. She had given no thought to publishing her stories: her energies were absorbed by her roles as mother and minister’s wife. But in August of that year, her fourth child and only son, Willie, died of scarlet fever when he was only ten months old. Her husband suggested that she should try writing a novel, “to turn her thoughts from the subject of her grief” (Gerin 74). Elizabeth Gaskell’s preface to *Mary Barton*, written for the first, 1848 edition, assures her audience that she wrote the novel out of her personal need for distraction, as well as her interest in the working people of Manchester, and not—as her contemporaries presumably might have suspected—to exploit the topicality of the social upheavals then occurring in Europe.

Despite being shielded by anonymity on the novel’s title page, Gaskell shrinks from directly mentioning her son’s death in the preface, which begins: “Three years ago I became anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to) to employ myself in writing a work of fiction.” She goes on to explain that she had originally thought of diverting herself by writing a historical romance:

Living in Manchester, but with a deep relish and fond admiration for the country, my first thought was to find a frame-work for my story in some rural scene; and I had already made a little progress in a tale, the period of which was more than a century ago, and the place on the borders of Yorkshire, when I
bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided. I had always felt a deep sympathy with the care-worn men. (37)

Imaginative escape to remote times and to places reminiscent of her happy childhood in the countryside could not answer her need for consolation. Struck by the unhappiness of the working people whose prevailing melancholy corresponded at this time so closely to her own, she determined to write of the “romance” in their lives, but nonetheless, in choosing a subject and setting so vividly present to her everyday existence, Gaskell was following an impulse toward realism.

What Gaskell imagined to be the possible romance in the lives of the urban poor turns out to include, as critics have noted, elements of plot and imagery that are as far from being realistic as her historical romance might have been, particularly the melodramatic framework of coincidence, murder, and intrigue over which the story of Mary Barton is stretched. But the romance also includes portrayals of working people’s emotions about more common occurrences, such as the loss of children. One of John Barton’s primary motives for murdering Harry Carson, the mill owner’s son, is his own long-festering anguish from having watched his infant son die of scarlet fever, unaided by any of the food or medicine that a tiny portion of the mill owners’ profits could have supplied. By giving John Barton a basis for sorrow that was very similar to her own (and one that was common even among middle-class families, in that age of high infant mortality), and by making Barton’s situation still more miserable than hers because of his poverty, Gaskell gave herself and her middle-class readers personal ground for sympathy with the character. Building on her imagination’s version of their common loss, Gaskell expands her sympathy for John Barton to encompass the whole realm of the working man’s frustration over misery that he is helpless to abate.

Writing a novel could not restore her son or abolish scarlet fever: that part of Gaskell’s sorrow, like Barton’s, was indelible. But she apparently believed that her novel could “intervene” in the unhappy lives of the poor, not so much by changing the circumstances causing their grief, as by inspiring her “more happy and fortunate” readers to feel and to express sympathy with the workers. The preface makes explicit her belief that such
sympathy could lighten the emotional load that was pressing the lower classes into desperation and violence. Claiming to know "nothing of Political Economy," Gaskell emphasizes that she wished to work changes not on a political, but on a personal scale. Many critics, dismissing this prefatory confession as irrelevant to the text proper, have gone to great lengths to explicate the political ideology that the novel seems to endorse; as Elaine Jordan has shown, however, the political stance of *Mary Barton* is notably confused and confusing. If we take the preface seriously, we can see that Gaskell's hopes for social "intervention" had very little to do with details of public policy. As Gaskell puts it, she had become

anxious . . . to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case. If it be an error, that the woes . . . pass unregarded by all but the sufferers, it is at any rate an error so bitter in its consequences to all parties, that whatever public effort can do in the way of legislation, or private effort in the way of merciful deeds, or helpless love in the way of widow's mites, should be done, and that speedily, to disabuse the work-people of so miserable a misapprehension. (37–38)

Interestingly, she does not urge legislation, merciful deeds, and widow's mites on the grounds that such actions could improve the physical living conditions of the working poor. Her primary concern is that the middle and upper classes should make these gestures as signals of sympathy to the working class. The reasoning of the preface implies that this novel's function should be to move middle- or upper-class readers to perform philanthropic actions demonstrating compassion, regardless of the effect of these actions on the daily lives of the poor. Keeping this in mind, we can see that a critical analysis of the novel's political content, such as Jordan's, although it demonstrates the interplay of competing ideologies and literary genres in the text, does not necessarily reveal a fundamental contradiction to the declared goal of the novel. The introduction of confusion, romance, and Gothicism can be seen as part of *Mary Barton*'s machinery for stirring actual readers' emotions to the point where sympathy for the characters might spill over the border between the actual and imagined worlds—as did Gaskell's own.
The redeeming power of sympathy is, accordingly, a dominant theme in *Mary Barton*, in both the novel’s realistic and its melodramatic sections. The novel does indeed fall into these two distinct parts, although (as Jordan has argued) elements of Gothicism surface in the first part, foreshadowing the sensationalist mode of the second. The first seventeen chapters recount the family histories, daily joys and disappointments, and ordinary loves and deaths among the Barton family and their neighbors, the Wilsons and the Leghs. This part of the narrative includes some political debate among the working-class characters, as John Barton turns the pain resulting from the losses of son, wife, and job into union activism and feelings of re­crimination against the masters. John’s disappointments culminate in Parliament’s refusal to support the Chartist demands, which he, with high hopes, had helped carry to London. The details of the book’s first half lead plausibly enough to John Barton’s final desperation. The climax comes when Harry Carson, the son of Barton’s employer, refuses to listen seriously to the requests of a delegation of his father’s workers. Young Carson further offends the delegation by drawing caricatures of their haggard faces on a bit of paper which he tosses carelessly into the fire as he leaves the room. The unhappy men retrieve the paper and denounce the cartoonist. Speaking to the other members of the delegation, John Barton reviles the masters, who cannot comprehend that the men need more wages, not for luxury, but simply for the essentials of life. He particularly condemns the extravagant and jolly Harry Carson: “Now I only know that I would give the last drop o’ my blood to avenge us on yon chap, who had so little feeling in him as to make game on earnest, suffering men!” (239). With this, the delegation decides to assassinate young Carson, and the novel begins its eleven-chapter journey into melodrama. True to Gaskell’s stated thematic purpose, what finally drives Barton over the edge of desperation is young Carson’s indif­ference to the men’s suffering; after Harry’s murder, sympathy and for­giveness become the final saving grace both for Barton and for Harry’s stricken father.

*Mary Barton* reinforces its theme with the narrative “redundancy” that Susan Suleiman has identified as a characteristic of the *roman à thèse*: the story repeatedly depicts the power of sympathy dramatically, while the narrative discourse contains many assertions that underline the relevance of
sympathy to the novel’s point. Gaskell constructs the story so as to provide numerous models for the behavior she hopes to inspire in readers; the admirable poor people in this novel all practice sympathy and forgiveness. In the opening scenes, Mary Barton’s pregnant mother has recently lost her sister Esther to what the Bartons assume must be a life of prostitution. This blow, which later leads to Mrs. Barton’s death during a miscarriage, depresses Mary’s mother a great deal, but does not prevent her from entertaining family friends at a tea party. When Alice Wilson, a very old, well-meaning, but absentminded woman, proposes a toast “to absent friends,” Mrs. Barton “put down her food, and could not hide the fast dropping tears. Alice could have bitten her tongue out” (53). This blunder breaks up the party, and prompts “the self-reproaching Alice” to apologize to Mrs. Barton, who surprises and delights her by embracing, forgiving, and blessing her, promptly and openly. “Many and many a time, as Alice reviewed that evening in her after life, did she bless Mary Barton for these kind and thoughtful words” (54). A simple instance of compassion suspended and renewed among friends, the scene illustrates the healing power that sympathy and forgiveness can wield in the fictional world Gaskell depicts, even when they can make no material difference in the unhappy situation.

As the action becomes more involved with the dramatic repercussions of Harry Carson’s murder, the instances of sympathy and forgiveness take on more significant thematic resonances. Just as Harry Carson’s lack of sympathy for the working men inspires their plot to kill him, John Barton’s depleted store of sympathy for the masters enables him to carry out the deed. While Mary travels to Jem’s trial in Liverpool and remains in the port city in a catatonic state after the trial, John Barton wastes away in guilt at home in Manchester. After Mary and Jem return, her father calls them and Harry Carson’s father together and confesses to the crime, asking Carson to forgive him. Not until he witnesses Carson’s anguish at this moment does Barton look past his own guilty misery and sense of loss to see the effects of his act. He cries out to Carson,

“My hairs are gray with suffering, and yours with years—”

“And have I had no suffering?” asked Mr. Carson, as if appealing for sympathy, even to the murderer of his child.

And the murderer of his child answered to the appeal, and groaned in spirit over the anguish he had caused. (434)
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The point of the episode is to demonstrate Gaskell's earnest conviction that compassion can break down class barriers and the desire for revenge: "The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for little Tom . . . The mourner before him was no longer the employer . . . no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor, and desolate old man" (435). The spectacle of Barton's compassionate penitence at first appears to have no impact on the "desolate old man," who initially resists the appeal. But after witnessing a minor incident of trespass and forgiveness among two children on the street and after reviewing the Gospel account of Christ's plea that "they know not what they do," Carson joins Barton in sympathy and forgiveness. In a scene that is exuberantly melodramatic—which renders it no less consistent with or necessary to the novel's project—John Barton dies in the arms of his murder victim's father. Victimizer and victim come full circle, breaking the perpetuation of the cycle, each by recognizing his affinity with the other (an affinity that the novelist makes obvious even in the orthography of their names) and by acknowledging his own responsibility for the pain in the life of the other.

The novel's movement from realistic situations of distress into sensationalist excess finds a parallel in Gaskell's own emotional activity in writing the book. She could identify with the suffering of John Barton and his wife over the loss of their son, but she elaborates upon that pain, giving John heartrending memories about the circumstances of the boy's death: not only had little Tom, like Willie Gaskell, contracted scarlet fever, but he had become ill at a time when his father was laid off from work. Tantalized by the doctor's suggestions that luxurious foods and comfortable living might save the boy, John had lurked around a food shop contemplating a robbery, only to see his former master's wife come out of the store laden with extravagant purchases for a party. The narrator explains that John would have considered stealing food "no sin," a conclusion she implicitly endorses through the "ethic of care" that Carol Gilligan has identified at the core of feminine morality. Having no opportunity, however, John had returned home "to see his only boy a corpse" (61). In imagining this excruciating experience for John Barton, Gaskell was adding many layers of frustration, helplessness, envy, and revenge to the loss that she herself had felt so keenly.
The entire novel follows a similar train of amplification, moving from the simple moments of hurt among friends, to the more profound but still familiar pain of losing children, mothers, wives, and jobs, to the sudden, sweeping blow of Harry Carson's murder and all its sensational consequences for the young heroine. The opportunities for the characters to sympathize with one another—and for the willing reader to join them—become almost grotesque in their number and scale. If this is the "romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed [Gaskell] daily" in Manchester, it is not all that far from the outlandish story she might have set a century earlier and hundreds of miles away from that city.

Still, as the preface and many of the narrative interventions make clear, Gaskell took the difference between historical romance and social-problem novel seriously. If the plot exaggerates the characters' claims on the sympathies of the narratee, it does so for an explicitly rendered purpose. As the narrator remarks near the end of the tale:

There are stages in the contemplation and endurance of great sorrow, which endow men with the same earnestness and clearness of thought that in some of old took the form of Prophecy. To those who have large capability of loving and suffering . . . there comes a time in their woe, when they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual case into a searching inquiry into the nature of their calamity, and the remedy (if remedy there be) which may prevent its recurrence to others as well as to themselves. (459)

"If remedy there be": again, we are urged to recognize that Gaskell's novel endorses no particular political solution for the "calamity." The context of this thesis-statement within the text is Mr. Carson's gradual conversion to compassionate awareness of what John Barton has lived through; like Carson's spiritual transformation, the remark constitutes a gesture toward significance that would extend beyond the text. To inspire actual readers to that state of "earnestness and clearness of thought" where "they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual" woes, to move readers to emulate her activity in identifying John Barton's suffering with her own—and her characters' activity in recognizing one another's unhappiness as a kindred link among them—Gaskell employs numerous engaging narrative interventions. Her narrator circumvents the difficulty of rendering a melo-
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dramatic plot realistic by encouraging the narratee to acknowledge the affinities between the story and the literally real. The first of her rhetorical moves in this direction is the narrator's consistent identification of her "I" with the actual author; the corollary move is her implication that "you," the narratee, stands for each actual reader.

THE ENGAGING NARRATIVE "I"

An essential characteristic of Gaskell's engaging narrator, then, is her candid and consistent depiction of herself holding a pen, creating the book. Through repeated references to her act of writing, she makes herself a concrete presence in the book; she is the narratee's friend and correspondent, who can be depended upon for generous interpretations of the characters' motives and of the narratee's own motives as well. She speaks directly, innocent of any self-consciousness about the danger of breaking into the illusion of reality her scenes might create. For instance, when Alice asks Mary's friend Margaret to sing "The Owdham Weaver," Gaskell's narrator shifts from her depiction of the scene in Alice's room to an acknowledgment of her own narrative responsibility to fill in the gaps in the narratees' information:

> With a faint smile, as if amused at Alice's choice of a song, Margaret began.
> Do you know "The Oldham Weaver"? Not unless you are Lancashire born and bred, for it is a complete Lancashire ditty. I will copy it for you. (71)

The narrator proceeds to do exactly what she proposes, and then comments on the tone of the old "ditty." Fearing that "to read it, it may, perhaps seem humorous," she assures her narratee that "to those who have seen the distress it describes, it is a powerfully pathetic song" (73). As a transition back to the narrative, she declares that Margaret has witnessed such distress, and continues with a description of Margaret's rendition of the ballad. An intervention like this, one of the many overjustifications that Gaskell's narrator employs, serves two strategic functions: it suggests a narratee with whom the vast majority of the actual readership (every reader who is not "Lancashire born and bred") can identify, and it depicts the narrator as a person writing, a person identified with, if not identical to, the author.
On other occasions the narrator similarly pictures herself at her writing desk. Explaining the interest that amateur botany holds for some Manchester workmen, she mentions a biography that describes their scientific enthusiasms: "If you will refer to the preface to Sir J. E. Smith's Life (I have it not by me, or I would copy you the exact passage), you will find that he names a little circumstance corroborative of what I have said" (76). *Mary Barton*, like all novels, is full of implicit intertextuality, especially in its allusions to other literary texts and traditions. However, a specific reference to another text, the biography of Sir. J. E. Smith, in the form of a citation lends an unusual element of the real to this fiction. Because Smith's biography actually exists, and because Gaskell's narrator acknowledges that she could copy the passage for the convenience of the narratee, the intervention places both the narrator and the biography on a plane of existence where the narratee exists, too. The plane where the biography exists is the actual world; thus, by implication, the narrator and narratee exist there as well, in the forms of the author and the reader. In frequent comments on her way of telling the story, Gaskell reinforces the same implication. For example, she draws attention to her role as the source of the narratee's information when she confesses to having omitted pertinent information from her narrative, saying, "I must go back a little to explain the motives which caused Esther to seek an interview with her niece" (288). The identification between narrator and author is thus reinforced.

This narrator who manifests no desire to screen herself from the reader's attention could simply have been a sketchily realized fictional character, such as Mary Smith of *Cranford*, except that she gives herself no fictive name or circumstances; on the contrary, she places herself specifically in the author's particular situation. Describing the miserable, lonely night in Manchester that Mary Barton endures after realizing that her father has murdered Harry Carson, Gaskell comments on how little sympathy the "outward scene" of the city seems to manifest for Mary's "internal trouble":

All was so still, so motionless, so hard! Very different to this lovely night in the country in which I am now writing, where the distant horizon is soft and undulating in the moonlight, and the nearer trees sway gently . . . and the rustling air makes music among their branches, as if speaking soothingly to the weary ones, who lie awake in heaviness of heart. The sights and sounds of such a night lull pain and grief to rest. (303, emphasis added)
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The romantic argument on the surface of this intervention—that nature's beauties, unavailable to Mary in the city, can soothe internal pain in those who have access to them—does not contribute much to the narratee's understanding of Mary's state of mind, unless the actual reader happens to have experienced the soothing power the passage describes. What the intervention does, though, is create for the narratee a vivid picture of the author herself, seated comfortably in the country somewhere, gazing out a window and feeling a strong sense of contrast between Mary's circumstances and her own. Detailing the "sights and sounds of such a night," the narrator implies that her own "pain and grief" can be consoled by them. Whether or not the picture is biographically accurate (that is, whether or not Elizabeth Gaskell really wrote these lines in the circumstances she depicts), the intervention draws the narratee's attention to the figure of an author who, like the actual reader, lives in much more comfortable circumstances than the unfortunate characters do.

A later passage hints at the source of this narrator's unnamed grief, in an unusually personal intrusion. The paragraph describes Mary's fears that Jem's mother, who has fallen asleep after learning that she must testify against her adored son at his murder trial, may be driven mad "in the horrors of her dreams" (327). The disjointed prose mirrors Mary's own mental distress, but the long parenthetical interruption speaks with an "I" that cannot be Mary's.

What if in dreams (that land into which no sympathy nor love can penetrate with another, either to shake its bliss or its agony,—that land whose scenes are unspeakable terrors, are hidden mysteries, are priceless treasures to one alone,—that land where alone I may see, while I yet tarry here, the sweet looks of my dead child)—what if, in the horrors of her dreams, her brain should go still more astray? (327, emphasis added)

Mary Barton has no child, alive or dead: the "I" is the narrator (who in this instance exactly resembles Gaskell herself) recalling dream visions of her own dead baby. The very personal pronoun here serves a double function in the passage. Not only can it be read as the narrator's specific reference to herself, but it also resembles the "I" of a lyric poem or a folk song: a persona with whom most readers or listeners can sympathize and identify in a general way. In this second sense the narrator's use of the pronoun "I"
parallels her use of "one" in the preceding description of dreams as "priceless treasures to one alone." In shifting from that third-person observation to the personally voiced "I," however, the narrator once again prompts the narratee to attend to the presence of an author.

In addition to these personal reminders of Gaskell's presence behind the pen, her engaging narrator often refers to her own opinions and impressions, giving the reader a strong sense of the personality that narrates the novel. The narrator openly displays her sympathy with the working people, her opinions about their plight, and her personal experience with them, citing these as her authority for writing the book. She is sometimes very definite in her assertions. She is positive, for example, that the poor have reasons to be dissatisfied, and that they deserve better. In one intervention that interrupts the story, she introduces a long catalogue of miserable conditions with an impassioned testimony that she has heard it all first-hand: "And when I hear, as I have heard, of the sufferings and privations of the poor . . .—can I wonder that many of them, in such times of misery and destitution, spoke and acted with ferocious precipitation?" (126–127). One goal of the novel is to ensure that, having read it, actual readers will also "have heard of the sufferings and privations of the poor."

Trying to circumvent possible objections that the picture she presents is unrealistically distorted, the narrator is particularly anxious to demonstrate her own distance from the conclusions her characters draw about their condition. While emphasizing her awareness that impoverished people have a limited understanding of economic conditions, she insists that the poor merit sympathy nevertheless. After describing John Barton's feeling that "he alone" must suffer from bad times, she interpolates a comment: "I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight" (60). This aside, like the narrator's depiction of her own serenely comfortable surroundings, functions to establish the narrator and narratee as middle-class observers who regard the working man as an unfortunately inferior "other." Understandably, the passage has been cited as evidence of the narrator's self-satisfied condescension to the class she writes about: David Smith observes, on the strength of this passage, that Gaskell "can never escape the patronizing tone of the Health Visitor" (103). The rhetoric of the passage does
condescend to its object (the working man), but functions to solidify the link between the speaking subject (the narrator’s “I”) and the intended receiver of the text. The “I know . . . and I know” construction works in two ways: in second-guessing the narratee’s objection to Barton’s feeling, it sketches out the narratee’s middle-class assumptions and demonstrates the narrator’s familiarity with those assumptions; at the same time, the construction of the intervention establishes the narrator’s authority as an even-handed, open-minded figure who speaks on behalf of the working class without belonging to it. The strategy enables her to follow up this intervention with confident assertions such as: “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” (96).

 Whereas the content of such interventions places a barrier of difference between the middle-class narrator and narratee and the working-class characters, Gaskell’s narrative stance simultaneously operates to overcome that barrier by insisting that characters, narrator, and narratee all populate the same world, the “real world” of nineteenth-century England. The engaging narrator takes advantage of her confident, assertive side by commenting about the characters as if she were discussing real people. In one such scene, where Mary decides not to speak to Jem in jail about establishing his legitimate alibi, Gaskell brings Mary’s thoughts around to the realization that she would not be permitted to see Jem, even if she tried to. Then Gaskell skips again from Mary’s thoughts to assess the heroine’s feelings: “and even if she could have gone to him, I believe she would not” (312). To bring in this hypothetical possibility, to state a belief about what a character would or would not do, and to personalize that belief by saying “I,” is certainly to employ metalepsis in the extradiegetic narrator’s stance toward a fictional character. During the same scene, the narrator yokes Mary with herself in their common fear of subpoenas, suggesting that author and character inhabit the same reality: “Many people have a dread of those mysterious pieces of parchment. I am one. Mary was another” (313). The narrator, who has consistently linked herself with the real-world Elizabeth Gaskell, here transports Mary Barton to that same real-world plane of “many people.”

 Although the narrative “I” is definite in her opinions about some issues, her assertions more often falter, as she expresses doubts about her
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grasp of the facts that she must narrate and insecurity about her ability to transmit those facts accurately to the narratee. This hesitant attitude is more characteristic of Gaskell's engaging narrator than is her more confident side and serves rhetorically to reinforce the implication that the real world and the fictional may be identical. The doubts the narrator so frequently and candidly expresses are her own acknowledgment that her vision is subjective, her judgment fallible, and her talent limited. By emphasizing her subjectivity, the narrator also implies that she is reporting events that are "true," and therefore open to subjective interpretation.

Gaskell's insistence that she doesn't have all the "facts" suggests that facts exist, even though she claims they are out of her grasp. For instance, of a workman's day off, she writes, "I do not know whether it was on a holiday granted by the masters, or a holiday seized in the right of nature and her beautiful spring time by the workmen" (40). Similarly, she claims not to know all the facts about Mary's friendship with Margaret: "I do not know what points of resemblance (or dissimilitude, for the one joins people as often as the other) attracted the two girls to each other" (79-80). She sometimes "confesses" to not knowing the exact physical occurrences of a scene, as when she describes a collision among pedestrians: "I don't know how it was, but in some awkward way he knocked the poor little girl down upon the hard pavement" (437). At other times, she sets limits to her ability to read characters' thoughts. She summarizes the feelings of Mr. Carson during the night before Jem's trial, emphasizing that "until he had obtained vengeance," Mr. Carson could not rest. But then she pulls herself up, in a parenthetical aside: "I don't know that he exactly used the term vengeance in his thoughts; he spoke of justice, and probably thought of his desired end as such" (381).

Strictly, such disclaimers are nonsense, or even lies. (P. N. Furbank, arguing from the bizarre premise that the "truth" about characters' motives is not only determinable, but provable against a narrator's assertions, has dubbed Gaskell "the poet of mendacity" for her reliance on this kind of narrative prevarication.10) Of course the narrator could supply these facts if the author chose for her to, by inventing them along with the rest of the story. And the disclaimers are not, by any means, completely consistent: when she does choose to, the extradiegetic narrator is perfectly capable of reading characters' thoughts. But because the author does not choose to
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invent every detail—and because the narrator draws the narratee's attention to this choice—the narrative has the air of being one fallible observer's account of actual events.

Her expressed doubts about the facts of the story would seem to separate the voice of the narrator from that of the author, or the entity responsible for creating the "givens" of the story as well as for rendering it in discourse. This is offset, though, by other engaging remarks, which establish the narrator's doubts about her ability to achieve accuracy in the novel. These particular disclaimers of omniscience refer more directly than other interventions to Gaskell herself, because they describe the limitations of her knowledge on extra-fictional matters and reflect her own expressed lack of confidence in herself as an all-knowing novelist. In these interventions, the narrator is quick to acknowledge her own confusion, as when she makes a generalization about "the Jews, or Mohammedans (I forget which)" (132), or when she describes Mary's discovery of her father's "bullets or shot (I don't know which you would call them)" (300). When she could attribute the lack of knowledge to a character, the narrator still takes the responsibility for slight gaps in the narrative, as in the scene in Liverpool in which Mary listens, bewildered, to sailors' speech that she cannot understand. Mary hears "slang, which to [her] was almost inaudible, and quite unintelligible, and which I am too much of a land-lubber to repeat correctly" (352). A self-effacing narrator could have omitted any extended mention of the slang, since the scene is focalized through Mary's perspective and the speech does not enter her consciousness. But the narrator specifically reminds us of her own presence, in order to ally herself with Mary in her ignorance and fear of the sea and to intensify the narratee's awareness of reading a text that has been created by a fallible (that is, human and therefore possibly real) person.

Added to these confessions of limited knowledge, the narrator's self-deprecating comments on her ability to tell the story intensify her subjective pose. On the first page of the novel she chooses to deprecate her own descriptive abilities, conveying the "charming" effect, rather than the exact appearance, of a stile that figures in the opening scene. The narrator gives some details of sight and sound in this rural setting, but interrupts with a passage addressed directly to the narratee: "You cannot wonder, then, that these fields are popular places of resort at every holiday time; and you would
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not wonder, if you could see, or I properly describe, the charm of one particular stile, that it should be, on such occasions, a crowded halting-place" (39). Gaskell's confession of her inability to describe the stile's appearance serves as both a compliment to the reader's power of imagination and a slight to her narrator's power of description. Gaskell usually appeals directly to "you" in passages that serve this double function, as when she instructs the narratee to "picture to yourself (for I cannot tell you)" Mary's tumultuous thoughts (329); similarly, she avoids attempting a potentially unsuccessful description of Mr. Carson's strong feelings, asking "how shall I tell you the vehemence of passion which possessed the mind of poor Mr. Carson?" (396). The cumulative effect of such expressions of doubt is to underline the implication that the characters' feelings and the story's events are real, and therefore that confident narrative assertions about them would necessarily be oversimplified, subjectively biased, or otherwise flawed.

Although, as I have mentioned, Gaskell's narrator treats the characters as though they were real people, she seldom goes so far as to claim personal acquaintance with them, and is vague about the sources of her definite information. Nevertheless, two comments—both occurring in the courtroom scene, a setting that evokes questions about "evidence"—suggest that the engaging narrator places herself within the characters' world. The metaleptic effect of these comments is more emphatic than it would be if the narrator were to place herself more consistently (for instance, as a fellow character) in the world of the fiction. When Jem's mother enters the witness-box, the narrator digresses into a brief explanation of her epithets for Mrs. Wilson: "I have often called her 'the old woman', and 'an old woman', because, in truth, her appearance was so much beyond her years, which might not be many above fifty. But partly owing to her accident in early life, . . . partly owing to her anxious temper, partly to her sorrows, and partly to her limping gait, she always gave me the idea of age" (385–386). Anxious to demonstrate her firsthand knowledge of Mrs. Wilson, the engaging narrator defends her term, "the old woman," on the grounds that the "real" Jane Wilson gave her the impression of being old. At the same time, the narrator does not place herself at the scene, as her disclaimer of being present at the trial indicates: "I was not there myself; but one who was, told me" (389). The stance of the engaging narrator is a tenuous mixture of knowing and doubting, of inhabiting the fictional world and of

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remaining invisible. This narrator offers no answers for the technical questions that were later to be tackled by the narrators of impressionist fiction, questions such as How do I know what I claim to know? and Why should my reader believe me? In this sense, Gaskell's narrative technique could have had a highly distancing effect, inspiring actual readers to turn such questions against the persuasive intentions of this sometimes confident, sometimes dubious narrator.

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The effect of all these narrative interventions could have been to prompt the actual reader to recognize a distance between the real world and the fictional one, or to intensify the actual reader's sense of the story as fictive. But the narrator manipulates her direct address to the narratee in order to subvert that distancing effect. In her stance toward the reader, the narrator places "you" on the same plane of reality that she herself occupies, a plane which, she seems to suggest, could place "you" within the world of the fiction—hypothetically, at least. The narrator never challenges the narratee to admit to having been present at any of the story's events, but by using subjunctive phrases to describe the reader's probable reactions, she suggests that "your" presence could have been possible. For instance, the narrator posits the reader's hypothetical presence at Mary's unhappy vigil after her refusal of Jem's proposal: "She could not have told at first (if you had asked her, and she could have commanded voice enough to answer)" (176). The narrator's parenthetical remark encourages the reader to imagine himself or herself at Mary's side, in a position to question or comfort her. The narrator similarly places the reader at the scene of John Barton's confession: "Your heart would have ached to have seen the man, however hardly you might have judged his crime" (422). Again the appeal aims at the narratee's imaginative sympathy: the narrator asks the actual reader to forget for the moment that he or she is reading. Significantly, she does not even address the narratee as "reader," but uses only "you." The narrative strategy here encourages actual readers to picture themselves in the scenes that the narrator's descriptions have evoked in their minds.

And this engaging narrator quite often speaks to "you." She frequently refers very openly to information she has previously related that the
actual reader could have forgotten: such phrases as "the shelf I told you about" (66), "you remember the reward?" (273), "as you know" (363), or "the facts were as well know to most of the audience as they are to you" (384) all reinforce the narratee's sense of the story's being conveyed through the medium of narrative. Rather than merely stating facts or descriptions, the narrator often asks the narratee to participate in the creation of scenes, asking, "Can you fancy the bustle. . . . can you fancy the delight?" (67), or "Do you not perceive?" (80). She calls upon the narratee's mental images of common objects, as when she refers to "that sort of striped horsecloth you must have seen a thousand times" (300). In addition to these appeals for imaginative participation in the narrative, she often reminds "you" that she speaks directly to "you." The novel is sprinkled with such phrases as "you may be sure" (443), "If you think this account of mine confused" (413), and "I must tell you; I must put into words the dreadful secret" (299). If the actual reader were to take these pronouns seriously and personally, he or she would experience an intensified sense that the novel is a personal act of communication between Elizabeth Gaskell and "you."

Of course, Gaskell's narrator sometimes uses "you" in the conventional sense that actually means "one." An example of this usage occurs in an aside that is not necessarily directed to the individual, actual reader. A character says, "Well-a-well," and the narrator amplifies, "(in a soothing tone, such as you use to irritated children)" (376). Not everyone speaks to irritated children in a soothing tone; not every actual reader could identify with this "you" as he or she could with the receiver of a remark such as "I must tell you." Though this infrequent usage of "you" to mean "one" is less personal than other uses of that pronoun in the novel's interventions, it is also more informal than the more polite "one" would have been. The casual tone converts even Gaskell's truisms into partly personal remarks. Consider, for instance, how different the effect of this exhortation would have been, had the narrator substituted "one" for "you": "It is a great truth, that you cannot extinguish violence, by violence. You may put it down for a time, but while you are crowing over your imaginary success, see if it does not return with seven devils worse than its former self!" (232). Gaskell evidently wants each reader to consider his or her personal responsibility to the people represented by the characters in the novel, as her narrator's use of "you" in order to personalize general observations bears witness.
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When Gaskell's narrator uses the word "we," then, she is including the author herself and the actual reader in that plural pronoun, often implicitly linking author and reader with the novel's characters. Her use of "we" underlines how much the narratee and the actual reader have in common with the speaker, as well as with those of whom she speaks. Describing the anxiety that preoccupies all the travellers en route to the Assizes in Liverpool, the narrator remarks that their emotional state says "little or nothing" about them in particular, "for we are all of us in the same predicament through life. Each with a fear and a hope from childhood to death" (343). Gaskell's strategy is similar when she writes that "you and I, and almost everyone, I think, may send up our individual cry of self-reproach" (328). Such generalizations embrace Mary Barton, as well as the narratee and the actual reader, reminding the receivers of the text that Mary and her kind inhabit a common plane of humanity with the narrator and themselves.

At times, Gaskell's narrator implicitly excludes the poor from her "we," subtly indicating that her intended audience is comfortable and well-fed, without her having to address them specifically as such. Of Mr. Carson's servants, who fail to offer a hungry workman any of their plentiful food, she says, "they were like the rest of us, and not feeling hunger themselves, forgot it was possible another might" (106). The scene and its commentaries are reminders of the purpose of reading a social-problem novel: so that a complacent bourgeoisie does not forget that working people might experience physical strain which the middle classes have no occasion to share, as well as feeling emotional strains with which they could identify. Gaskell's tone in such passages is consistent with the sympathetic, confidential attitude she has established in her relations with the narratee. Capitalizing on the strong links her engaging direct address has attempted to establish between the narratee and herself, she again uses the pronoun "we" as she confronts the reader with the central moral question of the first, more realistic portion of the novel: "The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with a mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?" (220). The reproach she levels at herself and at us is far from being "mute," but the passage certainly
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draws the narratee's attention to the narrator's sad, steady gaze as she awaits the actual reader's looked-for response: emotional commitment to improve the lot of the poor, to give them that "inner means for peace and happiness" by expressing (and not only by experiencing) compassion for them.

For the arousal of the actual reader's sympathy is the declared aim of the book. Although the tension of the melodramatic trial plot may be effectively riveting, that part of the novel tends to deflect the particular kind of active empathy that Gaskell wanted most explicitly to evoke. The narratee may be presumed to hold his or her breath throughout the trial scene, to pity the catatonic Mary, and to rejoice with the triumphant Jem, but these characters' problems, strongly within the tradition of Gothic romance, end with the narrative. They flee the Old World, leaving behind Jem's tainted reputation, the reminders of John Barton's crime, and the place Carlyle called "sooty Manchester." Jem's merit enables their emigration to Canada, where he takes a respectable foreman's job and becomes a solid member of the very middle class to whom the novel is addressed. The end of the story runs counter to the urgent message with which the novel began: within the world of the fiction, all of the main characters are either dead or comfortably settled even though the actual reader did nothing more (and possibly less) than experience sympathy for them; the reader need take no further action in order to be able to experience the gratification of seeing the characters' suffering end at last. This is, of course, the limitation of all rhetoric as a means of intervention in real-world problems: because a novel is only a text, it cannot exert any material power over the actual reader. On the level of story, though, *Mary Barton* makes it manifestly clear that sympathetic intervention in unhappy circumstances can improve the emotional state of a sufferer, for the story's closure follows from the individual acts of sympathy and forgiveness that accumulate throughout the plot. On the level of discourse, too, the engaging narrator's own interventions attempt to wake the reader up to the necessity of transferring his or her sympathy from the characters to their counterparts in the real world.

Perhaps the definitive example of an engaging narrative intervention in *Mary Barton* is a passage among those first realistic chapters, where the narrator insists that the actual reader should project some compassionate imagination upon his or her understanding of the lives of the poor, both in the novel and in the world. The passage echoes Gaskell's declaration in her
preface that she "bethought me how deep might be the romance" in the lives of people she met on the street; here, she asks readers to place themselves in that same position and to consider what some specific possibilities for that romance might be:

But [Barton] could not, you cannot, read the lot of those who daily pass you by in the street. How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under? You may be elbowed one instant by the girl desperate in her abandonment, laughing in mad merriment with her outward gesture, while her soul is longing for the rest of the dead, and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here. You may pass the criminal, meditating crimes at which you will to-morrow shudder with horror as you read them. You may push against one, humble and unnoticed, the last upon earth, who in Heaven will for ever be in the immediate light of God's countenance. Errands of mercy—errands of sin—did you ever think where all the thousands of people you daily meet are bound? (101–102)

The "wild romances" to which the narrator refers here represent little more than the condition of being human in a nineteenth-century urban environment. The open-endedness of the possibilities she predicts for the narratee ("you may be elbowed," "you may pass," "you may push") resists closure in a distinctively engaging way: these are not assertions of experiences that actual readers must have had in order to identify with the "you" being addressed, but are only suggestions for what could conceivably occur to anyone in Gaskell's intended audience. The intervention sketches out a model for ways in which the actual reader could imaginatively project life-histories onto the strangers he or she does encounter. Although such projections would bring the actual reader no closer to knowing the realities of the strangers' lives, it would at least place the strangers in the same category as the novel's characters: they are to be seen as real people, with feelings and lives that could command the actual reader's sympathetic attention. The use of "you" in this passage—in addition to the examples of the types "you" may encounter in the real (as well as the fictional) world—demonstrates the engaging narrator's attempt to extend what Elizabeth Meese calls (in another context) "the play of the signifier beyond the text." 12
To skip from Mary Barton to Gaskell's late novels is to see engaging narrative strategies disappear from her work. Her later fictions rely on other, more conventionally established strategies for creating verisimilitude and the most sympathetic of Gaskell's critics have traditionally seen this shift in technique as a sign of her improving her novelistic art. Edgar Wright, for instance, makes a case for "reassessing" Gaskell as a serious novelist whose techniques developed in their sophistication over the course of her career; according to him, "the most important development is probably in the gradual shift away from use of authorial commentary" (18). Gaskell never articulated any theories of literary art, nor did she write or speak directly about her practicing narrative interventions, so we can only speculate about whether she considered the reduction in direct address an improvement over her early techniques. However, if we look at narrative discourse not as the product of "artistic intention" or "mastery of technique," but rather as the result of an author's choices about the relations she hopes to establish between her text and her actual readers, we can trace Gaskell's abandonment of engaging interventions to a loss of faith in their efficacy. It came about through a loss of faith in her readers.

Gaskell's shift in assumptions about her readers can be glimpsed in a letter she wrote to her friend Charles Eliot Norton in 1858, ten years after Mary Barton was published. In 1853 she had published Cranford, with its minimally characterized, first-person narrator, and Ruth, which employs a consistently engaging, extradiegetic narrator resembling Mary Barton's. After Ruth, she had written North and South, which is entirely devoid of direct address to a narratee, for serialization in Dickens's Household Words in 1854–1855. Her Life of Charlotte Brontë had appeared in 1857. As far as Gaskell was concerned, the biography was strictly true, and she let the "facts" speak for themselves: the Life, too, contains no remarks directed to "you." In her letter to Norton, Gaskell speaks of a painful awareness that was preventing her from thinking too concretely about her readers as she wrote:

I can not (it is not will not) write at all if I ever think of my readers, and what impression I am making on them. "If they don't like me, they must lump me," to use a Lancashire proverb.
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It is from no despising my readers. I am sure I don’t do that, but if I ever let the thought or consciousness of them come between me and my subject I could not write at all. (Letters 503)

“From no despising” her readers, perhaps, but rather from having learned to suspect their lack of sympathy, she had come to refrain from continuing the overt conversation between narrator and narratee in her later work.

This attitude could be connected with the vehemence of the criticism of Ruth, a sympathetic fictional account of a highly idealized unwed mother. Enraged readers (or a public that pretended to have read it) burnt the book, denouncing Gaskell as an improper woman because of her choice of heroine. The attack was similar to that which Harriet Beecher Stowe had just suffered for Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but Gaskell had less resilience than the American author, and the letters of praise that she finally received for Ruth did little to reassure her. As Winifred Gerin writes of Gaskell, “She was far too sensitive to people’s opinion, to blame or praise, not to be deeply bruised by the public nature of [Ruth’s] condemnation; she was crushed by the news of Bell’s Library withdrawing it from circulation, and by the personal tone of such reviews as the Literary Gazette which deplored her ‘loss of reputation’” (139).

Though Gaskell insisted that in spite of the painful criticism, she “would do every jot of it over again tomorrow,” (Gerin 139), the experience appears to have left its mark on her narrative technique. When she was new to writing novels and hadn’t yet tested her audience’s responsiveness, both to her narrative interventions and to her implicit endorsement of “interventionism,” she had been able to try to establish an open, personal, earnest communion among author, narrator, characters, and reader. Mary Barton had drawn a sympathetic public response, on the whole, but Mary Barton is half romance, and never trespasses beyond the bounds of Victorian “moral” propriety in its treatment of the heroine. Ironically, Gaskell could employ her engaging narrator in realist fiction only as long as she could maintain for herself a fictive idea of what her audience would be like. The reading public had betrayed her engaging narrator’s faith that actual readers would live up to her narratees’ generous capacity for imaginative compassion. Perhaps, after that disappointment, Gaskell felt the need to shield herself from the thought of the disapproving or hard-hearted actual reader, and thus chose to stop making direct narrative appeals to a sympathy she could no longer
be sure would respond. Gaskell's answer was simply to stop intervening in her narratives, apparently because she was convinced that intervention of this kind would not work.

There was, of course, another strategic option available to the novelist who assumed failings on the part of narratees and actual readers: the distancing narrator, who sets up flawed narratees to tease and taunt them, to shame actual readers out of identifying with them. Distancing strategies, which tended to undermine the rhetorical goals of realism, may have been too metafictional to be useful to Gaskell. Furthermore, in the 1840s the distancing narrator was a strategy associated with male-written texts, as a close look at the interventions in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Kingsley's *Yeast* will show.