English Studies in Latin America

"Beastly Customs" and a "Prodigious Nuisance": A Revision of the Noble Savage in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*

Author: Christine Gmür
Source: *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America,* No. 3 (August 2012)
ISSN: 0719-0921
Published by: Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America
Issue 3 (August 2012)
ISSN: 0719-0921

"Beastly Customs" and a "Prodigious Nuisance": A Revision of the Noble Savage in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*

Christine Gmür

If one considers its critical reception, the reading of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* often seems to have presented more of a struggle than a pleasure. It is no surprise, then, that for a long time *Barnaby Rudge* has "generally been judged as a failure" (Marcus 169). The confusion over characters and their respective role in the novel has a long tradition and is usually believed to be due to the text's unusual construction. *Barnaby Rudge* is said to be lacking a clear centre, which is visible in its ambiguity over the main character. Whereas some critics[1] tried to bypass this problem by claiming that the numerous father-son relationships form the centre of the book, Rice argues that "the dominant central character of the usual novel is replaced by several major figures who are closely intertwined by a number of preexisting ties" (Rice 174). Bowen on the other hand, in an oxymoron, suggests that this "allegedly historical novel has at its absent centre an idiot and a raven, surrounded by ghosts, shadows, and monsters" (Bowen 161). That neither the author nor the publisher may have been quite certain about who functions as the main character is further supported by their decision to change the novel's title. As Dickens wrote the book, he intended to call it *Gabriel Varden: The Locksmith of London*, but decided against it later on (Bowen 169). Whenever critics tried to point out a set of main characters, ignoring the afore-mentioned difficulties, their choice usually included Gabriel Varden, Maypole Hugh, Barnaby Rudge, John Willet, Lord Gordon or Sim Tappertit and, if existent, their respective fathers or sons. This lack of a determining main character creates a tension

[1] For example Marcus 184, and Kim Ian Michasiw, "Barnaby Rudge: The Since of the Fathers," *ELH* 56.3 (1989): 571.

which will never be resolved and is a distinctive part of *Barnaby Rudge*. The resulting ambiguity should be regarded as an enriching feature which opens the path to new, inspiring discussions rather than a defect. Much attention has already been drawn to the novel's undoubtedly significant relationships between fathers and sons, but one particular connection seems to have been neglected very frequently and unjustly. Although they have been subject to extensive research,[2] the connection between Barnaby and Hugh has usually been reduced to the shared fate of their respective fatherlessness. However, the fact that Barnaby and Hugh become intimate friends before and during the riots is often ignored. Outlawed and close to nature, they both embody Dickens' reassessment of the Noble Savage. Barnaby and Hugh are insofar a reassessment of this trope as they do not inhabit some remote continent, but have been raised and bred in the civilisation of Britain.

Due to their fatherlessness, Barnaby and Hugh lack, just like the novel, a clear patriarchal centre of power on which to focus their rebellion. Whereas Hugh's motivation to reverse the existing order is his "hatred of everything established – rank, institutions, customs" (Marcus 181). Barnaby's is multidimensional. Stagg has told him that prosperity is not to be found in "solitary places like those you pass your time in, but in crowds, and where there's noise and rattle" (369). When Barnaby sees the mass gathering for Lord Gordon's great association, he is immediately reminded of "what the blind man said, about the gold" (382). There is, however, another, less materialistic reason for Barnaby's immediate fascination with the crowd. During the encounter with Stagg, Barnaby mistakes the crowd for society in general. Stagg's encouragement to seek fortune in a crowd raises Barnaby's subconscious urge to enter society and be a part of it. In Lord Gordon's crowd Barnaby believes that he has found his goldmine in more than one sense. His final aim, eventually to become a fully integrated member of society, is diametrically opposed to Hugh's, who is determined to destroy this very same order. Due to the absence of their fathers, Hugh and Barnaby are outsiders. Neither of them has a clear function in society apart from the occasional duty as groom or runner. For an "idiot", Barnaby is surprisingly self-conscious and aware of the fact that he and Hugh share the same lot. The reader has barely been introduced to the two characters when Barnaby mentions Hugh quite unexpectedly. After his return from the Warden, Chester offers Barnaby a monetary reward for his errand. Barnaby accepts the money, but, strikingly, considers it to be "for Grip, and me, and Hugh, to share among us" (95), although there is no hint in the text of

[2] For a more extensive discussion see Goldie Morgentaler. *Dickens and Heredity: When Like Begets Like*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 2000. 111 – 122.

any contribution of Hugh's in the delivery of the message. As much as his mental impairment may affect his daily life, Barnaby is sensitive enough to understand that there is a connection between them.

Dickens' fascination with characters that seem out of the ordinary has often been pointed out and *Barnaby Rudge* is no exception. Dickens takes great pleasure in describing Barnaby and Hugh with unveiled admiration. For Marcus, the reason is to be found in Dickens' identification with the rioters, since "everyone knows now that unconsciously he identified himself with the rioters who burned into Newgate" (Marcus 172). Both characters appear as wild, desolate, uncanny and unreliable beings from the start. Because they swiftly wander in and out of the narrative at the most unexpected moments, they are not exposed for long enough for the narrator to draw up an appropriate description. Barnaby's excitement about the wounded man he has found on the ground makes him swing his torch so ferociously that the narrator has to wait for a description until he stands still in the rather awkward position of "half shrinking back and half bending forward" (37). Hugh resists the narrator's description at the beginning through his absence, ignoring his master's call. It is therefore John Willet who describes him first as "a dreadful idle vagrant fellow, […] half a gipsy as I think – always sleeping in the sun in summer, and in the straw in winter time sir" (87). Once Hugh does appear, however, his quick action stands in strong contrast to Willet's description of him and demands of the narrator a rectification of this ostensibly unsatisfactory account. The rectifying account follows as soon as the society of the Maypole Inn has recovered from the arrival of John Chester and goes back to the usual pipe-smoking and drinking. On this occasion, Barnaby and Hugh are the only ones who show "but little interest in the general contentment" (96). Whereas the other characters chat, Hugh and Barnaby shut themselves out from society both physically and mentally. The two characters are asleep and sit or crouch opposite each other. Whereas Barnaby lies in the chimney-corner, Hugh has positioned himself on the bench, "in the full glare of the blazing fire", allowing the narrator to give a more detailed description of this rather uncouth man.

The outline of both characters heavily borrows from the Renaissance tradition of the noble savage. These European ideas of the savage grew "out of an imaginative fusion of classical mythology with the new descriptions that were beginning to be conceived by scientifically minded writers as 'observations'" (Ellingson 11). Dickens adopts this fusion and admiringly describes the sleeping Hugh as a young man, of "muscular and handsome proportions" with a "hale athletic figure, and a giant's strength" (96). Although criticism seems to have infantilised the twenty three

year old Barnaby a great deal he is described as "though rather spare, of fair height and strong make" (37). Both characters share a very manly, innate athletic strength which never fails them. Barnaby can run for hours so that "there were not many who could have kept up with him" (358), and even his legion of dogs would come home "limping and sore-footed, and almost spent with their fatigue", whereas Barnaby shows no sign of exhaustion. Barnaby's and Hugh's strength and stamina are almost superhuman and a clear sign of their intact virility. Were it not for their unkempt outer appearance, their lack of education and manners, they would make perfect models of ancient Greek athletes. Despite their negligence, Barnaby and Hugh appear as strangely attractive and handsome, despite or perhaps justly because of their desolate, odd look. Dickens' gaze here becomes one with that of the explorers, geologists, ethnographers and philosophers who have travelled to foreign lands in order to study foreign, "savage" cultures. Furthermore, Dickens takes particular care to give a detailed description of Barnaby's grotesque and colourful dress, only to conclude that "startling as his aspect was, the features were good and there was something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect" (37). Similarly, Hugh's entire "negligence and disorder" (97) give him "a picturesque appearance". In his "slumbering form" he might even "have served a painter for a model", just as countless "savages" from foreign continents have done for numerous artists illustrating the sensationalist accounts of European scientists.

Ironically enough, the father of this uncouth but picturesque youth is the novel's most polished gentleman, who, "with his blooming face, white teeth, exactly-ordered dress, and perfect calmness" might, in his turn, "have come from making an elaborate and leisurely toiled, to sit for an equestrian portrait" (86). Neither of them shows the consideration of Edward, Chester's legitimate son and Hugh's unidentified brother, who will be the only member of this family not to die an unnatural death before the turn of the century. Much emphasis has been put on this strong contrast between the over-polished father and his desolate son. Whereas the father's way of dressing and his affected manners embody "the values of civilized society and its institutions" as well as "the full corruption" (Marcus 203) of them, his son is his perfect double in the negative. In *Barnaby Rudge* any extreme exaggeration to either side of the balance of norms is punished by death. What Ellingson suggests in his analysis of the Noble Savage, namely that "bestiality and 'nobility' in fact may be part of the same package" is perfectly shown in Dickens' portrait of the Chester family. Hugh and Chester both belong to the same abominable, yet endlessly fascinating category of corrupted humans. That Dickens chose to make Hugh Chester's illegitimate son only proves his very

conscious association. Moreover, Chester and Hugh actually belong to the same low category as Hugh's mongrel pet dog: Hugh's constant follower is a dog, which, although present throughout, is only noticed by Barnaby and the narrator. Hugh even admits that he feels closer to animals than humans and states that: "I'd sooner kill a man than a dog any day. I've never been sorry for a man's death in all my life, and I have for a dog's" (172). The only affective relationship Hugh has is that with his dog. Since "such a dog as that, and one of the same breed" (194) was the only living thing except himself who "howled" the day his mother was hanged, Hugh accepts and treats dogs of that breed as members of his family. Hugh introduces the dog, his adopted family member, to his real father, who cannot find anything more flattering to say than that "virtuous and gifted animals, whether man or beast, always are so very hideous" (194). Being Hugh's father, he thus unconsciously reflects upon his own role as the head of a perverted family of "dull brutes." In Dickens, cruelty to dogs is a sign of madness and irrevocable moral decay. When Bill Sikes attempts to kill his dog in *Oliver Twist*, this is a symbol for his madness and violence. Gottshall proposes that "perhaps the best point of comparison with Oliver Twist would be to put Hugh next to Bill Sikes. Both are hardened and unrepentant" (Gottshall 145). Yet in *Barnaby Rudge*, it is not Hugh who is cruel to his dog, but his father with his verbal abuse. Nonetheless, both Hugh and Sikes cannot do without affective relationships and therefore turn to their dogs.

In this context, a controversial text by Dickens' own hand is of interest. On 11 June 1853, the lead article of the *Household Words*, edited by Dickens himself, was entitled "The Noble Savage". In it, the author goes to great lengths to explain that he does "not have the least belief in the Noble Savage" and that, anyhow, a savage is "a something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth" (Household Words 337). Whereas some critics have read this "anomaly" of a piece as a "testimony of Dickens's growing racism during this period", others have argued, that it offers "an important insight into […] Dickens's frequently shifting stance on race in the years before 1857" (Moore 236). In any case, Dickens ridicules the too-ready admiration of members of another race, who, in his opinion, do nothing else than delighting themselves in the preparation or the execution of wars of extermination. Although he clearly speaks of the savages from foreign countries and refers to "Mr. Catlin's Ojibbeway Indians", "bushmen" and the "Zulu", there is yet a moment which is particularly striking for any reader of *Barnaby Rudge*. Dickens recommends contemplating the savage's dog: "For evidence of his [i.e. the savage's] moral nature, pass himself for a moment and refer to his 'faithful dog.' Has he ever improved a dog, or attached a dog, since his nobility first ran

wild in woods […]? Or does the animal that is the friend of man, always degenerate in his low society?" (Household Words 337). Although Hugh speaks of an "animal of the same breed" when he refers to the dog which comforted him at his mother's execution, Chester and with him the reader, understand, that Hugh's dog is hardly a purebred, but a scruffy mongrel of no refined bloodline. The dogs which follow Barnaby on his long and exhausting excursions are "vagabond dogs" too. Just like the "cruel, false, thievish, murderous" (Household Words 337) savages Dickens describes in his article both Hugh and Barnaby are followed by "degenerate" dogs, which have not been improved through their contact with humankind. In both texts, Dickens associates the bastard dogs with their equally ill-bred owners.

In his unflattering outline of the noble savage, Dickens calls them "addicted more or less to grease, entrails, and beastly customs; a wild animal with the questionable gift of boasting; a conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty monotonous humbug" (Household Words 337). With Hugh's and Barnaby's preference for shelter in barns and their custom of curling up in corners or next to fire places they, more often than not, resemble animals, or dogs, themselves. Just like dogs, Barnaby and Hugh walk alongside, but are not integrated into human society. John Willet quite bluntly admits that he cannot quite see a human being in Hugh: "He's not often in the house, you know. He's more at his ease among horses than men. I look upon him as an animal himself." He thus concludes that Hugh is to be treated accordingly: "That chap that can't read nor write, and has never had much to do with anything but animals, and has never lived in any way but like the animals he has lived among, *is* an animal" (98). Willet consequently doubts the existence of a soul in Hugh: "If he has any soul at all, sir, it must be a very small one, that it don't signify what he does or doesn't in that way" (108). In this, Willet seems to express precisely what Dickens will write in his article 12 years later about the noble savage. However, it can hardly be claimed that Willet with his refusal to accept the passing of time and his resulting tyrannical oppression of his son should function as a role model for the reader. What is, then, to be made of the striking similarities between the two characters of *Barnaby Rudge* and Dickens' description of the noble savage?

The most distinctive differences between the savages of Dickens' article and Hugh and Barnaby are certainly their respective location on the one hand and their designation as "noble" on the other. Despite the *Household Words* article being more recent than the publication of *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens' claim is still very much the same. The author takes issue with the argument that in distant countries uncivilised cultures are noble *per se* and worthy of admiration, whereas the

"homebred savages" of Britain, brought forth through biological defect or society, are too readily dismissed as idiots, animals and centaurs in comparison. Therefore, both Marcus's statement that "behind the kind of representation Dickens achieves in Hugh are not only Shakespeare and romanticism, but an ageless popular tradition of tales of wild and savage men" as well as Michasiw's claim that "Hugh is, in part, a revision of the later eighteenth-century passion for the natural man, but with no sentimental overlay" (Michasiw, 586), fall short for two reasons. Firstly, it is Barnaby as much as Hugh who would fall into this category and, secondly, particularly Michasiw's category of the natural man would simply not do justice to the complex issue, as Dickens' article proves. Yet that Barnaby and Hugh are savages cannot be disputed and if not noble, they certainly exert a particular fascination as becomes clear when they are first described. The word 'savage' is used in nineteen instances in the novel, albeit sometimes as an adjective: It is directly related to Hugh on seven and to the mob on six occasions. One crucial moment in which the word appears is when Hugh attacks Dolly in the forest: "There was something so thoroughly savage in the manner of these expressions, and the looks and gestures by which they were accompanied, that her great fear of him gave her new strength," but Hugh is "as nimble, strong and swift of foot, as any man in broad England" that her attempted flight is hopeless. The comparison here is between Hugh and "any man in *England*" and not a resident of a foreign country. Both Barnaby and Hugh are essentially English and need to be, in order to fulfil their roles in a malfunctioning, fatherless society. As "English savages", they also draw on the European Medieval tradition of the Wild Man, which, itself, was influenced by the Greek type of the satyr or the faun and belong to Dionysus's trek. Marcus has correctly identified a Dionysian dimension in Hugh, which can be linked to the initial description reminiscent of a Greek athlete pointed out at the beginning of this essay.

As a Dionysian figure, the animal-like Hugh is very much concerned with the satisfaction of his primary needs. He is not only an "embodiment of feral, uncivilized sexual energy," (Marcus 199), but also takes the chance to eat, drink and sleep whenever it is offered. Since the lack of cultural education leaves him with no other pleasures than the fulfilment of his primary needs, a combination of more than one at the same time promises the climax of earthly satisfaction. Carey points out that when Hugh has the "delicious Dolly Varden and haughty Emma Haredale at his mercy, imprisoned in a closed carriage, he insists on speaking of them as delicate, tender birds, and stares into the carriage, we are told, 'like an ogre into his larder'" (Carey 23). This is also the case when Hugh ambushes Dolly Varden in the forest. Remarkably, Hugh ever only shows interest in

Dolly, but not in Emma. Hugh teams Dolly's rape, the consumption of her virginity, with the consumption of food and therefore shows his sadistic side in which he takes pleasure in the thought of cannibalism, which, as Ellingson states, is a *conditio sine qua non* in the rhetoric of the savage (Ellingson 12). Carey adds that cannibalism is a "form of violence more exotic and, to Dickens' way of thinking, more amusing than capital punishment" (Carey 22). Particularly Hugh, and with him the mob, constantly display metaphors of rape during the riots. The houses, which, like the Maypole Inn, offer the domestic security of a mother or wife, allow rather feminised descriptions due to their careful inner and outer arrangement and the families they sustain and bear. When the mob breaks in, penetrates and breaks the locks of these houses, its violence is nothing less than an act of rape.

Barnaby's savagery is less feral and sexualised, which certainly is one of the reasons why his virility has often been contested. Before he joins the rioters, Barnaby is more of a Wild Man than a brutal cannibal like Hugh, but when he does, he perfectly fits into this "dream of demon heads and savage eyes" (404) which take pleasure in the sexualised violence against society's domestic space. Barnaby adds two new dimensions to the trope of the European savage. Through his uncanny symbiosis with his talking pet raven Grip, Barnaby seems to retain the characteristics of a seer, a fortune-teller, which, in the end, is itself a revision of the Medieval, and Renaissance or Shakespearian, fool or joker. Marcus points out that in "Dickens's conception of Barnaby we recognize something of the Holy Fool," (Marcus 191) and emphasises the considerable influence of *King Lear*. However, he fails to explain what this "something" is, that we recognise. The first hint of Barnaby's role as a jester comes with the description of the gaudy, tawdry, "motley scraps that formed his dress" (36). If it were not for the missing typical little bells, the reader would indeed believe to be introduced to the prototype of fools. These extravagant items of sound, however, are present too in *Barnaby Rudge*. Completing the "ornamental portion of his attire" are some "parti-coloured ends of ribands and poor glass toys", which must make a similar noise to the one of bells, when they touch one another. Grip, his talking pet raven becomes a substitute for the characteristic mock sceptre, the marotte, by means of which the jester utters truths through ventriloquism he would not dare to make "in person". In the uncanny symbiosis between Grip and Barnaby, in which it is not quite clear who is in charge or who speaks, the raven has sometimes been understood as a an incorporation of evil itself (Gottshall 140). Although there certainly are uncanny (Bowen 172), perhaps even devilish, features of the supernatural both about Barnaby and Grip, it would be far-fetched to read Grip as a personification of the devil. Their respective uncanny characteristics have

more to do with Barnaby's madness and the faculty of this odd couple's clairvoyance. That Grip is a devil, as he states himself so often, is what society would, for convenience's sake, like to reduce him to. This portrait of Barnaby as a clown blends in with the discussion of the savage. Since the clown, in himself a profoundly European Medieval concept, is often understood to be a madman and, with his jester's-licence, is actually quite out of place in the courtly environment of strictly observed code, he is a counterpart to the Wild Man living in the forests, in that he is the Wild Man living amongst society. Although the jester is allowed access to society, he is nonetheless not part of it, but walks alongside.

In *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens presents a reworking of the Noble Savage trope by transporting it into a European context. His later criticism of Catlin and Harriet Beecher-Stowe expressed in his *Household Word*'s article is anticipated in *Barnaby Rudge*. Dickens' point of attack is that in order to find a savage, travelling the oceans far and wide is perfectly unnecessary, for the type of human to be found there is in no respects more or less beastly, savage, or noble than any in Britain whom birth, fate and circumstance have excluded from society. Dismissing the belief in any sort of noble savagery, Dickens observes that "several of these scenes of savage life bear a strong generic resemblance to an Irish election, and I think would be extremely well received and understood at Cork" (Household Words 339) and emphasises, that the discussion of savagery should not only be held when it comes to foreign parts of the globe, but is as threatening at this hour and at this time. It is a topic as urgent in the contemporary Victorian Age with its Chartist movement as it was in the eighteenth century during the Gordon Riots. Because a representation of the African or American savage will not do for a representation of wild men in a British novel, Dickens draws on two traditions that have arisen from a European context. The two traditions are those of the Wild Man from the forest and that of the Fool. Whereas Hugh, due to his utter exclusion from society, rather corresponds to the Wild Man living in the forests, Barnaby perfectly fits into that of the clown. Paradoxically enough, in *Barnaby Rudge* it is Barnaby's madness and his resulting freedom of speech, which allows him a limited access to society and Hugh's sanity, which determines his fate of hopeless exclusion from it.

Works Cited

Bowen, John. *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Carey, John. *Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination.* London: Faber and Faber, 1979.

Dickens, Charles. *Barnaby Rudge.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Dickens, Charles. "The Noble Savage." *Household Words* 7.168 (1853): 337-339.

Ellingson, Terry Jay. *The Myth of the Noble Savage.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002.

Gottshall, James K. "Devils Abroad: The Unity and Significance of Barnaby Rudge." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16.2 (1961): 133 – 146.

Marcus, Stephen. *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1965.

Michasiw, Kim Ian. "Barnaby Rudge: The Since of the Fathers." *ELH* 56. 3 (1989): 571 – 592.

Moore, Grace. "Reappraising Dickens's 'Noble Savage.'" *The Dickensian* 98. 458 (2002): 236-243.

Morgentaler, Goldie. *Dickens and Heredity: When Like Begets Like.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 2000.

Rice, Thomas Jackson. "The End of Dickens's Apprenticeship: Variable Focus in Barnaby Rudge." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30.2 (1975): 172 – 181.