

Barnaby Rudge

OF ALL Dickens's novels, *Barnaby Rudge* was the longest delayed and the one with the most troubled beginnings. He composed it in 1841, although in fact he had signed a contract for it five years before under the title of *Gabriel Vardon, The Locksmith of London*: it is even possible that this was the novel he had been proposing to write ever since he began his career, and indeed in some ways it is the most elaborately planned and carefully structured of his earliest fiction. It had such a long period of gestation in part because Dickens committed himself to too many projects and too many books; such was his self-confidence and energy that he believed he could do almost anything, and indeed every aspect of his extraordinary early success would have confirmed that opinion. But there were penalties involved in such enthusiastic production – he had signed one contract for *Barnaby Rudge* only to scrap it, he had begun the novel and then broken off when he quarrelled with one of his publishers, and then he had become too involved in his new journal, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, to start work upon it in earnest.

Indeed it was the fate of this periodical which finally persuaded him properly to settle down to *Barnaby Rudge*. He had been serialising *The Old Curiosity Shop* in *Master Humphrey's Clock* and had seen sales mount to some one hundred thousand; he knew well enough that only another continuous story would maintain such popularity, and so he decided to begin his new novel immediately after the wanderings of Little Nell had come to an end. *Barnaby Rudge*, fortunately, was

ready to hand – he had written two chapters some months before, and with some judicious enlargements he was able to prepare three chapters without undue difficulty and thus provide enough material for the next two issues of his magazine. He was on his way again.

Nothing in fact is more surprising in Dickens's career than the energy and instinctive skill with which he could turn immediately from one novel to the next, and only eight days after completing *The Old Curiosity Shop* he set to work upon *Barnaby Rudge*. 'I imaged forth a good deal of *Barnaby*,' he told one friend, 'by keeping my mind steadily upon him.' That was Dickens's way – to hold his character in his mind's eye, watching him move through the story, hearing him converse, observing his gestures, all the time creating the pattern of the narrative in which that character might be seen to best advantage. Certain other aspects of that narrative, however, had been prepared in advance. Even when he had signed the original contract for it, five years before, he knew that it was going to be an historical novel and that it would in large part be concerned with the Gordon Riots of 1780 (these were anti-Catholic riots which led to some of the most savage and bloody scenes in the history of London) and Dickens had already done a certain amount of historical research into the subject. Not all of that research needed to be historical, however, for it was in the late 1830s that the Chartist struggles focused attention on what was then called 'the condition of England question'. There had been battles between mobs and the police in Birmingham in May 1839, and in November of that year there had been an 'uprising' in Newport. Of course the Chartist demands, primarily for universal male suffrage and the secret ballot, were not directly linked to the 'No Popery' riots of sixty years before; nevertheless the fears of mob rule and internecine strife were precisely the same, and not for the first time Dickens showed an exquisite sense of timing in writing a novel about urban revolt in a period when his readers would have every reason to be interested in it. Like all good

historical novels, *Barnaby Rudge* was as much about the present as the past.

There were other contemporary influences upon it, too, although perhaps of a more private nature. Dickens was fascinated by the behaviour of the mob, and had taken the opportunity a few months earlier of witnessing one of the many public executions which took place outside Newgate Prison. It is of course of some interest that, in the novel he was about to write, Newgate itself would be burned and stormed, but in particular Dickens was both obsessed and horrified by the behaviour of the crowds of men, women and children who flocked around the gallows. On this occasion a murderer, Benjamin Courvoisier, was to be executed, and at a later date Dickens described the conduct of the mob which watched his death as comprising '... nothing but ribaldry, debauchery, levity, drunkenness and flaunting vice in fifty other shapes'. This was a spectacle he would put to good use in *Barnaby Rudge*. And then there was his raven, Grip, a pet bird that fascinated him and which he would also put into the novel – as Barnaby Rudge's companion. It is as if a new fiction magnetised the world around Dickens, so that everything came to be fashioned in the image of the reality he was about to create.

It was apposite, for example, that a novel which is in large part concerned with the relationship between fathers and sons should have been preceded by a veritable explosion by Dickens against his own father. Ever since the time when John Dickens's debts had consigned him to the Marshalsea Prison, and the young Dickens to a blacking factory, the problem of insolvency had haunted the family. John Dickens was always getting into what he might euphemistically have termed financial 'difficulties', and his son's astonishing rise to eminence only compounded the problem: for it seems that the father was now literally trading on his son's name, and at this point Dickens had had enough. He placed an advertisement in several newspapers, disclaiming any debts which anyone

bearing his surname might run up, and then demanded that his father leave the country. It is perhaps not altogether surprising, therefore, that the theme of fathers and sons runs through the novel he was even now preparing to write: thoughtless fathers, like John Willet; unnatural fathers, like John Chester. How appropriate, too, that they should both bear the name of John. And how strange that, introduced into this theme, there are other more perplexing ideas: how a son, like Barnaby himself, may bear the taint of the father's crime; how another son, like Hugh, will run wild if he is neglected by the father and indeed exhibit all the characteristics which the father has successfully repressed in himself. But these are not simply Dickens's private preoccupations issuing unchecked into his fiction – part of his genius was to turn what might seem wholly individual concerns into metaphors of a universal kind. Thus in *Barnaby Rudge* the theme of fathers and sons is part of a much larger enquiry into the nature of power and dependency, of authority and subversion.

Perhaps it is the very compulsiveness of the private vision, however, which makes *Barnaby Rudge* a much more complicated narrative than at first it might appear. For Dickens displays himself throughout its pages as both an authoritarian and a revolutionary: his central characters are the respectable locksmith, Gabriel Varden, and the poor mad boy, Barnaby Rudge, as if in creating both he was also recreating the twin poles of his own temperament. Dickens hated the mob, as we have already had occasion to notice, but in this novel he seems to revel in the violence for which it is responsible. The most powerful scenes here are in fact those concerned with the burning and storming of Newgate Prison: 'I have just burnt into Newgate,' he said at the time of writing these passages '... I feel quite smoky when I am at work.' In fact throughout *Barnaby Rudge* there is both the fear of disorder and the need for it, the horror of, and the desire for, insurrection, the heady pleasure taken in the fever even as he diagnoses its painful effects. It should not be forgotten that his own father had

once been imprisoned, and in the scenes of riot it may be possible to trace his old childish impulses to tear down the institutions which had destroyed his family and blighted his childhood.

That is also why Dickens himself seems so close to Barnaby, for he depicts him in terms that he would also sometimes use about himself – in particular he describes his ‘terrible restlessness’, precisely the condition from which he himself always suffered. That wild and restless energy, that excess of imaginative excitement – in a way Barnaby is like the dwarf, Quilp, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and in that conjunction we may see how Dickens pours himself into his ostensible ‘villains’ as well as his heroes. And, when Barnaby sees ‘shadowy people’ in the outline of clothes hanging upon a line, he is precisely like the young Charles Dickens who in an essay on the old clothes market of Monmouth Street volunteered the same observation. In fact there were even people who considered Dickens himself to be as insane as the character he created – it was Landseer who said of his affection for his pet bird, Grip, that he was ‘raven mad’. Somehow this became transformed into the phrase ‘raving mad’ but, even, before that time, even when he was writing *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, his creativity was so astounding that it was popularly believed that he was about to be consigned to an asylum. Dickens himself was quite aware of these reports, and there may be a certain harsh irony in his depiction of the mad young man here.

He did not rely upon introspection alone, however: as soon as he began seriously to write *Barnaby Rudge*, he made a point of visiting at least two prisoners who were considered to be of ‘unsound mind’. For similar reasons he was wandering through the older streets of London, attempting to conjure up for this narrative all the reeking atmosphere of the city’s past. He wanted, after all, to write a serious historical novel: he was implicitly attempting to set himself up against Sir Walter Scott, whose own historical works had been the single most

important fictional phenomenon in the years immediately before Dickens. And indeed *Barnaby Rudge* is the most carefully planned, the most consistently structured, of Dickens’s fiction to date. All of his previous novels had emerged accidentally, out of stories or sketches, or had carried all the marks of brilliant improvisation on the author’s part. This was the first novel which had originally been conceived as a unified whole.

That was one of the reasons why he was able to work so rapidly upon it, despite the fact that he suffered a number of egregious interruptions. He visited Scotland with his wife, Catherine, while he was deep in the middle of his narrative: he was away for a month but even while travelling he contemplated the bloody riots he was just about to recreate (one might almost say, to celebrate). Indeed in the very torrents of the Highlands he seemed to see the rioters of eighteenth-century London – ‘They were rushing down every hill and mountain side, and tearing like devils across the path . . .’ He had already explained in the first page of *Barnaby Rudge* how those bent upon great or violent designs ‘feel a mysterious sympathy with the tumult of nature’, and surely Dickens found in the wildness of the Scottish landscape some corroboration of his own wild imaginings. There were other interruptions of a less inspiring kind, however, and it was soon after his return to London that he began to suffer the pains of a fistula – agonising enough, certainly, but not so searing as the operation he was forced to undergo without anaesthetic in order to remedy the problem. The room would have been awash with blood as his posterior was forced open and carved up, but his hardiness and resilience were even then extraordinary; a few days later he was back to his composition of *Barnaby Rudge* while lying painfully upon a sofa in his new house in Devonshire Terrace.

In fact the novel was directly responsible for a longer interruption to his writing than either the operation or the Scottish journey, for even as he was composing it Dickens began to realise the perils of over-production. He had received advance

warning of a kind when he had visited the home of Sir Walter Scott, and remembered the last weary and defeated years of a great novelist forced to write more and more without respite. *Barnaby Rudge* was Dickens's fifth novel in as many years and, for the first time in his career, sales were disappointing: this in itself would have been enough to perturb him, dependent as he always was upon what he considered an affectionate and even familial relationship with his audience, but he understood at once the dangers of being too prolific, of flooding the market and thereby suffering all the penalties of his readers' over-familiarity with his work. He decided almost at once to stop after he had completed *Barnaby Rudge*, and write nothing else for at least a year – in fact he planned to travel to the United States, and there refresh both himself and his imagination with new scenes and new people.

We have here, perhaps, an explanation for the fact that this novel concludes on a slightly weary or even mechanical note. It is almost as if the violence and energy which Dickens expended upon the scenes of riot, as well as the great imaginative empathy with which he invested the portrait of Barnaby Rudge's madness, had reached a necessary quietus in the final chapters of the book. Certain elements of the novel also have echoes in Dickens's previous fiction, for once more he is pre-occupied with the theme of private loneliness, with the necessity for restless wandering, with the image of the city as a place of darkness: ' . . . to feel, by the wretched contrast with everything on every hand, more utterly alone and cast away than in a trackless desert . . . ' This is the city which Dickens knew as a child, and in *Barnaby Rudge* his own old sense of privation and despair is lent a fantastic existence with the notion of London as 'a mere dark mist – a giant phantom in the air'. But this novel differs from its predecessors in being much more of a *story*, an historical tale of blood and evil, which has its counterparts in the fiction of Scott or of Ainsworth. There are other affinities also. Much of its plot might have come straight from the Restoration stage, just as some of the more pictur-

esque horror might have come out of the Jacobean theatre – not a fanciful comparison this, either, when we remember how deeply affected Dickens was by all forms of drama. When it is also remembered how often in this novel Dickens seems to be half-quoting, or misquoting, from the works of William Shakespeare it is possible to understand what kind of continuity he represents. It is easy enough to draw a line through the fiction of this country and see Dickens as the direct heir of Smollett or of Fielding, but it is equally important to realise that in English culture the novel has often been directly associated with the drama. Dickens's own works testify to that allegiance, and in *Barnaby Rudge* itself we see one important example of it. It has not been his most popular book, at least in recent years, but this has more to do with the general intellectual prejudice against 'historical fiction' (*A Tale of Two Cities* has suffered a similar fate for similar reasons); on any objective judgment, it is one of his most energetic and powerful narratives. It is filled with his own wild energy, sustained by his own bracing sense of form, and complicated by his own ambivalent reactions to crime and punishment.