

**FROM CARICATURE TO CHARACTER:
THE INTELLECTUALLY DISABLED
IN DICKENS'S NOVELS
(PART TWO)**

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Barnaby Rudge: Erstwhile Idiot and Plot Catalyst

Smike is a Dickensian idiot whose dual roles produce an unsustainable character situation, a social problematic the resolution of which requires extreme measures by the author. Barnaby Rudge is another. In Smike's case, apparently insurmountable intellectual and social debilities prevent expression of those emotional desires Dickens has allowed him to develop, creating a disconcerting portrait of unrequited affection. Smike has an idiot's intellectual powers but a normal person's sensibilities. The only "logical" course left to him, once he realizes the impossibility of successfully wooing the kind and beautiful Kate, is self-termination, a path his already weakened body obligingly effects for him. Barnaby Rudge's own stereotypical role as naïve plot mechanism, like Smike's position as pitiable dependent, cannot be prolonged indefinitely either. As Dickens wishes, however, to pull this second idiot figure back into the communal fold (from which Barnaby will unwittingly take his leave mid-story), he decides to *alter* instead of eliminating him:

"God be with you through the night, dear boy! God be with you!" She tore herself away, and in a few seconds Barnaby was alone. He stood for a long time rooted to the spot, with his face hidden in his hands; then flung himself, sobbing, upon his miserable bed. But the moon came slowly up in all her gentle glory, and the stars looked out...looked down in sorrow on the sufferings and evil deeds of men; and [Barnaby] felt its peace sink deep into his heart. He, a poor idiot, caged in his narrow cell, was as much lifted up to God, while gazing on that mild light, as the freest and most favoured man in all the spacious city; and in his ill-remembered prayer, and in the fragment of the childish hymn, with which he sung and crooned himself asleep, there breathed as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed, or old cathedral arches echoed. (609; ch. 73)

This melodramatic portrait corrals into one frame a number of variables important in understanding Dickens's shifting construction

of the central figure in his critically neglected *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*. As this passage suggests, Barnaby consistently wears the label "idiot," affixed to him here by the narrator and elsewhere by a host of other characters. He also plays a number of stereotypical roles ascribed to the idiot by literary tradition, including that of a *natural* more attuned than others to the heavens above and earth's creatures below, as well as a moral yardstick against which the "evil deeds of men" can be measured. Unlike the intellectually deficient protagonist of Dickens's third novel, that of his fifth boasts strong ties to community and family, evidenced here in the sorrow shared by an imprisoned boy-man of twenty-seven years and his anxious mother. These assorted factors would seem to relegate Barnaby to a relatively static imaginative space, one bound and secured by communal protections and predetermined narrative expectations for the idiot figure. Curiously, however, Dickens's characterization of Barnaby changes significantly as the tale moves towards an ending that will rescue and reincorporate the misled and bewildered protagonist.

Instead of requiring Barnaby's removal from the stage on which romantic unions and joyful births will bow when the curtain falls, this comedy ultimately calls for a new and improved Barnaby to step forward and join in the festival of renewed associations. Dickens has effected this kind of makeover before. As Angus Easson points out, Dickens transforms young Kit of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1804–41) from the "near-idiot" he appears at the book's opening into a literate hero "of sterling character" by its end.¹ In the previously quoted scene from chapter seventy-three, Barnaby's surprisingly normal emotional response to his serious situation already suggests a dramatically improved cognizance of consequences. His newly enhanced acumen accompanies a corresponding rise in spiritual status: once lamented for lacking a soul, a want "far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one" (35; ch. 3), Barnaby now prays with "as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed." In other words, Dickens's desire to reclaim his titular hero requires stripping him of those "idiotic" faculties which had *destabilized* various communities over the course of the novel. Dickens slowly erases the young man's naïveté and improves his intellect, memory, and discernment so that when Barnaby does return to his friends in the final pages, that troublesome ignorance which recently disrupted London society no longer exists to jeopardize this more intimate circle. And yet, at the same time that Barnaby undergoes this gradual change into one of "better memory and greater steadiness of purpose" (688; ch. 82), Dickens retains the period terminology ("idiot" and the more inclusive term "mad") that works to delimit Barnaby's

potential, and continues to assign him roles suggested by literary convention.² The result is a highly protean, ultimately untenable portrayal of intellectual disability.

Barnaby shares with Smike the unenviable status of "poor boy," an easy target for objectifying pity (215; ch. 25, 471; ch. 57). Once again, the distressing origins of the idiot figure's condition lie well outside his control, in this case linked back to evil wrought on the child around the time of his birth via Dickens's employment of popular superstition. A double-homicide committed by his father and discovered by his horrified mother places a blot in the shape of "a smear of blood but half washed out" (50; ch. 5) across the unborn Barnaby's wrist, thereby enacting the popular formula of *maternal impression* whereby shocking incidents witnessed by a pregnant woman transferred themselves onto the developing fetus. The birthmark serves as an outward sign of both Mr. Rudge's crime and the disability that offense stamps onto Barnaby's brain. Mysticism thus replaces physical abuse as the agent of affliction, effecting a quasi-Biblical transference of the father's sin onto the unborn child.³ The nature of this curse, identified repeatedly by the narrator and long recognized by Mrs. Rudge (209; ch. 25, 611; ch. 73, 612; ch. 73), eventually confronts Barnaby (609; ch. 73) and even the morally insensate Mr. Rudge. Horrified, the hero's father realizes that his own crime has been inscribed onto his son, one who quickly becomes to him

a torture and reproach; in his wild eyes, there were terrible images of that guilty night; with his unearthly aspect, and his half-formed mind, he seemed to the murderer a creature who had sprung into existence from his victim's blood. (574; ch. 69)

In Dickens's sentimental world, Barnaby's ills demand a sympathetic response from those around him, a prescription Mr. Rudge declines when he refuses to confess either to earthly or heavenly authorities his culpability in *creating* those ills, a refusal which doubles as a rejection of that path to salvation articulated by his estranged wife (611; ch. 73).

Despite the metaphysical curse tainting his mind and body, Barnaby remains the idiotic *innocent* for the first half of the novel, playing the predictable role of naïve natural at one with chaste Nature, and remaining unaware of society's scheming. Barnaby's absence from the main action usually indicates a carefree jaunt through the countryside with Grip, his pet raven, or perhaps some recently befriended dogs (371; ch. 45). When the threats and greed of Barnaby's spectral father prompt Mrs. Rudge to flee London for a

distant country location, Barnaby adjusts quickly, enjoying the new ease with which he can indulge in daylong adventures:

Barnaby's enjoyments were, to walk, and run, and leap, till he was tired; then to lie down in the long grass... There were wild-flowers to pluck... There were birds to watch; fish; ants... millions of living things to have an interest in, and lie in wait for, and clap hands and shout in memory of, when they had disappeared. In default of these... there was the merry sunlight to hunt out... there was slumber in the midst of all these soft delights, with the gentle wind murmuring like music in his ears, and everything around melting into one delicious dream. (372; ch. 45)

This perambulating impulse has long made Barnaby the perfect message carrier, "as much to be trusted as the post itself" (91; ch. 10), though his mind too tends to wander—just one symptom of that wildly associative imagination that can get him into trouble when he abandons the lonesome roads for communion with his fellows. His child-like conclusion that the "merry sunlight" betokens a reliable source of currency, for instance, seems innocuous enough when shared with only his mother. Though she does worry about Barnaby's fiscal fancies (in light of his father's murderous avarice), her son's conclusion that the sun deposits gold on the ground sparks only harmless attempts to search out those elusive monies (373; ch. 45, 383; ch. 46). Not until the eavesdropping Stagg overhears Barnaby's musings does the latter's simplicity become problematic. Playing upon Barnaby's craving for that phantom pot of gold, the villainous Stagg convinces him riches will be more readily found back in the city (where Stagg and his chum, Mr. Rudge, can more easily wheedle funds out of Barnaby's mother).

Barnaby's mother returns to London, determined to keep her gullible son far from her evil pursuers, only to watch him run into an even larger pack of troublemakers eager to mislead him. As Stagg has noted, Barnaby is indeed a "likely lad" (381; ch. 45), one malleable enough to be quickly convinced of any enterprise's virtue. This pliability makes Barnaby a reliable catalyst, a predictable tool in narrative hands which tend to place him in the action's epicenter; repeatedly, his naïveté puts the necessary spark to this historical novel's powder, explosively moving the plot along. The noble Gabriel Varden's fears for "the lad—a notable person, sir, to put to bad uses" prove well placed (220; ch. 26). Coming upon an excited crowd of political dissidents on London's outskirts, Barnaby is dazzled by the colorful ribbons and patriotic speeches, and quickly infers that the impending gathering must be a just one. After a few words from

Lord George and his even more corrupt henchman Gashford, Barnaby commits himself to the cause, convinced his participation will honor the king and maybe earn him some elusive gold in the process. This places Barnaby, with his devious friend Hugh, in the middle of an anti-Catholic disturbance outside Westminster, and culminates in Barnaby's striking a soldier from his horse in the belief that such violence will best serve Lord George, the revolt's spokesman (412; ch. 49). This audacious act propels the other demonstrators into action, unwittingly helping to inspire the atrocities at the heart of the novel. Though dismayed by what little of the subsequent violence Barnaby actually witnesses—Hugh and the other lawbreakers set him to guard an out of the way inn before they set about burning buildings—he remains steadfast, “evidently possessed with the idea that he was among the most virtuous and disinterested heroes in the world” (417–18; ch. 50). When soldiers later find and imprison Barnaby, the conspirators use their new hero's incarceration as an excuse to storm and destroy detested Newgate. Again and again, Barnaby's presence provides an impetus for plot movement. His pardon from a death sentence provides the tale with its most unabashedly pathetic moment, as the reader joins the London public in celebrating the last-minute liberation of the now well-known idiot.

We can rejoice in Barnaby's rescue because his involvement in the chaos, unlike that of the other agitators, is driven by some notion of honor. Though an active part of the mob's carryings-on, he regularly provides a moral yardstick against which the rest of the rabble are measured. Trained from childhood to complete a daily toilette, Barnaby rises at five o'clock each morning to wash and prepare himself for another day of bravely defending the hideout's entrance, while his compatriots sleep off the night's debauch in their hideout's dark recesses:

To Hugh and his companion, who lay in a dark corner of the gloomy shed, [Barnaby]...seemed like a bright picture framed by the door, and set off by the stable's blackness. The whole formed such a contrast to themselves, as they lay wallowing, like some obscene animals, in their squalor and wickedness...that for a few moments they looked on without speaking, and felt almost ashamed. “Ah!” said Hugh at length...“He's a rare fellow is Barnaby, and can do more, with less rest, or meat, or drink, than any of us.” (432; ch. 52)

The dramatic use of shadows here reiterates the point of Barnaby's hygiene and Dickens's bestial similes: an enormous moral divide separates Barnaby from his associates. Hugh may convince Barnaby

to defend the Boot, but doing so requires manipulation of his friend's strong ethical sense; to prevent Barnaby from witnessing the imminent carnage, Hugh had to convince him that guarding the conspirator's lair would aid an ill-used politician (433; ch. 52, 439; ch. 53). Involving Barnaby in acts of *injustice* requires appealing to his sense of *justice*, in addition to relying on his usual inability to uncover others' hidden intentions.

Barnaby frequently demonstrates want of moral discernment, a deficiency rooted in a more elementary ignorance of malice and deception. At times, however, Barnaby plays the tried and true role of the *wise fool*, the court jester who somehow sees further than others in spite of his odd behavior and comic appearance. What sounds like gibberish, for instance, may prove to be solid sense. Barnaby's first extensive speech—delivered on a darkened highway over the bleeding and unconscious victim of a midnight robbery—sounds to Gabriel Varden like the drivel of an excited simpleton. Speaking over the wounded young man, Barnaby rambles:

"I know him...Hush!...He went out to-day a wooing. I wouldn't for a light guinea that he should never go a wooing again, for if he did some eyes would grow dim that are now as bright as—see, when I talk of eyes, the stars come out. Whose eyes are they? If they are angels' eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt, and only wink and sparkle all the night?" (35–36; ch. 3)

Though Gabriel questions whether "this silly fellow" can actually know the injured gentleman, later events reveal that Barnaby did indeed recognize the victim, Edward Chester, having long served as the secret liaison between Edward and the beautiful daughter of Mr. Chester's greatest enemy (37; ch. 3). Barnaby has correctly discerned the seriousness of their romantic connection and, in the scene above, assumes correctly that Emma Haredale's eyes would "grow dim" if Edward were seriously injured. Also, while Barnaby's tendency to free-associate here produces the first of many pathetic fallacies, his intuitive linking of the stars with heavenly eyes also signals that sustained, serious concern with divine inaction that looms visibly above all Dickens's social-justice novels.

Another trait Barnaby shares with the fools and idiots of literary tradition is his small measure of prescience, a prophetic power that manifests itself waking and sleeping. One dream about "strange creatures crowded up together neck and heels" accurately predicts the violent mobs that will flood the streets in the middle of the novel, while another dream about his being chased by a man hidden in shadow accurately describes the specter of his father, who even

now dogs his steps (56–57; ch. 6). According to Juliet McMaster, “we are shown that his visions are previews, his shadows foreshadowings of actual events. He is...endowed with a path to truth more direct and immediate than that available to educated minds” (2). Barnaby articulates arguably his most disturbing vision while conscious, with his father—assumed by Barnaby to be dead—hiding directly behind him in his mother’s house. Recognizing the fear in his mother’s eyes, Barnaby looks about in a vague attempt to find that crimson color that marks his wrist and dashes “the ceiling and the walls” in his dreams, then collapses onto a chair in an epileptic, “shivering” fit (150; ch. 17). The blood in Barnaby’s dreams prefigures what we will later discover about his father’s crimes, as well as the impending “Riots of ‘Eighty.” As if to complete the portrait of knowing court fool, Barnaby also wears the appropriate costume: a hat decked out with broken peacock feathers, a bladeless sword hilt, and assorted ribbons and glass toys complement a green outfit awkwardly trimmed with bits of lace and cheap ruffles (35; ch. 3).

Dickens’s characterization of Barnaby proves as motley as the character’s self-fashioned garb. In addition to playing virtually every stereotypical role assigned the idiot by literary convention, Barnaby also exhibits a quite variable, even incoherent, disorder. Though his peculiarities consistently earn him the diagnosis of “idiot” from the tale’s most sympathetic and presumably enlightened characters—including Mr. Haredale, Barnaby’s own mother, and the narrator—the specific nature of his disorder evades easy definition. Even so, some critics have made the attempt. Beginning with the doubtful contention that Dickens always “looked on disease with the observing eye of the expert clinician,” Russell Brain concludes that Barnaby Rudge constitutes his “best-described mental defective” (124, 135). Most *elaborately* described, perhaps. The confidence with which critics have variously labeled Barnaby a “naïve fool” (Schmidt 93), an “idiot” (Crawford 43), a “half-wit” (Buckley 32), and a “madman” (Dransfield 79), however, suggests the difficulty of definitively mapping Barnaby’s mental powers. Something is going on here, and it involves more than language’s inevitable slipperiness. Further clues to the enigma emerge from attempts by critics to sustain coherent diagnoses of Barnaby, diagnoses that usually rely on selective evidence. George Gissing once argued that calling Barnaby an “idiot” constituted an egregious “misuse of language,” claiming that Barnaby was “simply insane” (in the modern sense), an apparently influential re-diagnosis (Schmidt 93). Thelma Grove, on the other hand, uses more recent terminology and diagnostic tools to discover in Barnaby “strong autistic features”

consistent with those characterizing *early infantile autism* (143). Grove grounds her own declaration in a detailed but vulnerable argument. She overlooks Barnaby's strong ties to his mother and his close friend Hugh, as well as his horror at bloodshed, to claim for Barnaby an "autistic withdrawal from normal relationships and lack of responsiveness to other human beings," then refers to Barnaby's making string puzzles on his fingers and wearing of baubles on his clothing in order to assert "a *pathological* preoccupation with certain objects regardless of their common usage" (143, 144, my emphasis). She ignores Barnaby's happy adventures outside the city so that she can sell his need for "adherence to a rigid routine" (143), then rediscovers that same wanderlust to demonstrate autistic "abnormalities of movement, which may be hyperkinetic" (145).

The reason such divergent opinions and terminology can be vigorously applied to a single character lies more in the instability of Dickens's original portrait than in our own shifting vocabulary and constantly changing, growing knowledge concerning mental retardations and autism spectrum disorders. Simply put, Dickens's portrayal is imperfect, his case study of idiocy inconsistent. His celebrated, youthful experiences observing the idiosyncrasies of Members of Parliament and the urban poor's street smarts undoubtedly sharpened his eye for character detail, but Brain's praise of Dickens's powers of observation requires moderation, at least as concerns the novelist's earlier idiots. It will be useful to remember what Brain himself admits during a discussion of Old Chuffey's senile dementia, that at times "clinical accuracy [has] to be sacrificed to the needs of the plot" (132; ch. 15).

Barnaby most closely approximates a severely limiting form of developmental disability—what Victorian physicians categorized as "idiocy" and modern psychiatrists would identify as a species of *severe mental retardation*—when the reader first meets him on a lonesome road in the middle of the night and observes him through Gabriel Varden's eyes. Homing in on repeated, increasingly vehement cries, Gabriel finds the distressed Barnaby hovering over a bloodied man he has found during one of his midnight rambles. In but a moment's time, Barnaby executes a number of odd behaviors that quickly mark him as the archetypal idiot. He wildly waves his torch about, shoves his frenzied face into another's personal space, communicates with a score of rapid, exaggerated nods and hand motions, and repeats the same word, "steel," over again as he tries to convey how the unconscious man was injured (34; ch. 3). The narrator eliminates any doubts concerning Barnaby's nature by describing his countenance as one "which told his history at once," which was lit "by something which was *not* intellect (34; ch. 3)."⁴

He tells us Barnaby's "noblest powers were wanting," notes that the "confused disposition" of his clothes reflects "the disorder of his mind," and sets a precedent for every other character's linguistic practice by bestowing on Barnaby the time-honored, delimiting tag of "idiot" (34-37; ch. 3).

Barnaby maintains at least some of the idiotic raiment given him here through most of the novel. That he lives in a world governed by his own interest and peculiar perspective grows clearer with every "vacant look and restless eye," with each failure to properly interpret or even notice his mother's anxiety, and with gradually accruing examples of a tendency to yield "to every inconstant impulse" (212; ch. 25, 373; ch. 45, 207; ch. 25). The intellectual "disorder" noted by the narrator expresses itself in a profoundly atypical social posture. In addition to a predictable negligence of social graces—like that demonstrated when Barnaby horrifies innkeeper John Willet by placing his hand on a wealthy guest's sleeve (94; ch. 10)—Barnaby fails to understand the practical significance of human antagonisms. The patron whose arm he has touched, the villainous Mr. Chester, shares a longstanding animosity with Barnaby's old friend Mr. Haredale. This tension remains totally outside Barnaby's ken as he runs messages back and forth between the two men, absurdly taking the liberty of inserting the endearment "loving friend" into Haredale's message to his enemy (96; ch. 10). The same thing occurs when Barnaby discovers that his father still lives and, before he has learned of his father's crimes, assumes that his mother will be happy to rejoin her husband (566; ch. 68). This tendency to read friendly relations into all kinds of associations also shapes Barnaby's comic anthropomorphizing of Grip, a pet crow whom Barnaby believes both directs and protects his human companion (61; ch. 6, 147; ch. 17). Barnaby definitely requires *someone* to watch out for him, especially as he sometimes shows little tendency towards self-preservation. In the same way that he neglects the bodily threat presented by a torch's flames and freezing temperatures in his first scene (34; ch. 3, 44; ch. 4), so does he appear inattentive to impending danger during the pre-riot period five years later.

While his intellectual limitations can endanger Barnaby, at times they actually allow his mother to mold his behavior and knowledge for his own protection. The seizure which incapacitates Barnaby during the visit of his (hidden) father gives his mother time to collect herself and better pretend that all is well when Barnaby comes to (150; ch. 17). She also relies on his faulty memory and rapidly shifting attention to shape Barnaby's understanding of their current situation. When Barnaby insists early on in the tale that it is his birthday, forgetting the occasion's celebration a week before, she

tries “to make light of Barnaby’s remark, and endeavour[s] to divert his attention to some new subject; too easy a task at all times, as she knew” (152; ch. 17), just as she later hopes his rapidly shifting thoughts will erase any memory of Stagg’s duplicitous promises (394; ch. 47). More successful are attempts to use Barnaby’s faulty memory to keep him close during their secret sojourn in the country, repeating the same stories each day with hopes he will postpone his wandering, if only for a time:

He had no recollection of these little narratives; the tale of yesterday was new upon the morrow; but he liked them at the moment; and when the humour held him, would remain patiently within doors, hearing her stories like a little child, and working cheerfully from sunrise until it was too dark to see. (371; ch. 45)

When circumstances require abandoning their straw-weaving occupation, Barnaby’s pliability allows his mother to convince him quickly of the need to relocate: “Little persuasion was required to reconcile Barnaby to anything that promised change” (386; ch. 46).

Barnaby will follow his mother anywhere because, though naïve and changeable, he recognizes his mother’s commitment to his well-being—even when he mistakenly thinks he knows better. It is a relational commitment he reciprocates. The plenteous kisses with which he peppers her after a long day’s adventure (147; ch. 17) betoken an affectionate dependent unembarrassed at admitting that dependence. Much of what Barnaby does, in fact, springs from a desire to recognize his mother’s claim on him; he wishes first and foremost to please this primary caregiver and best friend. Convinced by Stagg that the crowded streets of London contain gold for the taking, Barnaby contemplates solely how money will change his *mother’s* life. She will, he thinks, be happier once she has discontinued working long days and has adopted a finer wardrobe (383; ch. 46, 374; ch. 45). After returning to London, he ignores her pleas to avoid the mob of activists gathering outside the city, “bidding her be of good cheer, for their fortunes were both made now” (400; ch. 48). Though he soon forgets about money after joining the dissenters’ ranks, Barnaby remains motivated by the image of his mother. He easily convinces himself not only that his actions will benefit a righteous cause, but that his cutting a dashing figure in the public arena will delight his mother. Riding in front of the crowd with his friend Hugh, Barnaby enjoys the pomp and circumstance only insofar as he can imagine viewing the spectacle through her eyes:

'Wouldn't it make her glad to see me at the head of this large show? She'd cry with joy, I know she would. Where *can* she be? She never sees me at my best, and what do I care to be gay and fine if *she's* not by?' (405; ch. 49)

As the narrator later explains during Barnaby's defense of the rioters' hideout, Barnaby's current contentment springs from the conviction that his joining the movement has not grieved, but gratified, his mother: "She was at the heart of all his cheerful hopes and proud reflections. It was she whom all this honour and distinction were to gladden; the joy and profit were for her" (471; ch. 57). That his assumptions about his mother's feelings fall wide of the mark does not invalidate the singular nature of his enthusiasm.

These apparent lacunae in Barnaby's perception begin to close up, however, when one considers the acute awareness of his mother's emotional state which he occasionally demonstrates. Hints of such sensitivity—inconsistent with the portrayal of either an idiot or imbecile—appear rather early in the novel. Consider, for instance, the evening we meet Barnaby and follow him home to his mother, in whose pale face he immediately reads unease. Though unable to determine the cause of her present state (her greedy, murderous husband has just paid a visit), and unaware that her anxiety arises from concern for her son more than for herself, Barnaby accurately comprehends his mother's anxiety; his own body registers the intensity of her feelings in a bout of uncontrollable shaking (148; ch. 17). After recovering from this seizure-like episode, Barnaby demonstrates additional flashes of intellectual strength across a scene which, ironically, works to inscribe Barnaby's intellectual *weakness* and faulty memory. Note the response to a reminder that his next birthday lies a year away:

'I remember that it has been so till now,' said Barnaby. 'But I think to-day must be my birthday too, for all that...I'll tell you why,' he said. 'I have always seen you—I didn't let you know it, but I have—on the evening of that day grow very sad. I have seen you cry when Grip and I were most glad; and look frightened with no reason; and I have touched your hand, and felt that it was cold—as it is now. Once, mother (on a birthday that was, also) Grip and I thought of this after we went up stairs to bed...you said something in a prayer; and when you rose and walked about, you looked (as you have done ever since, mother, towards night on my birthday) just as you do now. *I have found that out, you see, though I am silly.* So I say you're wrong; and this must be my birthday ...' (152; ch. 17, my emphasis)

This passage illustrates nicely Dickens's desire to have it both ways, to render a pitiable, "silly" innocent who will solicit our sympathies, and at the same time provide an active player in the novel's central mystery who can help the audience begin to collect scattered clues. Though Barnaby's comedic conviction that another birthday has arrived only weeks after the last one plays as ridiculous and somewhat sad, tucked under his foolishness and impaired recollection is striking recall of distant details, plus the associative powers that provide those memories with significance. He remembers well that his mother has grown oddly cold, tearful, and frightened on each of his birthdays, and assumes the presence of such uncharacteristically severe melancholy can only connote another such holiday. Barnaby reveals, too, a conscious awareness of and ability to explain (!) his own, repeated subterfuge (in repeatedly observing his mother's annual sadness without letting her know she is observed), an advanced capacity of dissimulation suggested elsewhere by both Gabriel Varden and Stagg (58; ch. 6, 377; ch. 45).

This passage also parades Barnaby's strikingly normal language. The inarticulateness that introduced him as an "idiot" has disappeared. Barnaby speaks with the sophistication of an educated adult, demonstrated above by his smoothly injecting an independent clause ("I didn't let you know it") into the midst of another clause, and his frequent use of adverbial phrases ("till now," "with no reason," etc.). Note also the logical ordering of his mother's growing distress as Barnaby describes first her generalized mood (sadness), then her physical expression of emotion (crying), next her heightened state of anxiety (fright), and lastly the tangible, empirical proof that her state was serious (he felt her cold hand). His language reflects a similar sophistication when he describes his shadow's height as alternating between that of a church and that of a dwarf, then employs a long series of prepositions and geographic markers to describe how the shadow constantly shifted its position relative to his own body (56; ch. 6). The creativity on display in Barnaby's personification of his shadow—as with his impromptu mime of the appearance and posture of the figure who robbed Mr. Chester (150; ch. 17), or the vision of dancing and plotting conspirators he finds in some wind-whipped shirts hanging on a clothesline (94; ch. 10)—helps complicate still further the portrayal of one who began as a mere idiot. Dickens apparently feels he must have a central character whose language the reader and other characters can immediately identify, leaving them to be intrigued more by the strangeness of his ideas than the phrases he uses to express them. Perhaps the extra layer of linguistic complexity introduced by an idiot's faithfully rendered, compromised speech would have turned

off even more of Dickens's readership in the early 40s, those accustomed to the sad but identifiable emotional and cognitive experience of protagonists like *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.

That Barnaby's portrayal is not just complex but internally inconsistent emerges across scenes in which Barnaby does or understands something recently identified as beyond him. Mrs. Rudge's attempt to escape the husband whom only she knows still exists provides one example of such proximate disparities. Determined to cut all ties with society when she moves to the country, Mrs. Rudge asks Mr. Haredale not to tempt Barnaby into divulging his mother's whereabouts if he should later wander onto the Haredale estate. In doing so, she signals her fear that Barnaby could be easily led to respond openly to anything asked him by old friends (215; ch. 25). It serves Dickens's purpose here to emphasize Barnaby's gullibility so as to dramatize the difficulty of keeping confidential their undisclosed destination. A few pages later, however, Dickens wants to stress the difficulties faced by the other players in this friendship—the challenge Haredale and Gabriel Varden face in locating Mrs. Rudge against her will—and he accordingly constructs Barnaby Rudge anew, as one from whom it is nearly *impossible* to extract information (220; ch. 26).⁵ A similarly conflicted representation of Barnaby appears during the London riots, immediately before Hugh sets Barnaby to guard the Boot. In a matter of moments, Barnaby displays both strong deductive powers and a marked susceptibility to distraction, both loyalty *and* indifference. Overhearing ringleader Gashford's report that "the rioters who have been taken (poor fellows) are committed for trial, and that some very active witnesses have had the temerity to appear against them. Among others...a gentleman...one Haredale," Barnaby turns quickly around in astonishment and anger (440–41; ch. 53). Apparently, Barnaby not only understands words like "witness" and "temerity," but has a working knowledge of the court system, recognizes the role of his close friend Haredale in it, and understands Gashford's condemnation of his friend enough to be enraged! Unlikely enough in itself, this moment of intellectual prowess becomes still more incredible when Hugh quickly, completely erases both anger and epiphany from this suddenly perceptive idiot with a few well-placed, distracting words (440–41; ch. 53).

Immediately after this crisis has been averted and Barnaby dispatched to his new occupation, Gashford notes his surprise at Barnaby's "quick" understanding. Hugh's reply that "He's as quick sometimes...with his head—as you, or any man" (441; ch. 53) brings to the table the very issue in hand, one Dickens seems willing to recognize occasionally, if not immediately resolve. Over the course

of the novel, Dickens actually sets a number of characters to questioning whether Barnaby indeed has an intellectual disability. During their return to London, Barnaby and Mrs. Rudge run into a presumptuous country gentleman determined to have Barnaby's talking crow as his own. Amidst his offers and growing demands for Grip, the gentleman repeatedly denies the authenticity of Barnaby's intellectual deficiency. He calls the claim of idiocy an excuse for laziness curable with a ten minutes' flogging, cries that all real idiots should be locked up in institutions, then reiterates his doubt about Barnaby's condition when Barnaby refuses to sell his feathered friend and hurries to leave (389–91; ch. 47). Lord George Gordon, a political lynchpin in the tale's violent, historical backdrop, provides a second incredulous voice. Lord George runs into Barnaby as the crowd of demonstrators forms and, predictably, embraces the young man's enthusiasm with open arms. When Barnaby's mother asks that he reject Barnaby's bid to participate because he is "not in his right senses," Lord George bristles at the suggestion that supporting "the right cause" could be equated with mental instability (400; ch. 48). That his duplicitous secretary, Gashford, steps in to reject Mrs. Rudge's plea as "a very sad picture of female depravity," while Gordon's honest servant John Grueby later risks (and loses) his job trying to convince his employer of Barnaby's disability, only clarifies Lord George's mistake (400; ch. 48, 474; ch. 57). That is, Dickens cuts short these rather reasonable questions about Barnaby's true state by raising doubts about each questioner's motivation and character. The narrator implies that those inquiring into Barnaby's deficiency (villains, all of them) are in error, that their very doubt signals at least a lack of discernment and probably a disinterest in truth. Such moments seem intended to effectively quiet any questions about Barnaby's idiocy.

Perhaps Dickens wants to exhibit Barnaby's potential while simultaneously maintaining his idiocy so that his late change into a higher-functioning member of society seems the more remarkable by contrast. Up to the point when British soldiers take Barnaby prisoner for his involvement in the riots, Dickens has stressed repeatedly that Barnaby bears an authentic, very stable intellectual disability. In addition to rebutting implicitly the cross-examinations of each doubter, the narrator states directly that his five years in the country "had shed no brighter gleam of reason on his mind; [that] no dawn had broken on his long, dark night" (371; ch. 45), while Barnaby himself tells the country gentleman that he has "always" been an idiot (390; ch. 47). And though Mrs. Rudge's good friend Gabriel Varden claims Barnaby "grows wiser every day," that "He will be a 'cute man yet'" who one day puts "us to the blush," Mrs. Rudge and

the reader know that kindness, "no conviction of his own," motivates the locksmith's words (51; ch. 5).

Once Barnaby's defense of the Boot has been interrupted by a detachment of Foot Guards who successfully (though with effort) disarm and capture him, matters change rapidly. As the soldiers lead Barnaby through crowded streets at the close of chapter fifty-seven, the narrator marches the reader straight into Barnaby's mind. This shift in perspective, presumably meant to help us identify closely with Barnaby's plight, apparently necessitates granting Barnaby a greater degree of self-reflection, perception, and deductive power. With the marching soldiers looking away from him, he can "hardly believe he [is] a Prisoner. But at the word, though only thought, not spoken, he [feels] the handcuffs galling his wrists" and "the warm current of his life run cold" (480; ch. 57). In this moment, Barnaby figures out his new legal status without its being explained to him, and knows enough to fear for his life. Led into the barracks for temporary safekeeping, Barnaby looks about with the attentiveness of one who knows what his situation portends: "nothing escaped his notice" as a long list of details impress themselves "upon his observation, as though he had noticed them in the same place a hundred times" (481; ch. 58). Placed in a dark cell, Barnaby fixes his gaze on the door in an attempt to "accustom himself to the gloom," notes the similarity between the sentinel's step and his own recent pacing at the Boot, and has "wit enough" to remain perfectly still while listening to a discussion of what he recognizes as his own fate—though neither his name nor recent actions are mentioned (481–83; ch. 58). A natural mix of anger and tears erupts from Barnaby during a soldier's cruel reflections on how fun it would be too twist off Grip's head, and he adds the syntactically and linguistically sophisticated resignation, "Kill anything you can, and so revenge yourself on those who with their bare hands untied could do as much to you!" (485; ch. 58). The image of a newly minted, self-assured Barnaby comes into sharper focus as he steps from this holding area into the hands of those who lead him to Newgate prison, assuming a defiant posture: "he would not have *them* think he was subdued or frightened. He walked out like a man, and looked haughtily from face to face" (485; ch. 58). This increasingly acute Barnaby will show only hints of the old deficits as he grows more aware of his decadent environment and of his new, heroic role within it.

As Barnaby and the father he discovers in prison wander about the countryside after Newgate's destruction, "a vague and shadowy crowd" of memories concerning other children's fathers and his mother's old grief surge into Barnaby's mind. Though the narrator attempts to qualify these as "strange promptings of nature, intelligible

to him *as to* a man of radiant mind and most enlarged capacity,” and though these associations lead Barnaby to the unlikely vision of a reunited, nuclear family, the hero demonstrates that he indeed possesses a “radiant mind” and “enlarged capacity” by his transformed perceptions (566; ch. 68, my emphasis). When he follows his father’s directions to search London for the blind Stagg, he begins to see the violent rioters with new eyes, as “a legion of devils” (567; ch. 68). He grows physically ill at the fire, drunkenness, and destruction about him, but still manages to rescue his injured friend Hugh from a scene of rampant self-destruction by riding him out of town on an available horse (567–71; ch. 68). Later recaptured, Barnaby faces almost certain execution with aplomb, sorry only that he must watch Hugh be led away to his death first instead of being allowed to join him on the scaffold.

Refurbished with his new, heroic trappings, this character the narrator persists in calling an “idiot” finds rescue in the last-minute legal maneuverings of his friends and family, and accordingly participates in the ending’s ratification of relationships both present and future. (The farseeing narrator even grants him grey hair and long life—relatively rare occurrences among those with developmental disabilities.) The tale completes the morphing of an unpredictable dependent into a sharp and capable member of society when the narrator describes Barnaby’s psychological and physical recovery from recent events:

though he could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became, in other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose; but a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away. He was not the less happy for this.... He lived with his mother on the Maypole farm.... Never was there a lighter-hearted husbandman... It was remarkable that although he had that dim sense of the past, he sought out Hugh’s dog, and took him under his care; and that he could never be tempted into London. (687–88; ch. 82)

To the last, the narrator continues his contrary claims, insisting in the same breath that Barnaby’s memory has improved and also remains imperfect, that Barnaby largely forgets his London adventures and remembers specific details from them. (Hugh’s dying request was that someone care for his dog.) Not long after explaining how the scene of maddened rioters and burning buildings was “fixed indelibly upon [Barnaby’s] mind,” a shocking spectacle to be sure, the narrator is trying to dismiss Barnaby’s abhorrence of London

as inexplicable (571; ch. 68).

Dickens apparently felt that reassimilating this important character into a predictable, comedic ending marked by renewed communities and requisite marriages required recasting Barnaby as someone who could be a more equal member of that welcoming circle. For years, Barnaby's mother has persisted in caring for what the narrator calls a problematic, "despised and slighted work," one whose gaiety gladdens her while his "ghastly and unchild-like cunning" sometimes frightens (208-9; ch. 25). Though she found some measure of comfort in his continuing innocence, she also despaired in long "watching for the dawn of mind that never came" (154; ch. 17, 209; ch. 25). Experience gave her face "the patient composure of long effort and quiet resignation" as she slowly realized her Barnaby's adult years would not diminish his dependence. The two long ago moved from the hometown where everyone knew them to the anonymity of London, a metropolis where they could craft a life of isolation relieved only by occasional contact with a few persistent friends. In order to reestablish Barnaby and his mother's place in a large and more intimate network of personal relationships, as Dickens does in the novel's close, he must not only erase Mrs. Rudge's desire for seclusion by bringing the family secret out into the open, but mitigate Barnaby's dependence by diminishing the source of that dependence and thereby forming a more egalitarian domestic and social space on which to dim the stage lights. Instead of eliminating this particularly troublesome, intellectually disabled figure, Dickens eliminates his inconsistent disability.

NOTES

¹ See Easson's editorial notes to chapter twenty-two (692).

² What David Wright says of the word "insane" applies readily to its close cousin "mad." In his historiography of the Earlswood Asylum, Wright notes that nineteenth-century medical and legal usage of the term "insane" encompassed "idiots" as well as "lunatics." The association of "insane" specifically with mental illness would be a twentieth-century development (10).

³ "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation" (Numbers 14:18).

⁴ This first detail is doubly ironic. Until we turn the page and come upon Phiz's fourth illustration, we do not have the facial features to read and thus cannot know Barnaby's "history at once." Also, despite the assertion that character can be read in one's countenance, the narrator obviously feels two full pages of exposition necessary to

elaborate upon the clue provided by the illustration, a situation that, perhaps unwittingly, begins to interrogate those physiognomic assumptions with which Dickens holds a troubled alliance.

⁵ This disparity reflects not just a shift in perspective from that of a protective mother to that of concerned friends, but a highly variable construction of Barnaby's facilities. These various heroes might have different slants on Barnaby's abilities, but totally polarized opinions? Unlikely.

*To be continued in the September issue, at which time
the list of WORKS CITED will appear*

