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“The Meaning of Prophets and the Making of Trolls:
19th-Century Reception of Charles Dickens’ *Barnaby Rudge*”

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The Meaning of Prophets and the Making of Trolls: 19th-Century Reception of Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*

Maddison McGann

Comprised of arson, betrayal, murder, abduction, exploitation, rebellion, and bastardry, Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* is all but a boring read. Set during the Gordon Riots of 1780, Dickens' fifth novel was published in installments beginning in 1841, each week promising a new cast of characters and events having to do with the anti-Catholic uprisings that had taken place nearly 60 years prior. These uprisings, led by Lord George Gordon, had originally begun as orderly protests over Catholics serving in the British Army; however, they quickly evolved into full-scale riots, with crowds of over 50,000 people burning down prisons, churches, and the homes of Irish immigrants. According to critics, the rise and dominance of periodicals in this period amplified Dickens' interest in the Riots, which were widely read about and recorded in daily newspapers and political magazines. As Iain McCalman points out, Dickens' inspiration for the novel may have even come from a coroner's report that was featured in *The Times* in 1838 – one that described a man strangling himself in an obscure London Tavern after revealing his revolutionary past ([Figure 1](#)). The man, it turned out, had been Lord Gordon's secretary during the Riots, and this disturbing news bite – along with subsequent others – formed the basis for what would eventually become Dickens' first historical novel.

Fearing that religious persecution and political rebellion wouldn't be enough, Dickens also framed his novel with a murder mystery – one complete with a double homicide, an elaborate coverup, and a mysterious raven who fails to live up to his prophetic potential. Despite Dickens' best efforts, however, *Barnaby Rudge* was considered a flop – a hodgepodge of caricaturist-characters and dizzying plotlines that proved that Dickens was “as little at home on

THE TIMES

22. INQUEST.—A coroner's jury at an inquest, held on the corpse of Robert Watson, who strangled himself in bed at the Blue Anchor Tavern, St. Mary-at-hill, returned a verdict of "Temporary derangement." The deceased was eighty-eight years old; and, according to the account given by himself to the landlord of the Blue Anchor, a few days before his death, had been engaged in singular adventures. Watson said, that he had been deeply implicated in the riots of 1780, being at that period private Secretary to Lord George Gordon. He afterwards became president for a time to the London Corresponding Society. Having

Figure 1. Coroner's Report Published in *The Times*, 1838

the grounds of history

... as [he was] on rustic manners" (Anonymous review from *The North British*). While one nineteenth-century reviewer re-christened the novel "Barnaby Rubbish," another, Dickens' close friend and literary agent, deemed it "the weakest book that Dickens ever wrote" (*The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*). Opinions in other reviews ranged from Ruskin's "A stupid novel" to Poe's "a novel unprofitably sacrificed at the shrine of ...mystery" (*The Saturday Evening Post*, 1841). These critiques ultimately served as the basis for much of the novel's reception, and continue to drive present-day critics, who seek to either salvage the novel as an ambitious (albeit ill-fated) effort, or to determine the novel's historical accuracy nearly two hundred years after the fact.

While I can't rescue *Barnaby* from its long history of disparagement, I would like to argue that the nineteenth-century critical reception of the novel was emblematic of a wider grappling with periodical novel writing – a practice that, Dickens himself, had popularized in the early nineteenth century. In particular, I'd like to examine how the serialization of *Barnaby Rudge* came to factor into its reviews, looking specifically at how nineteenth-century critics were, in effect, 'writing' and 're-writing' the events of the novel in their reviews at the same time as the novel was being published. I'll focus on two reviews, both written by Edgar Allan Poe, who was an avid Dickens reader and a well-established critic. Suffice to say, Poe had as many qualms about Dickens' novel as he did about the waste of a good raven, and his reviews spurred a longstanding newspaper conspiracy that would put most contemporary fan theories to shame. While this paper aims mainly to relay the events that took place both during and following the publication of *Barnaby Rudge*, it also offers a broader framework for thinking about Victorian reception in the context of serialization. Ultimately, it is my hope that by looking more closely at the critical reception of *Barnaby Rudge*, we can gain a better idea of how nineteenth-century periodicals were helping to shape the historical and aesthetic contexts in which these novels were received.

In the spring of 1841, Poe published his first anonymous review of *Barnaby Rudge* in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Despite having only read the first few chapters – some 100 pages of, what is, in its entirety, a 670-page novel – Poe felt confident enough in his aptitude for deduction to declare both who the murderer was and how the story would unfold. Surprisingly enough, Poe was right about nearly everything, but most importantly, he was right about the fact that Rudge Senior, who was presumed dead at the start of the novel, was actually the murderer all along. In spite of this impressive conjecture, Poe’s review– which he deemed a “prospective notice”– went largely unnoticed, seemingly disappearing from the public register entirely until nine months later, when he published a second review in *Graham’s Magazine*, this time un-anonymously and this time, upon the novel’s completion. In this second review, Poe congratulated himself on the points he’d gotten right and blamed Dickens for those he’d had wrong, claiming that Dickens had “not sufficiently considered or determined upon *any* particular plot when he began the story” (*Graham’s Magazine*, 1841). In terms of these divergences, Poe insisted that the “absurd fashion of periodical novel-writing” had manifested in Dickens’ writing “numerous traces of indecision” that suggested that Dickens, at some point, had begun winging it, and had “abandoned ... or rather suffered to merge the soul of the plot in that of the Popish Riot” (*Graham’s Magazine*, 1841). What’s more, Poe proclaimed that *his* version of the story was far better than the original, noting that “if [he] did not rightly prophesy” then “at least, [his] prophecy *should have been* right.” Poe concluded his review by insisting that “while Dickens [had] a talent for all things, [he had] no positive genius for adaptation, and still less for that metaphysical art in which the souls of all mysteries lie.” Spanning over fifteen pages single spaced, Poe’s second review would not go unnoticed.

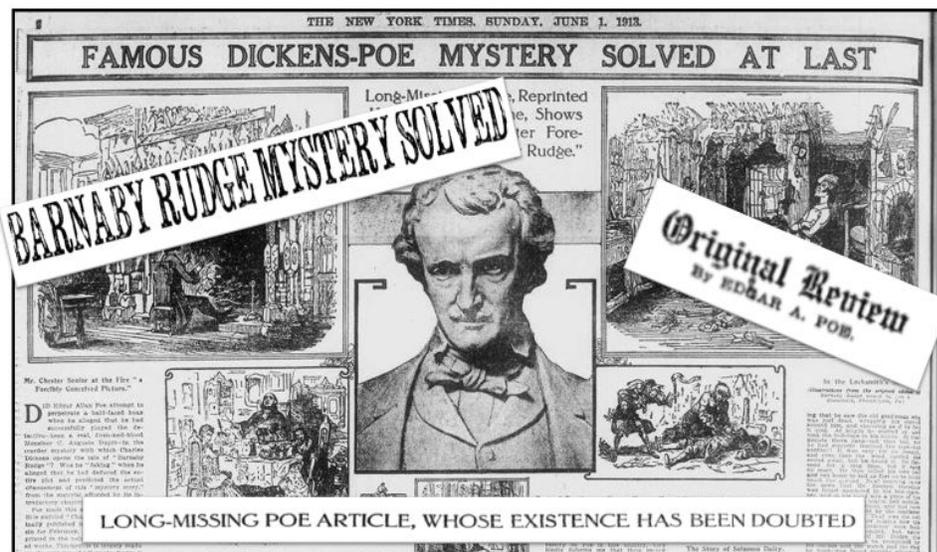
Putting aside the contents of the review for a moment, I want to turn to its reception. Poe’s review sparked a transatlantic, cross-paper conspiracy over whether Poe truly had prophesied the events of the novel. As aforementioned, Poe’s “prophetic notice” had disappeared into thin air, leaving more than one critic skeptical as to the verity of his claims. As Gerald Grubb notes, “So soon did this review disappear that all that was known about it was contained in the statements which Poe himself made in his later and fuller review of *Barnaby Rudge*” (“The Personal and Literary Relationships of Dickens and Poe” 8). In fact, it wasn’t until 1914, some seventy years after Barnabygate first began, that Sir William Robertson Nicoll, a Scottish journalist and editor, launched a full-scale investigation into the matter, asking whether Poe’s prediction was, for one, ever truly “published in the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post*,” and, for two, whether it had been “distinctly understood immediately upon the perusal of the [story],” as Poe had claimed. In his investigations, Nicoll concluded that if Poe did in fact publish the article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, he would have had to have written it only *after* having read the fifth chapter – a damning conclusion that challenged both Poe’s editorial integrity and his divination skills. Not long after that, however, a man by the name of William Glyde Wilkens exonerated Poe in a *New York Times* article, which was published in May of 1914. In this article – directly addressed to Sir Nicoll – Wilkens claimed that he had written to the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and that the editor had, in fact, confirmed that Poe *did* write and publish the original review in 1841. As to the second claim, Wilkens appeared less confident, but nonetheless, he went on to publish Poe’s original review in full – prompting what had to have been to be the most sensationalized headlines in the history of the *New York Times* ([Figure 2](#)).

I offer this Poe-Dickens conspiracy not as a means of detracting from the novel, but rather as a way of pointing out what I consider to be the novel’s most stunning feature: its ability

to leave so much wanting that readers have no choice but to fill in the gaps. This is not to say that Dickens actually left anything in *Barnaby Rudge* unresolved; in fact, quite the opposite is true—by the end of the novel, we know the fates of nearly every character involved in the Riots, including the raven's. What I do mean to say, however, is that, murder mystery aside, *Barnaby Rudge* proved just as dependent on the imaginings of the reader as on the events themselves. It required that readers fill in the gaps—draw their own conclusions—write in the events even as they were happening. Take this passage, for example; in this moment, we think we are being introduced to Mr. Chester, but we soon find out that we are actually in Ms. Miggs' head. Dickens writes:

...when Dolly was sitting listlessly at breakfast, reading all manner of fortunes ... in the grounds of her teacup, a step was heard in the workshop, and Mr Edward Chester was ... descried through the glass door, standing among the rusty locks and keys, like love among the roses – for which apt comparison the historian may by no means take any

Figure 2. Front Page of *The New York Times*, June 1, 1918



credit to himself, the same being the invention, in a sentimental mood, of the chaste and modest [Ms] Miggs, who, beholding him from the doorsteps she was then cleaning, did, in her maiden meditation, give utterance to the simile. (160)

In this moment, Dickens' grammar can be said to be serving as a microcosm of the novel itself. The parapsydokian— or the unexpected reveal— occurs in the latter half of the sentence, at the exact moment in which the reader realizes that the narrator has not been narrating after all. The reader is then forced to return back to the beginning of the sentence in order to view Mr. Chester anew. They are forced to relive the experience of meeting Mr. Chester, but this time with the intelligence that they are meeting him as Ms. Miggs. This unexpected return disallows what we

might call a “pure reading” to occur; it ensures that every interpretation will be colored by a previous one— one effectively offered, and authorized, by Dickens.

Treating this passage as representative of the whole, I would like to return for a moment to Poe, whose review was far more a re-writing of *Barnaby Rudge* than it was an actual critique of it. In stressing this point, I also stress the fact that what allowed for Poe’s re-writing to occur was the fact that *Barnaby Rudge* was serialized— that it was sent out and read by Poe in weekly installments. In order to claim that his version was the better version, Poe first needed to appropriate the role of author— an endeavor that required both a pause and a platform. While serialization afforded the former, periodicals supplied the latter, thus enabling Poe to review the novel in question at the same time as ‘write’ it.

Once Poe’s review *was* written, however, his cards were effectively laid, and he had to watch week by week and month by month as his prophecies failed to come true. One prophecy, in particular, is worth mentioning, considering it came to bear quite heavily on Poe’s life. This prophecy concerned none other than Grip, Barnaby’s raven, who Poe was certain would “croak frequently ... and prophetically [throughout] the course of the narrative.” In his initial review, Poe writes of

Barnaby, the hero, and of his raven, whose croakings are to be frequently, appropriately, and prophetically heard in the course of the narrative, and whose whole character will perform in regard to that of the idiot, much the same part as does, in music, the accompaniment in respect to the air. Each is distinct. Each differs remarkably from the other. Yet between them there is a strong analogical resemblance; and although each may exist apart, they form together a whole which would be incomplete without the other. This is clearly the design of Mr. Dickens – although he himself may not at present perceive it. (Review from *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 1, 1841)

Despite his assuredness, Poe was incorrect in his prediction that Barnaby’s raven would be heard “prophetically,” and that Dickens would develop a spiritual connection between the two. Upon learning that Grip croaked neither ‘frequently’ nor ‘prophetically,’ Poe mused, “How fine an opportunity has Mr. Dickens missed ... The raven ... intensely amusing as it is, might have been made, more than we now see it ... its croakings might have been *prophetically* heard in the course of the drama.” Needless to say, Poe took advantage of Dickens’ “missed opportunity”— publishing his own literary tale about a prophetic raven just four years later. Unsurprisingly, the central focus of Poe’s most celebrated poem was the “strong analogical” relationship between a raven and a speaker, the latter of whom filled the speaker’s narrative with interruptions of “Nevermore,” and the former of whom prompted the raven with a series of leading questions. As Grubb points out, the question-and-answer scheme that constitutes Poe’s poem is reminiscent of the following conversation that takes place between Barnaby and Grip as they are imprisoned together in a desolate jail house. Barnaby asks:

‘Grip hopes, but who cares for Grip?’

The raven gave a short, dull, melancholy croak. It said “Nobody” as plainly as a croak could speak.

‘Who cares for Grip expecting you and me?’ said Barnaby ...

The raven croaked again – ‘Nobody.’ (576)

In this moment, Grip's aptly spoken and oft repeated 'Nobody' suggests Poe's 'Nevermore,' while frequent allusions to Poe's raven as a "devil" echoes Grips' "I'm a devil, I'm a devil" (heard throughout Dickens' story). The combined speech act between the speaker and the raven ensures that the two "form together a whole which would be incomplete without the other," thus serving as a formal device that effectively fulfills and enacts Poe's prophecy.

As Matthew Redmond has rightfully pointed out, the Raven-Rudge connection seems to "hold something vitally important in reserve," with most critics approaching the topic as "a sort of trial in which Poe stands accused of plagiarizing Dickens" (90).¹ While these studies are undoubtedly worthwhile, their overwhelming focus on the *extent* to which Poe plagiarized Dickens' work has largely obscured questions of how and why. Rather than putting Poe 'on trial,' I would suggest that we begin to contextualize his reviews (and subsequent 'plagiarism') within this particular moment of serialization in mid-nineteenth century Britain. According to Carolyn Lambert, the mid-nineteenth century was a time when authors and critics alike were forced to adapt to the rapid commercialization of fiction, which created "layers of complexity and intertextual nuance that had not been found in volume editions" (116). It is important to remember, however, that while many authors (including Dickens) felt frustrated by the constraints and demands of serial publication,¹¹ there were just as many readers/reviewers reveling in this idea of 'co-creation.' The limitations and possibilities afforded by "periodical novel writing" rendered authorship negotiable, allowing critics to extend the text's creative production even beyond the limits of its author. In other words, the fact that critics like Poe were writing and publishing 'alternative endings' at the same time as they were reading the novel suggests that reading a serial novel in the mid-nineteenth century was neither a predetermined nor a passive experience; rather, it was a "choose your own adventure" game that allowed for unspoken collaboration to take place between authors and readers. The serial novel (and its subsequent shift in reviewing) enabled readers to become creators *as well as* consumers, thus changing the way that novels were read and received in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

Notes

- I. Here, Redmond is alluding to Gerald Grubb (mentioned earlier in the essay), as well as Fernando Galvan and Graham Thompson.
- II. In a letter to his readers published in *Master Humphry's Clock*, Dickens wrote:
I have often felt cramped and confined in a very irksome and harassing degree, by the space in which I have been constrained to move ... I have been sometimes strongly tempted (and have been at some pains to resist the temptation to hurry incidents on, lest they should appear to you who waited from week to week, and had not, like me, the result and purpose in your minds, too long delayed). In a word, I have found this form of publication most anxious, perplexing, and difficult ... (October, 1841).

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