Reappraising Dickens’s ‘Noble Savage’

GRACE MOORE

It might be laid down as a very good general rule of social and political guidance, that whateverenter Half-Chimpanzees, is the thing by no means to be done.

The Niger Expedition', 19 August 1848 [MP 117]

One might have thought that Mr Dickens, as editor of the 'Household Words', had no little to do on the coast of Africa as Mrs Jekyll (sic.) the mistress of a family in Thonges Inn.

Lord Donner

In October 1849 Dickens wrote to Forster with the outline of a proposal for an article for Household Words. The piece was to be, 'A history of Savages, showing the singular respects in which all savages are like each other; and those in which civilised men, under circumstances of difficulty, soonest become like savages'. It was not until four years later that Dickens finally put together the polemical 'Noble Savage' essay which appeared as the lead article in Household Words for 11 June 1853. The piece itself is rather an anomaly and has led critics like Sheila M. Smith to remark on its 'uncontrolled hysteria'. At a first glance the article does not make pleasant reading, but it has been dismissed too readily as a mere testimony of Dickens's growing racism during this period. It is my opinion, however, that circumstances leading up to the writing of the article offer an important insight into both its tone and the contrapuntalism of Dickens's frequently shifting stance on race in the years before 1857.

To attempt to elide the manifest racism of 'The Noble Savage' would be facile. Yet the willingness of critics like Bratling to accept the article at face value as a torrent of vitriol may be attributed to an overestimation of Carlyle's influence over Dickens in the early 1850s. One explanation for this undue weighting of Carlyle's contribution is undoubtedly a result of Dickens's dedication of Hard Times to his mentor in 1854. The inscription, however, does not imply that he embraced Carlyle's every opinion, nor can it be read as a direct endorsement of the sentiments of 'The Nigger Question'. Rather, Dickens sought to place on record his well-documented admiration for the author of Charnwood and Past and Present and his attacks on Utilitarianism and laissez-faire.

Dickens's allegiance to the abolitionist cause demonstrates that he is unlikely to have been swayed by Carlyle's portrait of the pumpkin-eating 'Quashye' or his assertions of the justice of 'slavery of the strong to the weak'. Dickens was strongly committed to the emancipation of all slaves and believed that they could eventually be integrated into society on an equal basis with white men. As he and Henry Morley suggested, three years after the publication of 'The Nigger Question', 'We think... that it is possible to combine with the duty of emancipation the not less
important duty of undoing the evil that has been done to the slaves' minds, and of doing them some good service by way of atonement." While Dickens understood that the evils of the slave system had resulted in the degradation of the slave, Carlyle had registered in *Lettred Pumpdert* a predestinarian belief in the slave's innate inferiority and irredeemable nature:

My friend, I grieve to remind you, but it is eternally the fact: Whom Heaven has made a slave, no parliament of men nor power that exists on Earth can render free. No; he is chained by fetters which parliaments with their millions cannot reach. You can label him free; yes, and it is but labelling him a sceleist, —bidding him be the parent of sceleisms wherever he goes. You can give him pumpkins, houses of ten-pounds rent, houses of ten-thousand pound: the bigger candle you light within the slave-image of him, it will but show his slave-features on the larger more hideous scale. Herosism, manful herosism is not his: many things you can give him, but that thing never. Him the Supreme Powers marked in the making of him, slave; appointed him at his and our peril, not to command but to obey, in this world. Him you cannot enfranchise, not him, to proclaim this man free is not a God's Gospel to other men; it is an alarming Devil's Gospel to himself and to us all."

In these two passages it is the difference between the two writers that are noteworthy, as opposed to any similarities. Dickens's view of the fundamental right to freedom of all men was completely irreconcilable to Carlyle's rigid vision of a pre-destined hierarchy. Significantly, the 'North American Slavery' article does not resort to the type of racial stereotyping on which Carlyle's argument is so dependent. It would therefore seem unlikely that a mere nine months later, Dickens's feelings on the issue would have altered so substantially as to prompt him to risk his popularity by giving vent to a barrage of racist opinions.

Some other factor must therefore have been responsible for the sudden shift in perspective of 'The Noble Savage', and I would argue that the piece constitutes a reply to a series of articles byLord Denman. There were six articles published between September and October 1852 in *The Standard* which condemned Dickens for his response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, attacked the satirical Bori-Boolea-Ghi venture of *Bleak House* and intimated that he was less than committed to the work of the abolitionists. Denman, it would seem — along with John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau — did not appreciate the satirical caricature of the telescopic philanthropist, Mrs Jellyby, but instead he argued:

'[Dickens] exerts his powers to obstruct the great cause of human improvement — that which in general he cordially advocates. He does his best to replunge the world into the most barbarous abuses that ever afflicted it. We do not say that he actually defends slavery or the slave-trade, but he takes pains to discourage by ridicule, the effort now making to put them down. We believe, indeed, that in general
terms he expresses just hatred for both; but so do all those who profit
or wish to profit by them, and who, by that general profession, prevent the detail of particulars too atrocious to be endured. 9

For one who had witnessed the abuses committed by the American slave-
holders at first hand, and who responded as emotionally as Dickens did
in American Notes, to be grouped with them must have been particularly
galling. It would appear, however, that Dickens initially attempted to
placate Denman by outlining his support for emancipation with the
'North American Slavery' piece which appeared five days after The
Standard's first onslaught. Yet as one article after another appeared and
each became more personal in their censure of his work, Dickens began
to lose patience.

It was Denman's adoption of Harriet Beecher Stowe as a type of
protégée which annoyed Dickens even more than the attacks on his own
work. Although he praised the novel in public as 'a noble work; full of
high power, lofty humanity; the gentlest, sweetest, and yet boldest
writing', 10 in private he was less complimentary about its artistic merit.
He implied in a letter to Mrs Richard Watson that a number of Beecher
Stowe's protagonists had been culled from existing sources, most notably
his own works:

She [...] is a little unscrupulous in the appropriation way. I seem to
see a writer with whom I am very intimate (and whom nobody can
possibly admire more than myself) peeping very often through the
thinness of the paper. Further I descry the ghost of Mary Barton, and
the very palpable mirage of a scene in the Children of the Mist... 11

Although at this stage Dickens was more entertained than angered by the
book's shortcomings, its author's visit to England the following year
altered his perspective considerably. The Standard's articles were re-
published in pamphlet form in 1853, presumably to coincide with the
trip, although Denman was by now incapacitated by a stroke. Dickens
may have been gallant in his assurances to Denman's daughter that he
had completely dismissed her father's part in the affair, but he was also
singularly defensive of Bleak House, arguing that 'No kind of Slavery is
made or intended, in that connexion'. 12 Mrs Stowe's visit was treated
with a similar degree of attention to Dickens's own voyage to the United
States in 1842. A banquet was given in her honour at the Mansion House
on 2 May and she sat opposite to Dickens. As Harry Stone has noted,
Forrest Wilson later described Dickens's toast to Mrs Stowe as 'the most
restrained praise of herself and Uncle Tom's Cabin Harriet was to hear
publicly expressed in the course of her entire British visit'. 13 Dickens's
coolness no doubt stemmed from the irritation generated by Denman's
articles and it is probable that the linking of his name to that of a woman
he considered to be an inferior author also annoyed him. Stone has
argued convincingly that Dickens may simply have been jealous of all
the fuss, and this explanation seems a feasible one. Along with
Washington Irving (whom he admired immensely), Dickens had been
one of the first transatlantic literary celebrities and he may well have resented the feting of a work that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was later to cruelly parody in ‘Uncle Ned’: ‘Him take dribble on and on without a break./Till you hab no eyes for to see./When I reach Chapter 4 I had got a headache./So I had to let Chapter 4 be’.\footnote{\textit{Cf.}}

Dickens may not have resorted to Rossetti’s extremes, but he was certainly unimpressed by Beecher Stowe, later referring to her memoirs, \textit{Sunny Memories of a Foreign Land} as ‘Moony Memories’.\footnote{\textit{Cf.}} It would seem that Dickens was anxious to disassociate himself from the author of \textit{Uncle Tom}, as less than six weeks after his encounter with Mrs Stowe, ‘The Noble Savage’ appeared in \textit{Household Words}. The tone of the piece is completely at odds with anything he had written in the past, and indeed, anything else he was writing at the time. The beginning of the article is almost Podsnapian in its assertion, ‘I have not the least belief in the Noble Savage. I consider him a prodigious nuisance, and an enormous superstition’ \textit{[RP 467]}. In a manner as consistent as that of Podsnap was to become, the narrative voice (which I hesitate to align with that of Dickens) continues to discuss at great length the very savage in whom he professes not to believe. There are several different arguments in play within the article, and I would suggest that the grotesque description of the savage as ‘cruel, false, thievish, murderous; addicted more or less to grease, entrails, and beastly customs; a wild animal with the questionable gift of boastng; a concieted, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug’ \textit{[RP 467]} is an attempt to sever any perceived connection between himself and Mrs Stowe once and for all.

The hyperbolic effect of the succession of epithets renders the description almost absurd, and it is a far cry from Dickens’s more moderate observation that he thought Uncle Tom, ‘a little too celestial’\footnote{\textit{Cf.}}. In beginning the piece with such an accumulation of negative images, Dickens appears to be adopting the voice that Denman had attributed to him in order to demonstrate the absurdity of his accusations that a number of pieces in \textit{Household Words} ‘appeared to have been written for the taste of slave traders only’\footnote{\textit{Cf.}}. Dickens had not thwarted Denman’s attacks by writing to appease him, so now he played along with the allegations instead.

After the introductory paragraphs, the tone becomes much more moderate and is more akin to Dickens’s own voice. Essentially, the narrative voice offers several different views of the ‘savage’, which range from disdain for his barbarity to sympathy at his plight and annoyance at the people of Exeter Hall. Shearer West has posited that ‘By the mid-nineteenth century the reading of the savage as a natural man had given way to the idea that savagery resulted from a process of degeneration from a state of primal grace’.\footnote{\textit{Cf.}} Dickens’s essay was certainly attempting to explore these tensions and it is characteristic of his dialectic mode of thought that he would not necessarily seek to reconcile them. The discussion of the ‘savage’ is by no means confined to the African, but also encompasses the Ojibbeway Indians too. It is rather curious that Dickens speaks of George Catlin as ‘energetic’ and ‘earnest’ \textit{[RP 468]} as Catlin’s 1844 display of Amerindians had been
exposed as a hoax when the 'exhibits' were discovered to be from the East End of London. It is, therefore, unclear as to whether it was to the East Enders in need of missionary care that he referred when he described the 'savages' on show as 'wretched creatures, very low in the scale and very poorly formed' [RP 468] or to the Ojibbeys. Dickens was, however, well known as a great admirer of the Native American people and lamented both privately and in American Notes their shoddy treatment at the hands of settlers.

As with the Crystal Palace, Dickens once again registers a dislike for exhibitions in 'The Noble Savage'. He argues that the Ojibbeys (or Londoners) were 'no better than the chorus at an Italian Opera in England - and would have been worse if such a thing were possible' [RP 468], which suggests that he regarded them as displaced and realised that the exhibition was choreographed and contrived. Interestingly, Punch took a similar line on the displays in its article of the same year, 'Thoughts on the Savage Lions of London: By a friend and a brother', a piece which sheds light on Dickens's disapproval of the spectacle of savagery through linking it to problems closer to home. The Punch poem concentrates on the way in which Africans are exploited through the shows, but more importantly it reminds readers that, 'in the back courts of St Giles's, it may be, Hordes of young savages there we could get...But they've no fancy dress to set off their figures...And nothing is thought of an every-day sight...And “Uncle Tom”'s roused such a penchant for niggers...That dark skins must now take precedence of white...'. Punch's indictment inadvertently transforms Carlin's deception into an ironic and symbolic act. The civilized nation was interested only in the novelty of the African, and the only way in which the urban poor could draw the attention of the telescopic philanthropist was through deception. Dickens may not have explicitly stated this parallel in 'The Noble Savage', but his cry at the end of 'The Niger Expedition', 'Look to your tents, O Israel!...but see they are your own tents!' [MP 134] would suggest that the belief was always at the heart of his writing on the matter.

It is not so much the 'savage' that Dickens attacks in his essay, but rather 'the whimpering over him with maudlin admiration, and the affecting to regret him, and the drawing of any comparison between the blemishes of civilisations and the tenor of his swinish life' [RP 468]. Certainly, Dickens's criticisms of the misplaced priorities of organisations such as Exeter Hall were nothing new. The descriptions in 'The Noble Savage' may have been more scathing in tone, but they were not significantly different from the observations made in the review of 'The Niger Expedition' five years earlier. Denman had alluded to the review (which he mistakenly attributed to Household Words, when it had in fact appeared in The Examiner) as 'extremely facetious upon missionaries in general...particularly so on those employed in Africa'...

Dickens's review of Allen and Thompson's Narrative had appeared in August 1848 - just a year before the publication of 'The Nigger Question'. The mission to the banks of the Niger had taken place in 1841 and it was an unmitigated disaster from beginning to end. The venture, organised by the prominent abolitionist Buxton, aimed to promote
'civilization' through trade (a somewhat anomalous concept to the modern reader, although certainly not to the Victorians) and to prevent the Africans from selling slaves to other nations, Buxton had declared to the Colonial Secretary, Lord John Russell, that he sought to see the people of Africa 'awakened to a proper sense of their own degradation' [MP. 119]. The journey had been troubled from the outset, with a problem over the design of the steamers delaying commencement by several months. The expedition was poorly planned, and little attention was paid to factors such as climatic differences and local diseases. Of the three hundred and one who journeyed to the Niger, forty-one people died of a tropical fever. In addition, the indigenous population of the area showed little desire either to be converted or to discontinue the profitable traffic in human flesh. Dickens was singularly withering towards the efforts of the 'weird old women' of Exeter Hall and their unsolicited telescopic philanthropy [MP 117]. He recounts the immense catalogue of the voyage's lofty aims in a typically flippant tone and ends by remarking:

A glance at this short list, and a retrospective glance at the great number of generations during which they have all been comfortably settled in our own civilised land, never more to be the subjects of dispute, will tend to materially remove any aspect of slight difficulty they may present. [RP 118]

Here, Dickens registers the fact that civilization cannot be attained overnight in any society. The catalogue registers what has not yet been established in 'our own civilised land' and attacks the cultural and racial arrogance of British pretensions to civilisations. What is most important about the article, though, is that it does not make any generalisations on the subject of race. In the novels preceding Bleak House, Dickens's view of evil was individual rather than institutional. Thus, characters like Quilp or Mr Carker could be manifestly wicked without Dickens's essential optimism being disturbed. Thus, in 'The Niger Expedition' the evil of the attacks against the missionaries is attributed to King Boy and King Obi as individuals, rather than to a collective race.

Like Bleak House, 'The Noble Savage' should be regarded as a transitional work in which Dickens's worldview is seen to alter significantly. The 'savage' of 1853 is a far more formalistic figure and the subject of a number of sweeping statements on the behaviour of his kind. Admittedly, Household Words had, in the past, published articles such as the 'Cape' Sketches' of Alfred Whaley Cole: although ostensibly a piece about the native labour resources of the colonies, the article degenerates into an attempt to ascribe different racial traits to different tribes. Thus the Bojesman language is dismissed as 'probably the most hideous language in the world... It is more like the chattering of apes than the tongue of man', and the reader is warned of the Hottentot:

A most eccentric race – a most extraordinary mixture of good and evil qualities. In fact, nearly every Hottentot is a kind of living
paradox... He is a drunkard and a thief... He will serve you for two or three months in sobriety and honesty, then he will give you warning, pocket his wages, walk off to the nearest canteen, and never be sober for a month, or for whatever time his money may last... Unless your olfactory nerves are unusually obuse, it is advisable to put any room which a Hottentot damsel has been in order for at least half an hour after her departure.  

As Dickens’s contact with ‘savages’ of any description must have been minimal, it is not unfair to suggest that many of his views of ‘what the Noble Savage does in Zululand’ [RP 469] would have been influenced by articles such as Whaley Cole’s. His early interest in the evolutionary debate must also have altered his stance toward less developed races considerably, thus providing some explanation for the marked shift in perspective between 1848 and 1853.

There is a definite dialogue between the review of ‘The Niger Expedition’ and ‘The Noble Savage’ in spite of Dickens’s growing tendency towards racism in the 1850s. The conclusion of the latter is in contradiiction to the aggression of its beginning by its emphasis on the similarities between British life and that of the Noble Savage. The ‘savage’ is held up as a paradigm for all to avoid, and Dickens remains unconvincing to the likes of Mrs Merdle who extolled the virtues of the uncomplicated existence of the South Sea Island savage. Nonetheless, Dickens ends by reminding his readers, ‘We have no greater justification for being cruel to the miserable object, than for being cruel to a WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE or an ENOCH NEWTON’ [RP 473]. His final reflection that ‘the world will be all the better when [the savage] place knows him no more’ [RP 473] may appear to be at odds with his previous sentiments. However, referral back to ‘The Niger Expedition’ demonstrates that Dickens’s intention was neither to obliterate the savage, nor to impose ‘Railroad Christianisation’ upon him. In his words of ‘The Niger Expedition’:

To change the customs even of civilized and educated men, and impress them with new ideas, is — we have good need to know it — a most difficult and slow proceeding; but to do this by ignorant and savage races, is a work which, like the progressive changes of the globe itself, requires a stretch of years that dazzles in the thought. It is not, we conceive, within the likely providence of God, that Christianity shall start to the banks of the Niger, until it shall have overflowed all intervening space. The stone that is dropped into the ocean of ignorance at Exeter Hall, must make its widening circles, one beyond another, until they reach the negro’s country in their natural expansion. [RP 133]

It is the argument that Christianity will spread by example if it is seen to be practised on the dispossessed who are closer to home that is implicit in the concluding remarks of ‘The Noble Savage’. Dickens’s stance on racial matters may have oscillated between contempt and pity by 1853,
but by no means did he hold the extreme and reactionary views that he
developed after the Indian Mutiny. The events of 1857 enabled Dickens to
formulate a more consistent, but decidedly unpleasant attitude towards
other races, yet in many ways the dialogic and conflicting opinions of the
earlier writings were a great deal more enlightened.

1[Johnson, _Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Black House, Slavery and Slave Trade_, 6.]
3[Patrick Brantlinger, _Race of Darkness_, p. 207. Brantlinger has read the article’s
Darwinist rage to critics the savage out of existence through natural selection and the
gradual spread of civilization as evidence of Dickens’s call for the ‘elimination’ of
‘niggers’ and ‘natives’.

4[Originally published in _Punch’s Magazine_ in 1849 under the less controversial title of
‘The Nigger Question’, the article was re-issued in 1853 as an ‘Occasional Discourse on the
nigger question’.

6[Charles Dickens and Henry Morley, ‘North American Slavery’, _Household Words_, 18
September 1852, p. 5.]
7[Thomas Carlyle, _Letter-Day Pamphlets_, p. 249.]
8[The backlash against Carlyle’s ‘Nigger Question’ had indeed been extreme, and
journals such as _Punch_ led the way in condemning the rise of Chebres. In ‘A Black Statue
to Thomas Carlyle’ [ _Punch_ vol. 18, 1850, p. 19] it is suggested that he was to be "rewarded
by the West India planters for the late advocacy of the “beneficent whip” and the
Kontackian wrath with which he has all but destroyed. Black Quacker the whip who will
not work among sugar-canes, unless well paid for his sweat. The piece goes on to assert
that a statue to honour him will be erected in Jamaica by the slave owners, and that
totemism should be made available to Virginia slaves.

11[To the Hon Mrs Richard Watson, 22 November, 1852, _Letters_ 1850-52, VI. Ed.
12[To the Hon Mrs Edward Cropper (Dickens’s daughter), 20 December 1852, _Letters_,
VI, p. 825.]

York: AMS Press, p. 57. Dickens was consequently NOR when Mrs Stone attempted to call
on him at home, and his wife was also unable to see her because she was attending him.

17[Dickens, _Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Black House, Slavery and Slave Trade_, 6.
18[African West, The Victorious and Race_, 57.
20[Dickens, _Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Black House, Slavery and Slave Trade_, 7.
21[Cape Sketches_, _Household Words_, 26 October, 1851, p. 118.]
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