

*Gaskell's strategies of silence in  
'The Half-Brothers'*



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I

When Dickens addressed Gaskell as 'My Dear Scheherazade' in his letter of 25 November 1851, he was making a conciliatory gesture intended to secure her as an obedient contributor to his journal *Household Words*. But his comment pays apt tribute to her ability to write works of any genre as well as to meet any unreasonable demands regarding the work's length and publication style. Over the course of her career, Gaskell wrote more than thirty short stories in a variety of genres: Gothic, mystery, crime, picaresque, fairy, ghost, and household stories; *Bildungsroman*, pastoral, historical, social narratives, and so on.

Versatility is the most admirable of Gaskell's characteristics, and she is capable of dealing with a wide array of themes. Love, of course, is one of the most fundamental themes in literature, and poses an important test of a novelist's ability precisely because it is well-worn. Gaskell excels at describing various kinds of love: fanatical and serene; illicit and genuine; fleeting and eternal; selfish and unselfish; fraternal, conjugal, maternal, and patriotic. Although holding firm to the principles of Unitarian theology, she often invoked the traditional theology of Christ's love and suffering in her fiction.

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At times one can make one's love understood more effectively, more persuasively, by silent means than with speech. This is illustrated in most of Gaskell's novels and stories. Of course there are exceptions to this statement. Take 'Lizzie Leigh' (1850), for example. This is a story of maternal love; it compares a loving mother with a stern father. As Jenny Uglow comments, '[the] Pharisaic, Old Testament sternness of the men is ... contrasted with the sympathetic mercy of the New Testament, shown by the women'.<sup>1</sup> Until her daughter was disowned as a fallen woman, Mrs Leigh had been an idealistic wife in a patriarchal society, faithful to her husband, 'the interpreter, who

stood between God and her' (*CP*, p. 1). After his death, however, she does not subordinate herself to the heir apparent, her son:

'Will, my lad, I'm not afeard of you now, and I must speak, and you must listen. I am your mother, and I dare to command you, because I know I am in the right and that God is on my side.' (*CP*, p. 22)

Gaskell has no intention of subverting the patriarchal hegemony. Rather, she stresses the values of a gynocratic system which can be found, though repressed or slighted in Victorian society, in the Christian history that had formed under the patriarchy. This is why Gaskell changes Mrs Leigh into a new mother of voice and speech combined with love in the end: 'She stood, no longer, as the meek, imploring, gentle mother, but firm and dignified, as if the interpreter of God's will' (p. 22).

However, we have a tendency to doubt the honesty of a talkative figure, because speech itself is a kind of fiction, invented or fabricated, and because it does not always guarantee access to the truth. Words have so many varied meanings that the truth is easily hidden from our eyes. One tends to express love with words, but love does not fall into any one expressive category. Demonstration of love in a garrulous manner limits our understanding of the essential love being shown. Silent, non-verbal expression may be a more accurate and effective method of delivery.

Silence, to cite Adam Jaworski, 'has certain advantages for communicators, for example ... in going beyond the limits of words to deal with the unspeakable in psychologically extreme states'.<sup>2</sup> Gaskell repeatedly makes use of the advantage of silent communication in her fiction. For example, Ruth Hilton 'often wished to thank Mr Benson and his sister, but she did not know how to tell the deep gratitude she felt, and therefore she was silent. But they understood her silence well' (*RU*, p. 170). Similarly, for Daniel Robson's safety after his participation in the riots, 'Sylvia and her mother, in like manner, clung together, not speaking of their fears, yet each knowing that it was ever present in the other's mind' (*SL*, p. 276). It may sound paradoxical, but a novelist can sometimes more faithfully describe the psychology of a reticent character by silence. Gaskell expects that we will analyze an intense state of mind that can be best understood and appreciated only in silence.

Michel Foucault considers silence essential to speech:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary

division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There are not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.<sup>3</sup>

Silence is meaning without language and can be a substance with meaning, just as language can be without meaning. It is not a mere background to speech; it is a state of being filled with meanings. Psychoanalysis assumes that spoken words often conceal meanings rather than convey them accurately. A meaning will show itself clearly by being hidden. Silence is as far from nothing as chaos is from a pitch-dark gloomy void with no sign of life. It is deep and unfathomable like the sea, the physical embodiment of a chaos of unconscious forces. Chaos is a healthy and essential part of the creation process, without which new order is impossible. It is not only possible but necessary to infer the psychological meaning of silence in chaos from its context. It is up to us to find the potential for meaning in silence.

Silence has often been represented in fragile and negative terms in a patriarchal society of logocentrism based upon traditional gender-role stereotypes. The Victorian male notion is that women should be desired but should not desire, that they should not speak but listen. Witness, for instance, Gaskell's portrait of Sylvia Hepburn:

Sylvia, whom she [Hester] had expected to find volatile, talkative, vain, and wilful, was quiet and still, as if she had been born a Friend: she seemed to have no will of her own; she served her mother and child for love; she obeyed her husband in all things, and never appeared to pine after gaiety or pleasure. (*SL*, p. 362)

Gaskell employs feminine silences as deliberately chosen strategies for effect. The very qualities Hester so admired in Sylvia are so foreign to her nature that her husband Philip, who has known her since she was a child, feels what an unnatural restraint she is putting upon herself. According to the myth of Philomela, the repression of women in a male-dominated culture is expressed through their silence. Gaskell uses this silence, the imposed voicelessness, as a weapon to challenge the male domination that gagged her in the first place. The silence that is the essential defining feature of the Victorian female is also an expression of her resistance and thus her power.

In terms of discourse theory silence has commonly been regarded as the equivalent of submissiveness or passivity. This potential is clearly exemplified in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in Cordelia's aside: 'What shall Cordelia speak?

Love, and be silent' (I.I.61). Romeo and Juliet's eloquent declarations of love do express their unsullied innocence and love in speech, but this is a rare case owing something to Shakespeare's greatness. True love is on a different level from mere speech. The namesake heroine in *Emma* (1815) says to Mr. Knightley, 'If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.'<sup>4</sup> Like Jane Austen, Gaskell knows very well the limitations of words in expressing such extreme affective states as love. Norman Page argues concerning the language of Austen that 'readiness of speech is associated with the vicious, and taciturnity with the virtuous'.<sup>5</sup> The same can usually be said of Gaskell's characterization. Sally Leadbitter, 'the talker to whom [her friends are] hearkening with deepest attention' (*MB*, p. 255), is introduced as 'vulgar-minded to the last degree' (*MB*, p. 103), whereas Mary Barton resorts to silence as a rich and powerful mode of communication during her handclasp with her father after the failure of a petition to the House of Commons in London: 'In an instant Mary understood the fact, if not the details, that so weighed down her father's heart. She pressed his hand with silent sympathy. She did not know what to say, and was so afraid of speaking wrongly, that she was silent' (*MB*, p. 113). Molly Gibson is attracted by Roger Hamley's character, although her prejudice against his personal appearance confirms her initial impression of him: 'She thought him unfeeling in his talkativeness; his constant flow of words upon indifferent subjects was a wonder and a repulsion to her' (*WD*, p. 88). Finally, an eloquent example of the limitations of language is Jem Wilson's awkward declaration of his love to Mary Barton: "I cannot speak as I would like; my love won't let itself be put in words" (*MB*, p. 150). Love is an emotional rather than a mental state.

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'The Half-Brothers' (1858) is a story in which Gaskell is most conscious of silence and reticence as effective strategies of description for conveying inner emotions to the reader. The reader is required to understand the context so as to fill in the blanks of the silence and reticence. The first person narrator of the story was born after his mother had taken a second husband, William Preston, 'one of the wealthiest farmers thereabouts' (*MLL*, p. 337). Her second marriage was unavoidable, virtual blindness preventing her from gaining any means of support for herself and her first husband's posthumous child, the narrator's half-brother Gregory. For this reason the narrator has to rely on hearsay information gathered from Aunt Fanny, as he narrates his infancy as well as what happened before his birth – his mother's first marriage, her first husband's premature death, the posthumous birth of that man's child, and her loveless second marriage with William Preston. This

reliance on hearsay is an old trick often employed by autobiographical narrators, but the narrator makes repeated and unwise use of such expressions as ‘it was aunt Fanny who told me all this’ (*MLL*, p. 337) and ‘as aunt Fanny used to say’ (*MLL*, p. 338). A further, particularly unequivocal, demonstration is provided when the narrator describes how his family reacted to his near disaster in a snowstorm on the fells. He explains to the reader: ‘Aunt Fanny – always a talker – told me all’ (*MLL*, p. 347).

It is quite natural that a narrator should depend upon a talkative character to suggest authentic narrative sources. Except for the narrator’s excessive dependence upon this same talkative character, the reader might look upon him as a reliable narrator. For one thing, Aunt Fanny, the talkative supplier of his information, is ‘a kind, warm-hearted creature, who thought more of her sister’s welfare than she did of her own’ (*MLL*, p. 336). For another, the narrator sometimes scrutinizes his conscience: ‘I am ashamed – my heart is sore to think how I fell into the fashion of the family, and slighted my poor orphan stepbrother’ (*MLL*, p. 341). A serious problem arises, however, if we pay attention to the narrator’s comparison of the talkative aunt with a particularly reticent character, as well as his moral judgment of the two:

[My mother] seemed after that to think of nothing but her new little baby; she hardly appeared to remember either her husband or her little daughter that lay dead in Brigham churchyard – at least so aunt Fanny said; but she was a great talker, and my mother was very silent by nature, and I think aunt Fanny may have been mistaken in believing that my mother never thought of her husband and child just because she never spoke about them. (*MLL*, p. 336)

The ‘I’ of the first person narrator puts his mother and Aunt Fanny into a framework of binary opposites – silence and talkativeness. He adopts such values in order to counter the dominating effect of a patriarchal society that favors speech and disregards taciturnity. But, we may notice an inconsistency here, because the narrator depends upon Aunt Fanny’s exuberant speech to authenticate his narrative. This structural irony within the text itself could be seen to invalidate the very discourse that the narrator has presented to undermine patriarchy and its values, exposing him as an unreliable narrator. Though such a deconstructive reading reveals potential incompatibilities generated by the text, it is difficult for the reader to decide among them, and it is unlikely that Gaskell would have noticed them. In fact, something seems to prevent such a deconstructive reading of ‘The Half-Brothers’. In other words, this story is so subtly devised that the reader is insulated from the narrator’s inconsistency. The subtle devices are those strategies of silence which Gaskell

has deployed within the plot of the story to impress the reader with the Christian love of self-sacrifice.

While the narrator was 'a clever lad', his uterine brother, Gregory, 'was lumpish and loutish, awkward and ungainly, marring whatever he meddled in' (*MLL*, p. 341).<sup>6</sup> This poor orphan stepbrother was never upbraided for his dull-wittedness without turning 'silent and quiet – sullen and sulky, [the narrator's] father thought it: stupid, aunt Fanny used to call it' (*MLL*, p. 341). This reflects how people around Gregory in the story never fail to give his silence a distorted and unfavorable interpretation. Self-assertion through eloquent speech is the accepted method preferred in Gregory's Anglo-Saxon milieu. A sense of fear lurks behind this conventional communication – a sense that if one keeps silent, one will be misunderstood, even have one's own existence denied.

Gregory is too often isolated in the context of a community in which speech is regarded as a privileged act. It all but escapes our notice that this character embodies Gaskell's strong criticism of the injustice and prejudice of those who are identified with reason and power in the story. To foreground this function, Gaskell makes effective use of old Adam, under whom 'Gregory was made into a kind of shepherd, receiving his training' (*MLL*, p. 342). The old shepherd does not interpret his disciple's taciturnity as a manifestation of stupidity: 'He stood to it that my brother had good parts, though he did not rightly know how to bring them out; and, for knowing the bearings of the Fells, he said he had never seen a lad like him' (*MLL*, p. 342). It is to Gaskell's credit that she has registered an acute insight into character which is generally found only in an old hand of considerable experience. Old Adam's thoughts may echo Gaskell's. Take the naming of Gregory, for instance. Etymologically speaking, the word 'Gregory' is derived from Greek: 'to be watchful.'<sup>7</sup> Gregory was ever so watchful of his half-brother. His mother seems to have told him to be so at her deathbed by 'put[ting the brother's] small, wee hand in [his]' (*MLL*, p. 346). As Aunt Fanny fancied, therefore, he 'might have noticed the coming storm, and gone out silently to meet [the brother]' (*MLL*, p. 347) with his dog, Lassie. The silence of Gregory conveys an impression of thoughtful, imaginative, and philosophical depth. His motivation explains itself through his silent actions, which continually escape the attention of those around him.

In the choice of Gregory's profession as well as in his naming, Gaskell deserves her reputation as a writer of impeccable judgment and penetrating style. Assuming the mantle of his master, old Adam, Gregory presents an image of the Christian Good Shepherd: 'I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep' (John 10: 11). Christ laid down his life for his sheep on the cross. According to the Christian narrative, his expiatory

death enabled the sheep to have life in all its fullness. Gaskell's fiction contains a number of characters who, like Gregory, display much perseverance when undergoing persecution or trial. Their perseverance, characterized by silence or reticence, is eloquent of the significance of the Christian Good Shepherd. Christ endured great sufferings while striving for righteousness: 'when he was reviled, he reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him who judgeth righteously' (1 Peter 2: 23). Gregory, like Christ, is a paragon of quiet endurance and love: '... he was patient and good-natured, and would try to do a kind turn for any one, even if they had been scolding or cuffing him not a minute before' (*MLL*, p. 342).<sup>8</sup>

Gregory committed no sin, but expiated the sin of the half-brother whose life he saved at the cost of his own during a snowstorm on the fells. It is not until his self-sacrifice occurs, through an act of love and then death, that all his family can understand the meaning of his silence:

We spoke no more of Gregory. We could not speak of him; but he was strangely in our thoughts. Lassie came and went with never a word of blame; nay, my father would try to stroke her, but she shrank away; and he, as if reproved by the poor dumb beast, would sigh, and be silent and abstracted for a time. (*MLL*, p. 347)

Speech is a feature that distinguishes man from his quadruped brethren, but 'the poor dumb beast' Lassie and her silent keeper Gregory, like true kin, are capable of telepathic communication without the medium of speech. There is a tacit understanding between them. William Preston looks 'silent by nature', like the narrator's mother: 'he said very little, either on that visit, or on many another that he paid' (*MLL*, p. 337). It is no surprise to the reader, therefore, that Preston should be repentant enough to understand his stepson's silence well in the end. His repentance is probably a result of his discovery of grace in Gregory's heroic self-sacrifice – the grace of God brought about by Christ's expiatory death. This Christian value is expressed through Preston's own silence. John Geoffrey Sharps rightly says that 'the heroism of Gregory [is] described with reticence',<sup>9</sup> but the reticence is that of Preston and his family as well as of Gaskell.

Gregory's metaphysical silence transcends time and space. After his death, his family interpret it with the code they held in common with him. Thus his silence and love will keep his memory fresh in their hearts. Like Dickens, Gaskell believes that silence will keep its meaning through all eternity. Thomas Carlyle, 'the most illustrious as well as one of the most genuine of her early admirers',<sup>10</sup> expresses it in *Sartor Resartus*: 'Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity'.<sup>11</sup> The silence of Gregory's love and death can only be recognized



in his family's memory, which forever needs no speech. Gaskell's conveyance of such a religious vision is not embodied in speech; it is evoked by her strategies of silence. Gregory always cherished the memory of his late mother in his heart, and he met his death with serene composure to requite her silent love – 'the ready love that always gushed out like a spring of fresh water when he came near' (*MLL*, p. 339). In his *Language and Silence* George Steiner sees much of divinity through silence: 'It is just because we can go no further, because speech so precisely fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God.'<sup>12</sup> Gregory's fraternal love asked no more reward than his mother's silent love, and his heroic self-sacrifice tells, in eloquent silence, of the inner mysteries of the Christian God's love for Christ on the cross.

Finally, there is a larger dimension to Gregory's story of silence. The silence of insignificant and humble men is part of a larger historical process. In 'The Sexton's Hero' (1847), Gilbert Dawson, like Gregory in 'The Half-Brothers', impresses us as much with the spirit of heroic self-sacrifice as Gregory. This story is set against the background of the Napoleonic Wars (1805–15): the sexton's wife 'seemed to fear all manner of evil, even to the French coming and taking it [her baby] away' (*MC*, p. 106). Most characters, including a village vicar, are obsessed by the possibility of violence, whether outright war or person-to-person fighting. Gilbert Dawson is deprived of military and physical prowess, but '[his] heroism, of conscience, of action, of magnanimity, is answer enough to those who framed the question: What is a hero?'<sup>13</sup> To Gaskell's mind, the real hero can sacrifice himself for a noble act – an act committed silently and unmentioned in history – like Gilbert's and Gregory's. 'History lives in two different worlds,' writes Max Picard, 'that of the clearly visible daylight and that of the dark invisible silence'.<sup>14</sup> The silent side of history is seen a little in the silent suffering and heroic self-sacrifice of men. It is what conceals itself behind the audible facts of history – like the Napoleonic Wars.

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### Notes

1. Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 126.
2. Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), p. 8.
3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 27.



4. Jane Austen, *Emma* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 417.
5. Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), p. 38.
6. The contrast of half-witted brothers with their clever younger ones can be seen in various ages and countries. Jacob Faux in George Eliot's 'Brother Jacob' (1860), Seraph Pratt in Sarah Grand's *Adnam's Orchard* (1913), Yoshitaro Katsushima in Kan Kikuchi's 'Fool on the Roof' (1916), Lennie Small in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), Dick Crick in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Raymond Babbitt (Dustin Hoffman) in Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988).
7. E. G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 139.
8. An aspect of selfless love in Gaskell's fiction is the unfailing endurance that Christians are supposed to practise during difficult times, an endurance that extends to those around them. The greatness of their endurance hangs upon the tone of their story. 'The Well of Pen-Morfa' (1850) imparts a darker, sadder, and more depressing tone than any other work by Gaskell. The dismal and sepulchral tone, though, reveals her ideas about selfless love. Nest Gwynn rejects her mother's love after she is maimed in an accident, but repentance after the mother's death leads her to take care of Mary, the often-frenzied idiot. No doubt, Nest's love for this intractably wild idiot requires stronger and more stressful endurance than her mother's love.
9. John Geoffrey Sharps, *Mrs. Gaskell's Observation and Invention: A Study of Her Non-Biographic Works* (Fontwell, Sussex: Linden, 1970), p. 313.
10. Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), pp. 95–96.
11. G. B. Tennyson, ed., *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), p. 134.
12. George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 60.
13. Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 204.
14. Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: Harville, 1948), p. 83.