

## Slips of Memory and Strategies of Silence in *A Tale of Two Cities*

MITSU HARU MATSUOKA

### 1.

There are several slips of memory to be found in the works of Dickens. In *Bleak House*, for example, he misquotes Shakespeare when a bored and world-weary Lady Dedlock returns to Chesney Wold from Paris: 'Weariness of soul lies before her, as it lies behind - her Ariel has put a girdle of it round the whole earth, and it cannot be unclasped' (*BH*, 154).<sup>1</sup> But, it is Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not Ariel in *The Tempest*, who boasts that he can '[. . .] put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes' (*MND*, 2.1.175-76). Dickens, who was familiar with Shakespeare and the New Testament and alludes frequently to them in his works, can be forgiven for such a lapse, for it does not alter or affect the meaning of the text.



Profound Cognition of Captain Cuttle



Solemn Reference is made to Mr. Bunsby

Phiz: Two illustrations from *Dombey and Son* (1848), showing the changing hook arm of Captain Cuttle.

Similar lapses sometimes occur in the illustrations of Dickens's works. Though Phiz (Hablot Knight Browne) was responsible for illustrating ten of Dickens's major novels, errors here may be attributed to the novelist himself, because he customarily gave the illustrator detailed instructions. *Dombey and Son* provides two examples of such errors. In one of these, there are seventeen pupils out on a walk with Dr Blimber, although the text clearly states: 'The Doctor only undertook the charge of ten young gentlemen' (*DS*, 141). The other error involves Captain Cuttle's hook being attached to his left wrist in two illustrations ('Solemn Reference is made to Mr. Bunsby' and 'Rob

the Grinder reading to Captain Cuttle’) even though Dickens describes it as ‘attached to his right wrist’ (41). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Book III, Chapter 7, we are told that ‘four rough men in red caps [. . .] entered the room’ (277) for Charles Darnay who is to be summoned again before the Tribunal, while Phiz’s illustration depicts only three men armed with sabers and pistols.<sup>2</sup> But again, these lapses do not really alter or affect the meaning of the text.

However, the frontispiece of *A Tale of Two Cities*, the last novel to be illustrated by Phiz, raises a serious problem in meaning. It illustrates the Manette family seated with Mr Lorry around a table outdoors, while Sydney Carton leans against a plane tree in the background. Dickens delineates the scene this way in the text:

It was an oppressive day, and, after dinner, Lucie proposed that the wine should be carried out under the plane-tree, and they should sit there in the air. As everything turned upon her, and revolved about her, they went out under the plane-tree, and she carried the wine down for the special benefit of Mr. Lorry. She had installed herself, some time before, as Mr. Lorry’s cup-bearer; and while they sat under the plane-tree, talking, she kept his glass replenished. Mysterious backs and ends of houses peeped at them as they talked, and the plane-tree whispered to them in its own way above their heads.

Still, the Hundreds of people did not present themselves. Mr. Darnay presented himself while they were sitting under the plane-tree, but he was only One. (93-94)



Dickens and Phiz, working together, may have liked the idea of Carton silently and secretly giving love and protection to Lucie. The illustration depicts Carton as keeping himself away from the family scene before him. He appears to be gazing upon Lucie. It is interesting in contextual terms that Carton is included in the illustrated scene, for in the text he is not mentioned at all before large drops of rain force the group, including Charles Darnay (the ‘only One’), to return to the house. The narrator says that ‘Carton had lounged in’ (95) at tea-time after the rain. Carton completes the ‘only Two’ (95) before the ‘Hundreds of people,’ the French revolutionary mob, present themselves. We cannot think of this as a mere Dickensian slip of memory nor simply as a mistake by Phiz. Carton’s silent gazing from the center of the illustration (albeit in the background) is too prominent a facet to go unnoticed. It is difficult to distinguish with any certainty where the intentions of author and illustrator merge, but it must be the product of their artistic collaboration. How can we otherwise explain the discrepancy between the text and the illustration without assuming that Carton is silently and deliberately gazing upon Lucie from the cover of the plane tree without himself being observed by her?

Like the ‘[m]ysterious backs and ends of houses’ Carton peeps out at Lucie from hiding, and like the plane tree he whispers to her ‘in [his] own way,’ or in the mysterious language of silence. The plane tree can be seen, therefore, as symbolic of Carton’s love and protective care over Lucie. According to the *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, the plane tree is a symbol of ‘protection; friendliness, charity; grass grows more luxuriantly under it and it is the most receptive of any sort of graft; it has great curative powers.’<sup>3</sup> Take note, also, that it was Lucie who proposed that, for their peace of mind, they go out under the plane tree after dinner. The plane tree is a symbolic substitution that has a metonymical association with someone who is actually absent, similar to the way Madame Defarge is signified by ‘her knitting [. . . on] her empty chair ready for her’ (355) before Carton is guillotined on the scaffold.

## 2.

Nowhere in his fiction did Dickens use the strategies of silence so deliberately as in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Why was he especially alert to silence at this time of his career? There seem to be two reasons. At one level, many of his main characters in the later novels become lost in profound self-reflection. They turn their thoughts inward and examine their own hearts, having suffered from some trauma and from lack of love in youth. This self-reflection – probably a result of Dickens’s childhood trauma caused by

his father's imprisonment for debt and his mother's insistence that he continue to work at the blacking factory - is suggested by some of the illustrations of the later novels, where such characters are strikingly portrayed with a fixed gaze. This motif of the silent gaze conveys the impression of thoughtfulness, imagination and philosophical profundity.<sup>4</sup>

At a more practical level, Dickens was becoming more absorbed at this time in public readings and amateur theatricals - genres wherein silence can create a significant dramatic effect. He must have seen the impact of this technique on his audiences. *A Tale of Two Cities* is the first novel written after he began his public readings for his own profit in 1858. Furthermore, he writes in the preface to the novel that he 'first conceived the main idea of this story' while playing the role of Richard Wardour, the prototype of the silent, brooding Sydney Carton, in Wilkie Collins's play *The Frozen Deep* (1857). Dickens surely recognized the power of silence, not as the mere absence of words, but as a rich and telling form of communication.<sup>5</sup>

Dickens effectively uses this authorial silence to express what Carton feels in his heart. Wayne C. Booth describes some effects of authorial silence this way:

By the kind of silence he maintains, by the manner in which he leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself or a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Dickens invites his readers to refer to their own life experiences, ideas, wishes and fantasies to understand what Carton is experiencing. This brings up the problem of textual silence. A textual silence is not what is actually in the text but what could be drawn forth or foregrounded by what is there. *A Tale of Two Cities* is richer in such textual silences than any other Dickens novel.

Another proof that Dickens knew how to use textual silence is found in the narrative before Carton sets his scheme of self-sacrifice in motion. As he wanders by night through the city of Paris, these words of Christ convey to the reader what the author's words cannot: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11: 25). In the context of life as a journey Dickens has portrayed Carton as 'a tired man, who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length struck into his road and saw its end' (297). That he has arrived at this determination is confirmed when two important acts of crossing - the first of a river, the second of a street - are placed in juxtaposition:

With a solemn interest [. . .] in the whole life and death of the city settling down to its short nightly pause in fury; Sydney Carton crossed the Seine again for the lighter streets.

[. . .] At one of the theatre doors, there was a little girl with a mother, looking for a way across the street through the mud. He carried the child over, and before the timid arm was loosed from his neck asked her for a kiss.

‘I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die.’ (298)

Before this passage Dickens does not mention Carton crossing the river. This is his first crossing of it, not his second or third as might be inferred from what is written. Therefore, the question must be asked - what was on Dickens’s mind? Is this an instance of a Freudian slip, a faulty action produced by the interference of some unconscious motive, conflict, or train of thought upon the conscious mind?<sup>7</sup> Dickens seems to have been conditioned in just this way.

But for the solemn words of Christ, the narrator is reticent about the juxtaposition of these two acts of crossing. Rather than speaking directly of them he elicits the reader’s response to them through silence. Within the framework of this authorial silence Dickens leaves it to the reader to fill in the blanks about Carton’s thoughts and feelings. It is the reader’s task to decipher the hidden meaning behind his actions. To interpret this subtext adequately, however, an association between the Seine and the River Styx must be made. Carton’s crossing of the Seine can be understood as a metaphor for his death or his determination to die. In an earlier chapter Dickens associates a funeral procession, the mock one of Roger Cly, observed by Jerry Cruncher, with ‘an unusual concourse pouring down Fleet Street westward’ (147) like a *danse macabre*. The human streams no doubt hold their course for the land of death or the hereafter in the west. Effectively, Carton, when crossing the Seine, is crossing the Styx to the land of the dead. The Freudian slip here, if there is one, may be that Fleet Street is named after the Fleet River, which was the longest and most important of London’s subterranean rivers by the end of the 19th century. Cruncher, the resurrectionist, is like ‘the heathen rustic who has for several centuries been on duty watching one stream,’ (147) and he derives a small part of his income from ‘the pilotage of timid women [. . .] from Tellson’s side of the tides to the opposite shore’ (147). In this sense, Cruncher is a Charon, the mythical ferryman of the Styx.

It is also significant that the chapter sketching Carton’s crossing of the Seine (Book

III, Chapter 9) is entitled *The Game Made*. This carries an association with *alea jacta est* (the die is cast) - Julius Caesar's reputed words when crossing the Rubicon to defeat Pompey the Great. Such associations help the reader understand that Carton is taking an irrevocable and decisive step at the outset of a brave undertaking. Carton's second act of crossing is to carry a child 'across the street through the mud.' That he carries a little girl is a matter of consequence in itself when his promise to Lucie Manette is considered: 'Miss Manette [. . .] when you see your own bright beauty springing up anew at your feet, think now and then that there is a man who would give his life, to keep a life you love beside you' (146). Such fragments of conversation from Carton are important, because there are few of them in the novel. No annotated editions of *A Tale of Two Cities* comment upon this carrying of the child. Neither do T. W. Hill's notes on nor Andrew Sanders's companion to the novel. Dickens most likely thought of Carton as St Christopher here. Legend relates:

St. Christopher was a giant who one day carried a child over a brook, and said, "Chylde, thou hast put me in gret peryll. I might bere no greater burden." To which the child answered "Marvel thou nothing, for thou hast borne all the world upon thee, and its sins likewise." This is an allegory: Christopher means Christ-bearer; the child was Christ, and the river was the river of death.<sup>8</sup>

Dickens's strategies of silence are deliberately placed for effect, and their effect would be nullified without understanding their hidden meanings. These strategies invite us to discover the meanings concealed within Carton's internal monologues scattered throughout the novel, but this issue is beyond the scope of the present article.<sup>9</sup>



*St Christopher Carrying the Christ Child*  
by Hieronymus Bosch (1450?-1516)  
Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

## 3.

Some critics of Dickens have faulted him for catching only the surface of history in *A Tale of Two Cities*.<sup>10</sup> But, Max Picard has observed in *The World of Silence*: ‘History lives in two different modes, that of the clearly visible daylight and that of the dark invisible silence.’<sup>11</sup> Dickens does catch the second of Picard’s modes in the novel, though his vision of history may be flawed and his treatment of revolutionary ideas poor and restricted. The novel reveals a history of the secrecy and mystery that lie unfathomed in the human heart, all unperceived in the light of everyday experience.

It could be argued that in *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens has written a history of silence occurring in the lives of certain individuals during a particular span of time in 18th century France and Britain. Notable among the silences are those described in the heart of Doctor Manette, full of bitterness and distress after eighteen years of forced silence in the Bastille, and in Sydney Carton’s anguished conscience before his transformation and death. As dramatic and moving as Dickens makes Carton’s rendezvous with death, it is nothing more than a passing event, one barely noticed, in terms of the first of Picard’s modes of history.

Dickens emphasizes both the mysteriousness of Doctor Manette’s silence - ‘No human intelligence could have read the mysteries of his mind’ (46) - and ‘the inscrutability of Carton, - who was a mystery to wiser and honester men than he’ (287). On the other hand, Stryver, Carton’s law partner, is portrayed as ‘a glib man,’ (80) always talking as though his *raison d’être* were an appeal to speech. Carton’s *raison d’être* explains itself through his actions, carried out in silence and thus unnoticed by those around him. As a man of the law Carton knows the value of words and uses them as tactical and strategic weapons, but his public performances conceal the truths that lie hidden within him. Like so many other Dickens protagonists who have suffered the loss of parental love in childhood, whether by death, indifference or callousness, Carton can feel nothing but disappointment where he might otherwise have experienced love. This hole in his soul, for want of a better term, lies at the heart of his silence. Silence is its eloquent expression.

This reading is corroborated by Carton’s dialogue at a tavern with Charles Darnay, the man who is his ‘Double’ (78) in life and the man who appears to be and have everything he would wish for himself: ‘I am a disappointed drudge, sir. I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me’ (79). We are reminded here of Alexander Pope’s aphorism: ‘Blessed is the man who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed’ (To Fortesque, 23 Sept. 1725).<sup>12</sup> The novel itself, a masterly construct

of words and the silences they conceal, finds its *raison d'être*, in the end, in Carton's courageous act of selflessness. Thus, Dickens articulates his philosophy that 'every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other' (10). In order to express such unfathomable profundity within the human heart, Dickens undoubtedly drew upon his own secret childhood trauma, about which nobody, not even his wife or his closest friends, knew.

The motif of expectation and disappointment gives another satisfactory explanation for Carton's silence; he has given up on ever sharing or expecting love so as to avoid further disappointment. Sylvère Monod maintains that 'Sydney Carton declares his love to Lucie in a speech so reticent and involved that it can move no reader of today.'<sup>13</sup> The language of reticence, however, is the very strategy that Dickens employs to engage the reader in the depth of Carton's feelings. Lucie Manette's silent love has a powerful influence on her traumatized father: 'In silence they go walking up and down together, walking up and down together, till her love and company have brought him to himself' (92). In scenes like this Lucie, when she is reticent, captures the reader's attention more than when she speaks. She too finds her *raison d'être* in silence. Carton's frequent visits to the Manette household find their justification in her silent love, as does his magnificent act of self-sacrifice at the end of the novel. And it is to Lucie alone that Carton communicates his firm purpose to render up his life in a sublime act of self-sacrifice.

Lucie entreats her husband to understand Carton and 'to believe that he has a heart he very, very seldom reveals, and that there are deep wounds in it' (198). The author says enough through his strategies of silence to assure the reader that no one, other than Lucie, can fathom the secrecy and mystery of Carton's heart. Such strategies suggest, rather than pronounce, that she can plumb the depth of his feelings in silent understanding. This silent communication between Carton and Lucie - of heart speaking to heart - is the dominant motivation behind his sacrifice of himself.

The following words of Doctor Manette contribute to our better understanding of this secret communication between his daughter and Carton:

'[. . .] Charles Darnay, mysteries arise out of close love, as well as out of wide division; in the former case, they are subtle and delicate, and difficult to penetrate. My daughter Lucie is, in this one respect, such a mystery to me; I can make no guess at the state of her heart.' (128)

Darnay's inability to understand the implications of this remark is a dramatic irony.

According to its logic the ‘close love’ between him and Lucie can make them a mystery to one another, while she and Carton, with ‘wide division’ between them, can communicate well, as if by telepathy. In the denouement, Carton visits Darnay in his prison cell and orders him to write this message: ‘If you remember [. . .] the words that passed between us, long ago, you will readily comprehend this when you see it. You do remember them, I know. It is not in your nature to forget them’ (334). Andrew Sanders is surely correct in arguing that ‘Darnay’s letter is never finished, though the few words he has written will, we presume, hold meaning for him in the unknown future which Carton will not share.’<sup>14</sup> But the words convey more meaning to Lucie than Darnay can grasp.

That Dickens considered *Memory Carton* as one possible title for his novel attaches a peculiar significance to the unfinished letter. It bears no sender’s name and no signature, but Lucie can understand its content entirely. She has made a tacit agreement with Carton. She can interpret his metaphysical silence, transcending time and space, with the secret code she shares with him. Thus, his silent love will keep her memories green. ‘Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity,’<sup>15</sup> says Dickens’s mentor for *A Tale of Two Cities*, Thomas Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus*. That Dickens intended to convey a sublime, religious vision is not embodied in Carton’s speech but clearly revealed by his silence.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens ed. (1948; London: Oxford UP, 1975) 154. All quotations are taken from this edition. All further references by page number to individual novels are to the respective volumes of the edition and will be incorporated into the text.

<sup>2</sup> This discrepancy between text and illustration was pointed out by C. C. Kenrick in the 1943 volume of *The Dickensian*, but Walter Dexter, the editor, answered: ‘Such errors are not common, as Dickens kept in close touch with his illustrators [. . .]’ (98).

<sup>3</sup> Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974) 369.

<sup>4</sup> In *Little Dorrit*, for instance, Phiz draws an illustration titled ‘The Ferry,’ in which Arthur Clennam gazes upon Henry Gowan waiting to be taken over the Thames. The scene depicts a Twickenham towing-path early in the morning. The illustration’s brooding silence perfectly matches Clennam’s silent thought about Gowan. The thought is that there is something cruel in ‘his way of spurning [stones] out of their places with

his heel' (201) and tossing them into the water. To use the chapter's title, Gowan is 'Nobody's Rival.' 'Nobody' refers to Clennam's other self, the one that loves Pet Meagles, whose heart belongs to the rival. This triangular love complex forces Clennam to repress his other self, and this repression is mirrored in the illustration's silence.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault discusses silence as integral 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.' Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980) 1: 27.

<sup>6</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 273.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* Freud argues that 'where an error makes its appearance a repression lies behind it - or more correctly, an insincerity, a distortion, which is ultimately rooted in repressed material.' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961) 6: 218. According to the theory of Freud, '[parapraxes] are not chance events but serious mental acts; they have a sense; they arise from the concurrent action - or perhaps rather, the mutually opposing action - of two different intentions' (15: 44).

<sup>8</sup> Ivor H. Evans, ed., *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (London: Cassell, 1970) 224.

<sup>9</sup> For further details on this issue, see my "Appendix" on the Web <<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/cd-ttc-silence.html>>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906; London: Burns & Oates, 1975) 230-31; Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford UP, 1941) 34-35. On the other hand, Andrew Sanders values highly 'Dickens's grasp of history, both as an abstract idea and as an expression of the collective experience, rather than simply the "wisdom," of our ancestors.' He finds a message in Dickens's view of history: 'The study of history for Dickens implied a warning for the present, and it illuminated the way forward.' Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978) 69.

<sup>11</sup> Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, trans. Stanley Godman (London: Harville,

1948) 83-84.

<sup>12</sup> George Sherburn, ed., *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon, 1956) 2: 323.

<sup>13</sup> Sylvère Monod, *Dickens the Novelist* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1967) 459.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Sanders, introduction, *A Tale of Two Cities*, The World's Classics ed. (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP, 1991) vii.

<sup>15</sup> G. B. Tennyson, ed., *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1989) 134.

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