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## The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Seven)

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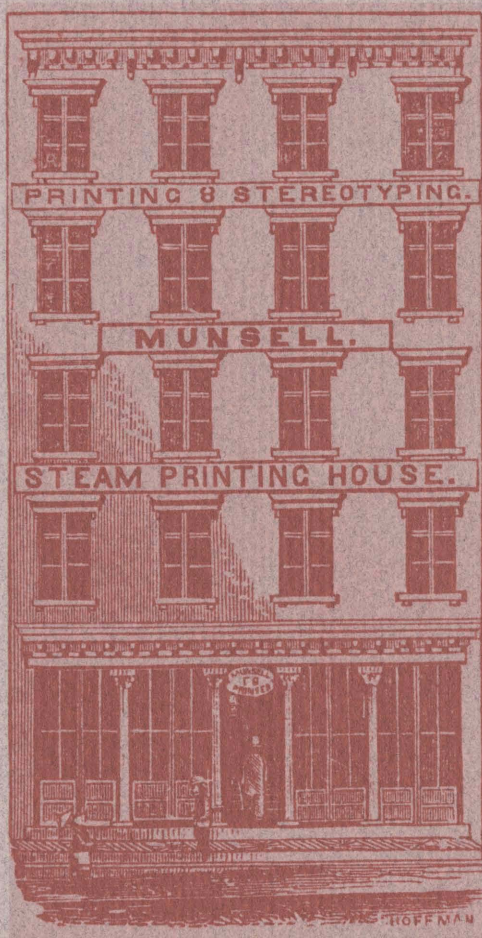
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# The Punctator's World: A Discursion

BY GWEN G. ROBINSON

## Part Seven

Age of Pragmatism: 1800 to 1850

*Though eighteenth-century grammarians had brought light to the profundities of our subject, their erudition and philosophical remove more often than not disqualified their ideas for popular application. Nineteenth-century scholars were a more practical breed. Their goal was to preserve the integrity of English in a far-flung and diversifying Empire. A standardized language was imperative for perspicuity in communication: for the lingua communis of poets and philosophers, as well as for commerce, science, mass education, and government. In the drive for clarity and uniformity, discussions of the values of the stops and how they should be applied formed a part of virtually every nineteenth-century grammar textbook.*

BY THE END of the eighteenth century, elocutionary and syntactical differences arising from the clash of aural and visual perceptions had been recognized by the philosopher-grammarians, and ways of dealing with them proposed, though not necessarily adopted. Out of the widely scattered, often wildly infeasible recommendations, the next generation of grammarians strove to gather a set of rules appropriate to the new commercial and democratizing atmosphere in which they found themselves. With some 270 published English grammars behind them, employing a spectrum of fifty-eight different categorizations for the parts of speech, nineteenth-century pedagogues, writers, and printers needed to settle on a workable system. In so far as punctuation had been deemed to be symbiotic with grammar, it comes as a surprise to learn how boggy the grammatical soils actually were in those times. Many elements still were not well enough defined to be teachable. *Clause*, for example, “until late in the nineteenth century, carried a wide

meaning, corresponding more to ‘expression’. A clause need not contain a finite verb; the term was applied to any group of words that possessed some semantic and syntactic unity.” Thus, phrase and clause had not by most been differentiated.<sup>1</sup> One wonders how, in such a world, grammarians managed to deal with their subject.

In 1785, the affable American, Lindley Murray (see Part Six), had reached a compromise between learned theorists like Walker and the less finicky, practising public. Relying on ‘good taste’ to resolve the perplexities of grammar and punctuation, and hesitant to “embarrass and confuse” young minds by treating the subject in too “extensive and minute a manner”, Murray had struck a responsive tone: assured, not lofty; knowing, not pedantic; firm, yet flexible where reason required it. With minor changes, succeeding editions of Murray’s *English Grammar*, with its chapter on punctuation, remained in print in Britain until the 1860s and in America until the 1880s. It was the most popular and most quoted statement on ‘correct’ use of the language through the greater part of the nineteenth century. The 1808 edition, twice the size of the original, added a battery of improving practice exercises to the not-very-much-changed original text. For the 1808 preface Murray wrote:

These improvements consist chiefly of a number of observations, calculated to illustrate and confirm particular rules and positions contained in the grammar; and of many critical discussions, in justification of some of its parts, against which objections had been advanced.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we see that even Murray had his detractors. For as long as regional, educational, and class differences were marked, prescrip-

1. Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English from the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 333, 346. Also see pp. 325–27: The nineteenth century inherited an ample supply of ‘rules for syntax’. In John Kirkby’s 1746 grammar, 88 such rules are advanced for the student’s edification; Jane Gardiner’s grammar of 1799 gives 109.

2. Lindley Murray, *An English Grammar*, 2 vols. (York: Wilson and Son; and R. and W. Spence, 1808), 1:3.

tions for ‘proper’ language use would vie for acceptance. Indeed, by the time we are now considering, the divergence of punctuation instruction had got maddeningly out of hand. Almost every serious treatment for the first five decades of the 1800s laments the profusion of conflicting advice.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile the audience for all this pedagogical cacophony was becoming more sophisticated. By the beginning of the nineteenth century in England, popular literacy—that is, the ability to write English fluently, as well as to read it—was thriving. Literates were fast becoming the majority. Books were being published on the order of 8000 titles a year. While social and business correspondence kept the postal systems active and solvent, newsprint, chapbooks, broadsheets—ubiquitously available and selling for pennies—dispersed the day’s news and provided entertainment. Clear linguistic communication on a national basis was agreed to be both a pleasure and a necessity for the commercial dynamics of an expanding Empire. An educated worker class was most definitely a requirement. To that end public libraries, museums, schools for boys and men, schools for girls and women were started up. As the market for recreational reading widened, much ‘literature’ was pumped out to satisfy it. Bourgeois egalitarianism was on the rise; elitism was in decline.

With the craft of book printing already an established enterprise, publishers had begun to separate from printers and booksellers and to form large companies of influential businessmen, who quite rightly fixed their attention on the most efficient way to make money out of books. As the system of parish schools took hold, these cost-minded men responded to opportunity in the way they knew best. They streamlined the production of print.<sup>4</sup> In paring down print-shop procedures, they came to discard variant spellings, alembicated sentence structures, and oddball pointing. Thus, in innocence, they brought about a simpler set of principles for punctuation.

3. Park Honan, “Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century English Punctuation Theory”, *English Studies* 41 (1960): 97.

4. John Carter and Percy H. Muir, eds., *Printing and the Mind of Man* (Munich: Karl Pressler, 1983), xxxiv.

Though the elocutionary traditions stayed alive, silent reading lent weight to the cause of visual punctuation, with its strong connection to grammar and its implication of exactitude. Gone, or at least speeding away, were the oral-aural days when a successful interchange of written ideas depended on the memory of voice sounds arousing the emotions. At ease with text, people now could retrieve the meaning of written words with their eyes alone. They admired the precision inherent in the notion of ‘perfectly’ conveyed ideas. Distance, space, solitude, the objectivity of print—all these contributing elements to visual absorption became the expectation. Donne’s sociable “No man is an island” was not so relevant to the ballooning egos that ushered in the Romantic Period in English literary history. During the opening years of the nineteenth century, the artistic personality best gratified itself by separation from the masses through some flamboyance or eccentricity.

Matters were not quite the same, however, in the pedagogical world. As time went on, grammatical voices seemed not so intellectual as John Walker’s or David Steel’s (see Part Six) had been. Pure delight in language analysis was transmogrifying rapidly into concerns about teachability. For the enormous body of learners, rules that governed the words on the page needed to be regular, thorough, clear-cut, and (in accordance with Murray’s principle) as simple as possible. Teacherly tendencies became less inclined to swing out into universal space or dive for ancient paradigm than to suppress irregular elements. Idiosyncrasy was not desired. The nail that sticks up will be hammered down, as the Japanese like to remind us. Because previous grammarians had settled the boundaries of the topic, inspection of particulars could now become quite intense. It was a perfect field for punctating moles to scabble around in.

“Divide, *distingue*, et impera”—said the witty Thomas Stackhouse, explaining how he had adjusted the famous motto “by an applicable insertion”. He, the author of *A New Essay on Punctuation: Being an Attempt to Reduce the Practice of Pointing to the government of Distinct and explicit Rules by Which Every Point may be Accounted for after the manner of Parsing* (1800), is typically a ‘grammar man’. As his subtitle promises, his book will attempt to make

pointing dependent on the governance of words. He will leave no nuance of meaning in limbo, nor allow moot sentence structures to live on undiscussed. All will be commented upon and made correct, so that young minds may be fortified with a set of directions for every contingency. Throughout the nineteenth century, students of English grammar will not suffer for want of advice.

#### CONDITIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CENTURY

As the century turned, pedagogical voices rose in dismay that the details of punctuation seemed so little settled. Says the mournful Caleb Alexander, “The proper use of [punctuation] marks is attended with some difficulty; and has been thought, by some, not reducible to any determinate rules”.<sup>5</sup>

Prefaces to pointing and grammatical treatises are rich in gloom over the career of punctuation. Thomas Stackhouse has this to say:

It is an assertion too strongly supported by fact, and too easily proved by experiment, to be controverted, that our youth, however complete in other branches of grammar, know little or nothing of that part of it, which relates to punctuation, or the right use of points.

Though not complete by modern comparisons, his view of the “right use” was often illuminating. He wanted above all to achieve transparency for the conveyed statement—a goal that we today claim to share. For that, he noted, pointing is not only generally useful, but “in some *particular cases indispensably necessary*”. What the writer means, he must put down. He illustrated his argument as follows:

Happy is the man, who hath sown in his breast the seeds of benevolence.

This sentence is foolish, said Stackhouse, for it implies that the sowing of benevolent seeds was the speaker’s own act—an obvious

5. Caleb Alexander, *A Grammatical System of the English Language*, 6th ed. (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1801), 89.



impossibility and quite the reverse of the intended meaning, which can only be:

Happy is the man, who hath, sown in his breast, the seeds  
of benevolence.

To perfect the handling of punctuation, Stackhouse furnished his reader with a wadge of verbose practice exercises. Though one “may apprehend, that Punctuation, on this plan, will demand more time and attention than can be appropriated to it”, the fact is, that it does not. For punctuation is indivisible from syntax, and plays in concert with it “to divide a subject into its component parts, and to distinguish their relations and connexions, or unconnectedness and integrity”.<sup>6</sup> This thesis will be affirmed again and again in the writings of punctators, grammar-oriented as they increasingly are.

At this juncture would-be punctators begin to pop up from all walks of life. The ensuing pages will introduce the punctuational cogitations of lawyers, gentlemen-scholars, teachers, and typographers—these last with an understandably aggressive interest in the effectiveness of written language. As the story unfolds, we will see how the ‘Is it an art or a science?’ quandary resolves. A successful punctating policy, it turns out, demands reason, but does not discard art. We will see ‘clause’ beginning to develop its distinct character. We will note both a microscopic interest in achieving perfect lucidity wherever possible and a simplifying of the language used to convey the instruction for doing so. With words locked into print and following the courses of a better understood grammar, elocutionary issues regressed in importance, though they were never wholly lost sight of.

#### SAMUEL ROUSSEAU

In the preface to his book *Punctuation*, published in London in 1816, Samuel Rousseau joined his colleagues in mourning the

6. Thomas Stackhouse, *A New Essay on Punctuation: Being an Attempt to Reduce the Practice of Pointing to the government of Distinct and explicit Rules by Which Every Point may be Accounted for after the manner of Parsing* (London: West and Hughes, 1800), iv, 2.

phlegmatic public response to the glamour of punctuation. He was astonished that so little attention was paid to it in the ‘seminaries of learning’ and that a pupil who was tolerably proficient in the classics could be so ‘extremely deficient’ in the art of punctuating. For even in his letters to his friends, a young man

either uses no points at all, or else places them all at random; so that it is almost impossible for any one but himself to understand fully the purport of his epistles: nay, even in his scholastic exercises the same negligence appears; and the inattention of the tutor suffers them to pass without animadversion on this important subject.<sup>7</sup>

Should the young man ever aspire to setting down his thoughts in print, says Rousseau, he will merely baffle his compositor, who will be obliged to guess at his sense and will in his ignorance more likely pervert it than not. If only the author would take the trouble to point his manuscript exactly as he wishes to have it appear before the public, what quandaries would be resolved! what labors saved! And how rewarding for the reader, who at last might garner the intended meaning.

We have known a learned work sent to the press, by one of the brightest geniuses of the present age, larded with Greek and Latin quotations, which made a large octavo volume, without a single Point from the beginning to the end of the manuscript; so that the Compositor has been under the necessity of using his own judgement, and of pointing the work accordingly in the best manner he was able: but surely the learned author could not imagine that the Compositor was sufficiently skilled in the Greek and Latin languages, to be able to point them properly, if he thought him capable of pointing the English part with correctness.<sup>8</sup>

7. Samuel Rousseau, *Punctuation: or, An Attempt to Facilitate the Art of Pointing, on the Principles of Grammar and Reason* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1813), xxii.

8. Rousseau, *Punctuation*, xxiii.

To establish the credentials of punctuation, Rousseau began his text with a multi-paged parade of all the big guns in the history of pointing—Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Quintillian, Donatus, Aldus Manutius. No laggard student could help but be impressed. The deliberations and discoveries of these august punctuists constitute an important “branch of education”, says our author, adding that it is one which is best inculcated into tenderer intellects by example and drill. Teaching books of this period regularly include questions to be answered, sample illustrations, and materials to be reworked or memorized.

Rousseau’s treatise draws heavily on previous works and is itself a strange concoction of old muddle with what is new and valuable. He is an admirer of Lindley Murray. He lifts great chunks of material from John Walker and David Steel, but gives his attributions like a man of honor. The underlying principles of pointing must align with grammar, says he, as have already said his recent predecessors. Sentence construction is crucial to sense and to appropriate punctuation. With admonishments to maintain the connection of subject (however complex) with verb, verb with its accusative (however complex), and relative clause (however complex) with its antecedent, he confusingly urged “a liberal and proper use of the Comma”.

John Walker’s theories on the tensions between rhetorical (or elocutional) and syntactical (or logical, or grammatical) punctuation had been on the market for several decades by the time that Rousseau himself addressed the difficult interrelationship. Walker’s elaborate dual punctuation system was too demanding for actual practice. Said the pragmatic Rousseau: “Punctuation should lead to the sense; and the sense will guide to [not necessarily equate with] modulation and emphasis”. In this way, he both accepted the findings of eighteenth-century scholarship and eschewed its impracticable prescriptions. Certainly, he recognized the distinction between reading aloud, and reading or writing in silence. For oral reading, he noted that “a Semicolon requires a pause twice the length of that which is observed at a Comma”. Writers, in applying their stops, should realize that grammarians had merely adopted the rhetoricians’ *names* of divisions of sentences, i.e., the period, colon,

semicolon, and comma, and applied them to the actual marks.<sup>9</sup> With the passage of years, confidence in the intuition of the reader-aloud—so new in the example of Rousseau—began to firm. As will have been realized, punctuation's bumpy history was beginning to smooth out.

Since we propose to follow some of the less agreed upon punctuating elements throughout this first half of the century, let us see what Rousseau manages to come up with for juggling the troublesome middle points. It is an era of indecision about, and even disgust for, the use of the colon and semicolon. Rousseau instructs as follows: "When several Semicolons have preceded, and a still greater pause is necessary, in order to mark the connecting or concluding sentiment, a Colon may be used". Again: "When one or more Colons have preceded, and the concluding sentiment is connected by a Conjunction, a Semicolon must be used before that Conjunction. . . . [However] when the Conjunction is not expressed, but understood, the Colon must be used."<sup>10</sup>

Parentheses make another much discussed grammatical topic. To what extent they participate in the grammar of a sentence is frequently held up for inspection. Additionally problematic is whether they reveal a certain lack of good taste on the part of the author. Much wordage is expended on these nebulous matters during the early nineteenth century. In Rousseau's view (he follows Murray) the parenthesis requires the proper sentential points before and after, as well as its own points inside. "For the real and proper office of the Parenthesis is simply to denote, not a Point, but the Parenthetical clause." How far away are the sounds of speech! As for the dash, a growing focus of controversy, Rousseau offers multiple differentiations. It is more or less up to the writer. Does he wish to leave the reader in suspense? to emphasize? be epigram-

9. Rousseau, *Punctuation*, 32–34, 39. We will see this thought crop up again later.

10. *Ibid.*, 98, 100–101. Also, see pp. 103–5. Sometimes the colon is used for ungrammatical purposes (for example, in introducing a quotation), as well as for rhetorical purposes (for example, in chanted Psalms, where, if the lines are to be *read*, rather than sung, the colon will not be regarded unless it accords with the "rules of Punctuation").

matic? lay the point? For all these purposes the dash may be properly introduced. In keeping with most grammarians of this time, he does not relish Lawrence Sterne's fanciful use of the dash.<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, is a man who worries about the most explicit way for setting down his thoughts. His thinking, so representative of all his punctating contemporaries, is that the points materially affect the

sense of all literary compositions in the highest degree, and . . . even a Comma may illuminate, or totally obscure, or entirely change the sense of the finest passage in the best and most classical writer. [Thus can] we see the absolute necessity of paying the strictest attention to this branch of erudition, in every species of composition.<sup>12</sup>

WILLIAM COBBETT

Only two years after Rousseau's appearance on the scene, William Cobbett, who had so much to say on so many vital matters, turned his attention to our topic. In *A Grammar of the English Language* (1815), he published his advice in a series of open letters to his son James and to all those "Young Persons, Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys" who, in their appetite for knowledge, were crowding at his shoulder. The tone of this book is lively, polemic, and frequently iconoclastic. Mr. Cobbett, though not himself conventionally educated, was unafraid to contest the opinions of those who were. He followed his reasoning mind where it led. Against the hum of contemporary stuffed shirts, his commonsensical voice is enormously refreshing. No one, however mighty or imbued with literary authority, is above the reach of his snapping commentary. He championed the causes of the common man, and among these, the mastery of grammar was a crucial one.

In general, says Cobbett, the points are things of much consequence in the matter of saying exactly what is meant. They are particularly useful to disambiguate the meanings of word clusters. He is oddly terse in his description of the four major stops, and simply,

11. Rousseau, *Punctuation*, 125–26, 130–42.

12. *Ibid.*, xx.

like Rousseau, accepts their aural-visual duties. In the case of the comma, it simply “marks the shortest pause that we make in speaking”. In writing, it should be used to set off every part of a sentence that has a verb in it that is not in the “infinitive mode”. Generally, this is proper, but not always, he says, and leaves these intimations of a ‘defined clause’ at that. The comma should also set off phrases that are not part of the basic construction of a sentence. Recognizing that the comma will mislead if present equally for phrases and structural sentence members, he strangely, like Rousseau, exhorts us to its frequent use in so far as good taste will allow. Cobbett, who by dint of his own intelligence had learned to implant the points usefully—*If I can do it, why not you?*—wrote with a remarkable clarity. Indeed, his hobby was exposing failure in the presumed clarity of others.

Cobbett advised a sparing use of the parenthesis, whose task is to interrupt the regular course of the mind. About the dash, he became more voluble:

Who is to know what is intended by the use of these dashes? Those who have thought proper, like Mr. Lindley Murray, to place *the dash* amongst the *grammatical points*, ought to give us some rule relative to its different longitudinal dimensions in different cases. The *inch*, the *three quarter-inch*, the *half-inch*, the *quarter-inch*: these would be something determinate; but, “the dash,” without measure, must be a most perilous thing for a young grammarian to handle. In short, “the dash,” is a cover for ignorance as to the use of points, and it can answer no other purpose.<sup>13</sup>

#### PHILIP WITHERS

Throughout this period ‘perspicuity’ was the watchword. Did what was written actually make sense? Was the expression as found on the page a reasonable image of what could be thought? In short, how can you presume to mean something when in fact you are saying something else? Cobbett was immensely active in this area.

13. William Cobbett, *A Grammar of the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 60, 65.

A fellow participant, though not so pleasant a one, was Philip Withers. In the opening pages of his *Aristarchus* (1822), he addressed his public: “Indulging the Hope that my Reader is fully convinced of the Dignity and Importance of Science, I proceed to demonstrate its Union with LANGUAGE”. He thereupon discourses on the misconceived opinions of “illiterate rustics”, foreigners, and Scots (“our friends north of the Tweed”). Though Withers does not write specifically about punctuation, his assured approach to the ‘state of the language’ is one so frequently found in grammar books of this period that it will be useful to include here a specimen of his thinking.

He is particularly scathing about authors who demonstrate an imperfect understanding of what they themselves are trying to say: Samuel Johnson, for example, that “polite and amiable Author”, who had absurdly described the word “or” as being a “disjunctive conjunction”. “Can mortal Imagination conceive what is meant” by such a phrase? Though he revered “Doctor Johnson as an able and elegant Defender of moral virtue”, Johnson’s “skill as an Historian of Words was below Mediocrity”. Poor Samuel Johnson. Cobbett, too, had enjoyed having a swing at Johnson.

But Withers had an especially wicked tongue. Steeped in science as well as the classics, his arrogance was as high as the sky. Thus, it is rather a pleasure to come across his complaint concerning the errata in the printed pages of his book. “The Author being in the Country, at a distance from the Press, many Errors in Punctuation . . . have unhappily escaped Correction.”<sup>14</sup>

#### JOHN JOHNSON, PRINTER

As was previously remarked, the printers, coerced by the commercial concerns of the publishers, had a great deal to do with the settling down of punctuation, of what the points should signify and where their presence might disentangle text. In these specific respects, alas, John Johnson was no great intellectual. Nevertheless, his plea for simplicity and accuracy appears to have had an influence. In his instruction book for printers, *Typographia* (1824), he

14. Philip Withers, *Aristarchus* (London: J. Hearne, 1822), 78, 329.

spoke of the standard, basic six stops—the comma, semicolon, colon, period, and the two notes of interrogation and admiration—as being rather one too many. He lamented the suggestions of some “pedantic persons” that the stops should be increased in number by adding one below the comma and another between the comma and semicolon.

So far are we from imagining that such an introduction will meet with encouragement, that we confidently expect to see the present number diminished, by the total exclusion of the colon, a point long since considered unnecessary, and now but seldom used.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson acknowledges that “there has never existed on any subject, among men of learning, a greater difference of opinion than on the true mode of punctuation”. Though the sense calls for only a comma, some will insist on a semicolon; where some prefer “stiff pointing”, others recommend altogether the reverse. The waste of time to the corrector is appalling. Either the writing is illegible and the spelling incorrect, or the punctuation is defective. “The compositor has often to read sentences of his copy more than once before he can ascertain what he conceives the meaning of the author, that he may not deviate from him in the punctuation; this retards him considerably.” But that is not the end of the matter, for the corrector will have other opinions and when these have been inserted and the proof goes to the author, he will dissent from them both.

It is John Johnson’s entreaty that compositors learn to punctuate, and that authors send in their manuscripts properly prepared, for he, the author, is the one most competent to judge “of the length and strength of his own sentence”, which the introduction of the wrong point will completely alter. Johnson suggests that unless the author undertake the responsibility to point the entire manuscript, he should not punctuate any of it. It will be easier for the composi-

15. John Johnson, *Typographia: or the Printer's instructor*, 2 vols. (London: Messrs. Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, & Green, 1824), 2:54.



tor to do it all in a uniform manner than to correct and shift about in a sea of indiscriminating, inappropriate points. The writer can advise to point loosely, or stiffly, and then let well enough alone until the proofs arrive, at which time he can detect “if a point or two do injury to his sentence”.

As punctuation is so difficult, Johnson will not try to lay down any rules. “An uniform and correct mode of pointing must be acquired by the compositor from practice and attention.” His description of the four major stops is given in terms of counting one for the comma, two for the semicolon, three for the colon, and four for the period and reveals his own unsophisticated perception of their emerging grammatical connections. Delightfully, however, his recipe conjures up the real-life image of a compositor, murmuring the phrases to himself as he plucks the letters from his type case and lays them along his composing stick.

Johnson’s semicolon instructions give an insight into the unsatisfactory state of printerly enlightenment during the first quarter of the century. A semicolon, with a two-count pause, he says, “enforces what has been illustrated by the comma, and allows the reader an opportunity to acquire a perfect view of the sentence, before it is terminated by the full point”. Of the comma he has not much more to say than that, though a junior stop, it requires a perfect understanding, for it governs the order of all the other stops. One feels sympathy for the compositors caught in this circuit of question begging. But John Johnson, we note, is more forthright about the colon (count three when you see it). As it has been superseded in practice by the comma, “ellipsis line”, or “metal rule” (for none of which does he give a value), it is no longer useful.<sup>16</sup> Having counted to three, you may throw it out.

#### LORD BYRON, A CULPRIT

Interestingly, Byron was a notorious non-punctator. Well-supported legend has it that, giving up entirely on the intricacies of pointing, he simply passed the tedious job on to the compositor at the press, who then presumably figured something out that seemed

16. Johnson, *Typographia*, 2:54–59 passim.

to do. It will be appropriate here to compare a Byron original manuscript offering with the effects achieved in a first printing. It is difficult to guess how much influence Byron exerted over the several word-changes, but given his reputation for non-pointing he probably welcomed (or perhaps did not notice) the new commas and additional full stop.

The verse below, from the tenth stanza of Canto X of *Don Juan*, has been copied exactly from Byron's manuscript version, dated 1822, in the British Library. It is followed by the same verse re-rendered in its first published form in 1823, by A. and W. Galignani, in Paris.

It is observed that ladies are litigious  
 Upon all legal objects of possession  
 And not the less so when they are religious  
 Which doubles what they think of the transgression  
 With suits and prosecutions they harass us  
 As the tribunals show through many a Session—  
 When they suspect that any one goes shares  
 In that to which the Law makes them sole Heiress.  
 (British Library, Ashley 5163, folio 2v)

It is observed that ladies are litigious  
 Upon all legal objects of possession,  
 And not the least so when they are religious,  
 Which doubles what they think of the transgression.  
 With suits and prosecutions they besiege us,  
 As the tribunals show through many a session,  
 When they suspect that any one goes shares  
 In that to which the law makes them sole heirs.  
 (*Don Juan*, page 14)

CHARLES JAMES ADDISON

Charles James Addison now joins our lachrymose chorus. What are we to do about punctuation? In the expansive subtitle to his *Complete System of Punctuation* (1826) he announces his position. He has established his punctating treatise “upon Fixed Principles: whereby

Albany July 8<sup>th</sup> 1814

My dear Hodgson / I send this on the chance of  
your being still at Hastings - if so - pray answer  
by return of Post. - Will you take a  
house for me at Hastings - by the weeks will  
be best as my stay will be short - it must  
be good & tolerably large - as Mrs Leigh - has  
4 children - & three maids will be there also -  
besides my own Valet & footman - my Coach-  
= man / & his horses / may be boarded out - I  
shall also want a housemaid and extempore &  
protempore cooks of the place - and wish all this to be

The first page of a Lord Byron letter, dated 8 July 1814. Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library. As is evident here, Byron was not only flummoxed by the rules of poetical pointing, but by pointing of any sort. His habit of pumping out short phrases between dashes is very oral, and apparently typical of most of the hasty correspondence of his time. The text reads as follows:

Albany July 8th, 1814

My dear Hodgson / I send this on the chance of your being still at Hastings - if so - pray answer by return of Post. - Will you take a house for me at Hastings - by the weeks will be best as my stay will be short - it must be good and tolerably large - as Mrs Leigh [Byron's sister] - her 4 children - & three maids will be there also - besides my own Valet & footman - my Coachman / & his horses / may be boarded out - I shall also want a housemaid and extempore & protempore cooks of the place - and wish all this to be settled as soon as you are disposed to take the trouble.

authors, literary men, and the heads of classical and Domestic establishments, may become proficient in an attainment which is indispensable to secure elegance with perspicuity of language". His preface is equally unequivocal:

At a time like the present, when every thing connected with Literature has reached a perfection which is at once demonstrative of the praise-worthy emulation and natural talent of this great country; when improvements, generally speaking, are continually perfecting the suggestions of earlier times; when Printing, in particular, is brought, as one is led to imagine, to its *acme*,—it does appear extraordinary, that a science like *Punctuation*, which may be termed the very marshalling and arranging of the words of a language, should not only be comparatively so little understood, but that no writer has yet appeared, who has ventured to fix such data for the judicious employment of the several marks in established usage, as might tend to the more general knowledge of that which all allow to be of the greatest importance, but which the bulk are confessedly so slightly acquainted.<sup>17</sup>

For Addison, then, pointing is a science, not a matter of taste, nor even an art, and its application must align with grammar. How, he asks, can options of choice be allowed to prevail according to the different impressions of speech, which is an arrangement of sound and not of sense and leads foolishly to commas equaling halves of semicolons and so on, when some speak monotonously, some emphasize or speak hastily? There is, in short, no *ad libitum* about the business. It is right or wrong. Printers, whose knowledge comes only from hints in different grammars, are totally in the dark about punctating principles, and their opinions change every hour. As no work is considered by even the most scientific printer to be authoritative for punctuation, Addison is rather hoping that his will not only fill the bill there, but provide a tool for inculcating correctness in youths everywhere.<sup>18</sup>

17. Charles James Addison, *A Complete System of Punctuation* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1826), iii.

18. Addison, *A Complete System*, iii–viii.

Addison is well into the pleasures of remodeling unclear statements. He offers for our delectation such morsels as: If the comma were omitted in the sentence

A wager is half won, when well laid.

then the sense would be that the wager was half won at the very time of its being well laid: not, that *after* it had been well laid, it was half won.

As the century advances, samples of linguistic opacity come regularly under the grammatical microscope. Rules about the versatile comma are rife. Though the semicolon and colon have begun to relate more obviously to particular situations in sentence structures, they remain no less difficult for the average user. Addison, like John Johnson, is himself wary of the middle points and cannot bring himself to define their boundaries of control. About the semicolon, Addison warns us not to “expect anything positive of this sign”, for “judgement cannot be enforced by precept in the use of [it]”. However, he suggests, we can learn something of its powers by practice and study. For example, in the sentence

Those best adapted to the purpose are called 10 dram vials;  
for they are long in proportion to their diameter.

we are informed by the semicolon that the reason for these vials being best suited to the purpose intended has nothing to do with their shape; whereas with a comma the meaning would positively imply that it did. The colon he calculates to be the most confusing of all the signs, suggesting, as it does, only a greater remoteness of the parts it divides. Finally, he settles on a role for it. It is to be used, he says, when matter follows that is a continuance of the same subject (i.e., not a fresh subject). No news there.

Addison touches on a number of other subtleties concerning the colon, but without much gusto. As for the dash (which, like the parenthesis, he calls a “break”), he advocates (“though not all agree”) that the writer replace it with commas as the syntax demands. Breaks should be used only sparingly, so that writers are not encouraged to rely on them in place of the natural structure of the language. In sum (following Stackhouse, and again though less

explicitly, Rousseau), he believes that all punctuation should be aimed against the jumbling together of discordant associations, and towards preventing confusion in the dependence of the connective parts. A study of the points and how they can marshal a sentence will induce reflection and an arrangement of reasoning that can be satisfactorily transferred to paper.<sup>19</sup>

JUSTIN BRENNAN

Compared with his contemporaries, Justin Brennan presented an astonishingly relaxed view. The subtitle to his *Composition and Punctuation* (1829)—*Familiarly Explained for Those who have Neglected the Study of Grammar*—augurs a welcome permissiveness to the novice punctator of those early years. Come, come, this gentle grammarian seems to say, life is too short. It is enough to steer clear of the parenthesis. Ah! and forget all the colon-semicolon nonsense. The job can be done well enough with dashes and commas. You'll be quite safe if you use short sentences, without all those 'althoughs', 'buts', and 'notwithstandings'. "Never torment yourself about the impropriety of dividing [a sentence], but make the separations, at once, according to your first impressions." Put commas in wherever you "wish a momentary rest", for the comma is the proper divisional mark "unless on those occasions where a kind of hiatus, or a fresh expression of force, might require the dash". The introduction of the dash is a most important accession to the arsenal of points, for it "puts simplicity in the place of mystery, gives decision in lieu of hesitation, divests ignorance of its imposing mask, and strips artifice of its deceptious solemnities". Paragraphs, this agreeable author suggests, should also be short, since shortness offers relief to thought as well as to attention. And don't fret if you find yourself repeating a word, for it is much better to do that than to leave the sense weak or doubtful.<sup>20</sup>

"What a quantity of useless controversial stuff has been written upon the 'proper' use of the semi-colon and colon!" Though the

19. Addison, *A Complete System*, 28, 47, 55, 62, 92–94, 102–3.

20. Justin Brennan, *Composition and Punctuation* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1829), 13, 39, 52, 59, 60–65.

public has thrown them overboard, the school-masters are still trying to keep them afloat, teaching the dash “as another kind of colon, and semi-colon too!” While the semi-colon is barely gasping above water, the colon is sinking fast—and good riddance! Although Brennan admires the tremendous clarity that Cobbett achieves with all his colons and semicolons, he chides him both for the cursory attention he gave to the points in his book on grammar, and for his extreme caution about the supple dash. “Cobbett forgets that not all have his intellect.” It was, after all, the prestigious Mr. Lindley Murray who ‘legalized’ the dash (“if used with propriety”, he had said, and gave three rules). But, pray, why slow up the education of our youth with ponderous differentiation when the dash is so handy and so penetrative of the confusion surrounding the colon and semicolon? As the semicolon is being brought to ruin by the comma, so the colon is being “dashed to pieces”. It is only the printers who love colons and semicolons. I beg you, examine with me the following sentence. How much more expressive has the substitution of dash for colon rendered it!

What a lamentable situation his! Wife, children, mother, sisters, friends—all desert this hapless victim of perfidy and ingratitude!<sup>21</sup>

Brenan’s comment here is worth pausing over. A printerly colon in the place of the dash would indeed have produced a sort of hiccup in the visual flow of this emotional statement. Orally, it would have marked for the reader an extensive silence—ending at the count of four, or six, or whatever—and had no effect whatsoever on the listener. But for the silent reader, the space that a dash actually creates on the page suggests a visually sustained commitment to the initial portion of the sentence and allows elasticity in interpreting what follows. Contrariwise, the stronger stops—that is, the colon or semicolon—rear up as barriers. To the eye they are without doubt more inhibiting and less given to subtlety.

Quite rightly, Brennan chides authors (a fair number, as a matter of fact—it being a hobby of his times) for “unmeaningful pointing”.

21. Brennan, *Composition and Punctuation*, 61–76 passim.

He deplors the finicky fashion of coupling a dash with a comma, colon, or semicolon. To what end? he complains. Even his beloved Lindley Murray is guilty of this. Again, why should grammarians of Murray's distinction give twenty and more rules for the comma, when its function on the page is so simple? The rules of grammarians tend more "to mysteize than to elucidate". Brennan feels justified in banning the use of the colon and semicolon, since even the "wisest heads cannot keep them under a wholesome subjection" and their powers are "not decisive but hypothetically assigned". Punctuation cannot be considered a science as it is too deviating. It is better conceived as an art, in that it must be regulated by feelings, impressions, and the "discretionary pleasure" of the writer. Brennan's advice to ambitious but untutored authors is to relax about sentential pointing. Put in your capital letters and your full stops and leave the rest to the compositor. He, a reliable fellow, "will correct your errors, and preserve more consistency and uniformity throughout".<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Brennan offers an example of the improvement in clarity that simple punctuation and shortening of sentences will make over the turgid and misapplied pointing of the past. He uses for this purpose a sentence from Dryden's dedication to the Marquess of Normanby of the *Aeneid* translation, taken from the first Tonson printing of it in 1697; and it is reasonable to suppose, despite the battles between them, that Dryden himself accepted the Tonson house rules for pointing.

*Staius*, who through his whole Poem, is noted for want of Conduct and Judgment; instead of staying, as he might have done, for the Death of *Capaneus*, *Hippomedon*, *Tideus*, or some other of his Seven Champions, (who are Heroes all alike) or more properly for the Tragical end of the two Brothers, whose Exequies the next Successor had leisure to perform, when the Seige was rais'd, and in the Interval betwixt the Poets first Action, and his second; went out of his way, as it were on propense Malice to commit a Fault.<sup>23</sup>

22. *Ibid.*, 85–96 *passim*, and III.

23. John Dryden, *The Works of Virgil: Containing his Pastorals, Georgics, and Aeneis* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1697), 150 [(a)v].



Brenan reproduces this same sentence, “newly punctuated by Carey, who has managed splendidly to make sense of it”:<sup>24</sup>

Staius—who, through his whole poem, is noted for want of conduct and judgement—instead of staying, as he might have done, for the death of Capaneus, Hippomedon, Tydeus, or some other of his seven champions (who are all heroes alike), or more properly for the tragical end of the two brothers, whose exequies the next successor had leisure to perform when the seige was raised, and in the interval betwixt the poet’s first action and his second—went out of his way, as it were on prepense malice to commit a fault.

Without Mr. Carey’s judicious punctuation, says Brenan, “it would be a study to comprehend this sentence”. Still, as it is not completely lucid, Brenan himself has a go.

Staius, through his whole poem, is noted for want of conduct and judgement. Without any obvious necessity, he stays for the death of Capaneus, Hippomedon, Tydeus, or some other of his seven champions, who are all heroes alike. It may, indeed, be more properly said, that he waits for the tragical end of the two brothers, whose exequies, the next successor had leisure to perform, when the siege was raised, and in the interval betwixt the poet’s first and second action. He therefore went out of his way, as it were on prepense malice, to commit a fault.

What, we ask, would Hemingway have made of it?

#### HUGH DOHERTY

Since the “confused methods of metaphysical grammarians [had] rendered [the principles of language] eminently repulsive to the young mind”, Hugh Doherty set about to rectify matters by writing a reformed explanation, free of the trappings of established ped-

24. Brenan, *Composition and Punctuation*, 10–12. In 1803 John Carey (1756–1826) had put out an improved edition of the works of Dryden’s Virgil, “containing many new and important corrections” (London: Printed by J. Cuthell).

agogy, for those who wished to learn their grammar without a master.<sup>25</sup> The abstruse result was entitled *An Introduction to English Grammar on Universal Principles* (1841). In reshuffling the tenets of grammar for his “simple” system, Doherty proved himself quite as exotic as were his eighteenth-century philosophical forebears. In fact, the terms he uses to describe the complexities of his universal rules assume a considerable experience on the higher levels of grammar. Without previous study no self-teaching hodcarrier could possibly have survived the mazes that Doherty had in store. Though Doherty’s language is clear enough, the material he proffers is extraordinary. It is hard to imagine how he intended to set any ‘eminently repulsed’ mind to rights by means of his difficult (though certainly cogent) treatise on the architecture of English grammar.

There is a mystique in numbers for Doherty. Everything he touches divides immediately in order to redivide and be accounted for as one item in a group of four. He models his grammatical cosmos by stacking his groups in biological tiers of class, order, genus, and species. The body of his theories on punctuation, whose description of office arises as the second order of the fourth class of “the signs of ideas”—the other classes being nouns, adnouns, and subadnouns, and this fourth having to do with the marks and signs that combine to elucidate numbers one, two, and three—is sadly ensnared in difficulties beyond the scope of this survey.

As will be realized by the above whiff of content, the author delves into his topic boldly. His enthusiasm for the subject leads him (as it had earlier led Walker) to attempt a stretching of punctuation to include both the oral-aural and visual aspects of language—a course that leads his readers up some rather steep slopes. Nevertheless, his idiosyncratic treatment of familiar materials does throw light on a number of interesting aspects of basic sentence formulation. Since his grammatical leadership was an honored fact in the midcentury years, we will not be amiss in presenting here a few of the less electrifying headlines from his thinking about punctuation.

25. Hugh Doherty, *An Introduction to English Grammar on Universal Principles* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1841), 1.

In Doherty's view punctuation would ideally require "at least four shades of variety in each of the four points which are commonly used". However, since "these very minute shades of distinction are more curious in theory than useful in practice", he recommends instead a general lightening of the load. As it is, the colon is hardly ever used, and like John Johnson and Justin Brennan, he discards it forthwith. Ditto, the dash. Dashes, this author proclaims, have only one legitimate use, that is, "to indicate *paragraphic* or *semi-paragraphic* separation, where we do not wish to waste space by commencing a new group of periods". So much for that. The semicolon, which he renames the "semi-period", represents a pause of "*mixt* signification", as it marks the "*external* limit of a simple sentence, and the *internal* division or pause between the simple members of a compound sentence"—a succinct way of putting it. Unless the sentence is very long and complex, then the slim, swift comma is the one to reach for. He gives, yes, four functions for it: the first one deals with respiration in so far as will be helpful for reading aloud and the second with the pauses between groups of words that facilitate easy listening; the third "represents a longer pause than usual, at the end of very long and complex functions which do not individually form complete sense and therefore ought not to be separated by semi-periods"; and the fourth represents "a sort of paragraphic separation"; or more simply—Use it in place of an introductory colon.<sup>26</sup> All in all, with modest attention to oral-aural and visual needs, the Doherty comma can be made to settle intuitively.

Be assured, however, that despite his interest in oral-aural aspects of written language, Doherty's points align entirely with his own redefined syntactical groupings of words. Grammar is crucial and in English, word order is the vital secret. If word groups are not immediately adjoined to the words they serve, they are necessarily thrown amongst others which they are not meant to serve. When that happens "we not only do not say what we meant to say, but it may happen that we express ideas which are in absolute contradiction with our meaning". To avoid such misfortune, the student

26. Doherty, *English Grammar on Universal Principles*, 82–83, 100–102.

should abstain from attaching loose auxiliary functions to the original concept, as in the following example:

Advertisement.—*Wanted*, a groom to take care of two horses, of a religious turn of mind.

The clarity of this sentence is not saved by the comma, whatever Cobbett might think. It will be better rendered as follows:

*Wanted*, a groom of a religious turn of mind, to take care of two horses.<sup>27</sup>

As we have just seen, ingenious punctuation cannot be counted on to put to rights irregular sorts of construction or the misarrangement of clauses. Yet with all his apparent enthusiasm for exactitude, Doherty does not come to grips with a precise meaning for the vagarious concept of clause. He is instead interestingly committed to the *sound* of language, to an invested sense of where pause, both grammatical and rhetorical, is called for. Like Rousseau, he accepts the differentiation between the written and spoken stops, but fails to deal with it appropriately in his own terms. Generally, he feels, punctuation is overused. “We ourselves, seldom use any other mark of *internal separation* than that of the *comma*, unless we wish to indicate a more formal pause than usual between the parts of a long sentence.” (Formal? He does not tell us what he means by this word.) Within the full grammatical sentence that has been marked off with a period, only a minor importance can attach to the distinct separation of its internal members and their functions. (From this meticulous investigator, here is a thought-provoking remark. Perhaps he never had occasion to dip into Tonson’s rendering of the dedication of the *Aeneis*.) The exception to the comma’s effectiveness, continues our Doherty, is the ambiguating situation where “an inferior function is placed exactly between two functions, to which it may belong with equal propriety”. In such a case the comma must do its best to separate the inferior function from the one to which it does not attach and group it positively with the one to which it does.

27. *Ibid.*, 129, 136.

As for parentheses, they should be treated with great diffidence, for they divert our attention from the subject under consideration. Unless witty or interesting, they always emerge from the text, “clumsy and unwelcome”, as in the following example:

Every planet (as the Creator has made nothing in vain) is most probably inhabited.

which would be much better rendered:

As the Creator has made nothing in vain, every planet is most probably inhabited.

Disappointingly, he does not present us with examples of witty or interesting parentheses.

In his ambitious embrace of the noise side of language, Doherty is concerned that no mark does justice to emphasis, which is a legitimate dimension of the meaning intended by authors. Punctuation, italics, and bold print will not distinguish positively the degrees of importance that an author may attach to different words in a written sentence, nor will they delineate the integrity of a relative emphasis against an indicative one. The reader must use his native sharpness to draw forth from the page the full meaning, which is implicit in the intoning voice.

Thus we see that Doherty, more than most, has thought hard about the relationship of the dual strains in language communication. He is aware that the physiological coupling of vision and sound cannot be ignored when serious discussion of pointing priorities is in course, for the “organs through whose medium we become acquainted with each other’s thoughts are primarily the eye and the ear”.<sup>28</sup> His proposals for a marking system that would render upon the page all the subtleties of meaning that the voice can produce are ingenious and, like Walker’s of the previous century, impractically complex and elaborate for adept usage. Sadly, Doherty’s name must join the list of those highminded intellects who swung hard at that elusive target: an absolutely trouble-free connection from author’s inspiration to reader’s comprehension.

28. Doherty, *English Grammar on Universal Principles*, 86, 142–44, 210.

Modern writers hear voices in their heads quite as much as their predecessors used to. Modern readers gather their clues of authorial intent as best they can from the 'received' grammar rules and printing conventions about written word groups and how they should be demarked. By the middle of the nineteenth century, as will have been noticed, grammar rules had hardened into a rigid discipline. Doherty's rethinking of their worth was useful to discerning grammarians, if not to ordinary folk. We must take leave of him now, still bustling amongst his universal principles as he evaluates the data on question and exclamation marks. Though used as full stops to a grammatically 'completed' period, they are notoriously footed in rhetorical soil and well worth hours and hours of scrutiny. Doherty, we are pleased to say, is not friendless in his white-coated world. France, the home of rational grammar, is full of similarly thorough and indefatigable types.

The two signs of intonation which are in common use, are the *note of interrogation*, ? and the *note of admiration*, !. These two signs are used to designate an incredible number of different intonations: more than five hundred, according to Professor Delsarte. A short time ago, we were introduced to that gentleman in Paris, and, in our presence, one of his pupils, a little girl of nine years of age, repeated one single sentence in one hundred and thirty different intonations. Professor Delsarte's method of analysis is analogous to our own, and it gives us pleasure to know that that gentleman's observations concerning the expression of ideas, confirm the opinions and conclusions which we had formed on the same subject.<sup>29</sup>

#### F. FRANCILLON

Punctuation is the *art*, said F. Francillon, solicitor, in his *Essay on Punctuation with Incidental Remarks on Composition* (1842), "whereby the author hopes to make his sentences more easily to be under-

29. *Ibid.*, 83.

stood by *his* readers and *their* hearers; and consequently more correctly to convey his ideas to them". Francillon noted how the grammarians had drawn their terms of comma, colon, and period from the rhetoricians and concluded, like Rousseau, that the office of the points is "to point out to the eye of the reader, the periods and members and fragments" of text—that is, the realities of which they are the indices. With this glance at punctuation's ambivalent history, he proceeded without differentiation of rhetorical and grammatical needs to the contemporary problems of how best to point a text. In the manner of all his fellow pundits, he regretted the public's unstable perception of punctuation. For in all of literature no department, while "so generally attempted to be practised, and so generally presumed to be of utility", is yet so much ignored.<sup>30</sup>

Francillon deals with the comma, quoting both Bishop Lowth (see Part Six) and Lindley Murray, and recommends that high pointing (that is, the extravagant use of 'comma-points') be avoided on the grounds that it emphasizes phrases which have no verb and cannot therefore convey to the mind an intelligible idea. (We are coming close to a workable definition for *clause* here. The reader will be relieved that Rousseau's confusing advocacy of frequent phrasal comma usage is being ignored.) Typically, Francillon is rather more verbose than clear on the matter of the semicolon-colon issue. "The colon takes more . . . the form of a period"; whereas "words of reference are more pro-semi-colon than colon". The semicolon is used when one member contains words which lead the reader to expect another member and the second member has words of reference leading back to the contiguous former and when the latter member effects nothing without calling in the aid of the former. Wrestling with the notion of a period, Francillon manages to improve the definition of it to that date. Heretofore, generally, it had been described as merely a 'completeness of sense', a suspension of meaning, a grammatical construction that will not admit of a close before the end of it. To all these views Francillon adds a conclusive touch. The words in a period are so connected,

30. F. Francillon, *An Essay on Punctuation with Incidental Remarks on Composition* (London: Whittaker and Co., 1842), 1–2, 12.

he says, and have such a mutual dependence, that “a reader or hearer, as he reads or listens, is aware, because he has not found those things expressed, which preceding words have led him to expect, that he has not arrived at the end”.

His discussion then turns, as might be expected from the title of his work, to the artistry required in deploying the points—to matters of taste and style in the presentation of meaning. The differing effects of the full period as opposed to the loose period make up a favorite topic. As elements of the seventeenth-century ‘loose period’ (see Part Four) revived in the so-called ‘decadent style’ of Walter Pater during the latter half of the nineteenth century, it will be useful to pause for a moment to see what Francillon (some decades before Pater) had to say on the subject. The following is his example of a simple loose sentence:

Lucius Mummius destroyed Corinth, because he was ignorant and illiterate.

In this sentence the mind comes to rest after “Corinth” and would quite willingly leave matters at that. Nevertheless, it is jarred to absorb fresh material before being allowed to relax. In the rounded period, the tacked-on bit is folded inside, so to speak, to produce a sort of energy that does not give out false premonitions of termination.

Lucius Mummius, because he was ignorant and illiterate,  
destroyed Corinth.

The variety of arrangement allowed by the inflections of ancient languages permitted an easy periodic structure. The mind would wait for the wanted case endings and the verb at the end. In English, however, we must rely more on those words whose almost sole duty it is to suspend the sense: ‘neither’, ‘both’, ‘while’, ‘although’, ‘so’, and the like, and whose presence or absence almost always entails subtleties of choice in punctuation. When these words are included, then some commas are likely to be appropriate; when they are omitted, English tends to compensate with a colon or semicolon.<sup>31</sup>

31. *Ibid.*, 15–19, 25, 29.



As for the use of parentheses, Francillon rather sides with those (Lindley Murray, most notably) who think the superaddition of colon or semicolon at the end looks nice. On no account (*pace* Addison) should the parenthetical marks be replaced by commas. Where ambiguity is manifest, the writer should reconstruct to make his intention perfectly clear. Dashes are useful where significant pauses are to be indicated, or where a sentence breaks off abruptly, or where there is an unexpected turn. Since Lindley Murray had already recommended their cautious use for those purposes, Francillon feels no risk in re-recommending them. He is disapproving of Brenan types who overrule tradition and use the dash to replace colons, semicolons, and parentheses. By Francillon's time, grammarians could only anguish over the slipshod dash. It had by then become a common stylistic feature of everybody's informal writing and was applied to demark more or less *all* the members of a sentence, to the great annoyance of precision seekers. The effect, they felt, was one of constant emphasis on insignificant matter. Francillon allows that the dash may be "lawfully" used in conjunction with other points to augment or qualify "their several powers in pointing out the different members and fragments of a period, and in denoting certain pauses". Even then, he himself disdains it for anything but a sudden interruption.

Though he speaks of art and deals with effects in the arrangement of composition, this author is basically a grammar man. He propounds the prime rule about punctuation. It is ancillary to construction. To render a transparent view of an intended meaning, it is better to rearrange the sentence than to rely on punctuation. He has outgrown all patience with the pausal one, two, three representations of the various points—admittedly, a relief. Though some writers may wish to conceal their ignorance by regarding punctuation as *merely* a matter of taste, the fact is clear: it facilitates a quick absorption of written composition and to understand it one must be conversant with the sentence parts and their relationships.<sup>32</sup>

32. Francillon, *Essay on Punctuation*, 37–39, 44. On page 80 of the appendix, there is an item that will be interesting to devotees of this subject. Unfortunately, Francillon does not say where he found his own information.

In founts of letters, in which the number of the letter *m* is 3000, and the

A major figure during the middle of the 1800s was John Wilson, typographer, who published three influential books on our topic: the first in 1844, *A Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation; Designed for Letter-writers, Authors, Printers, and Correctors of the Press*; the second in 1848 in conjunction with John Graham, entitled *The Compositor's Text-Book*; and the third in 1856, *A Treatise on English Punctuation Designed for Letter-writers, Authors, Printers, and Correctors of the Press: and for the Use of Schools and Academies*—this last being a new edition of the first, but with the special addendum on preparation of copy and proofreading. As was made explicit throughout them all, Wilson's stance was emphatically grammatical. Punctuation—"that despised but useful art"—must be subservient to syntax. Wilson too will rail against popular resistance to honoring the points as they should be honored:

The mental philosopher and the philologist seem to regard [punctuation] as too trifling for attention, amid their grander researches into the internal operations of the mind, and its external workings by means of language. The grammarian passes it by altogether unheeded, or lays down a few general and abstract principles; leaving the difficulties of the art to be surmounted by the pupil as well he may. The lawyer engrosses in a legible character, which, however, by its deficiency in sentential marks, often proves, like the laws of which he is the expounder, "gloriously uncertain" as to the meaning intended to be conveyed. The painter, the en-

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number of the letter *e* is 12000, the proportions of the common points have been as follows:—

	One Hundred Years ago	Fifty Years ago	At the present time
Comma-points	4000	5000	4500
Semicolon-points	1000	1000	800
Colon-points	1000	1000	600
Full-points	2000	2500	2000
Interrogative-Points,	500	400	200
Notes of Admiration,	300	400	150

graver, and the lithographer, appear to set all rules at defiance, by either omitting the points or by misplacing them, wherever punctuation is required. The letter-writer, with his incessant and indiscriminate dashes, puts his friend, his beloved one, his agent, or his employer, to a *little* more trouble, in conning over his epistle, than is absolutely necessary. Even the author—who, of all writers, ought to be the most accurate—puts his manuscript into the printer's hands, either altogether destitute of grammatical pauses, or so badly pointed as to create an unnecessary loss of time to the compositor. . . .

This is an age of authors, as well as readers. Young aspirants after fame, some of them of considerable merit, meet us at every step—in every department of literature. . . . [So] let them turn their attention to the elements of punctuation, trifling and undignified as the subject may appear to be.<sup>33</sup>

Since compositors cannot “follow copy” (so defiled are the manuscripts by slovenly and erroneous orthography, by badly constructed sentences, deficient and indiscriminating points), professional correctors must be brought in to resolve the mess that compositors make and to reduce the tasteless mass to order. We treat the correctors as if they were geniuses, totally knowledgeable. It is an impossible situation. To rectify it, Wilson suggests that all printers set about immediately to give instruction to their overseers, compositors, apprentices, and journeymen. In that way will they be enabled to enter into the conceptions of their literary employers, to fill the gap between a confused manuscript and its properly printed transcription.<sup>34</sup> John Wilson set about helping printers towards this noble goal. Specifically, he designed his *Compositor's Text-Book* to enlighten the young compositor on the principles of pointing. A good idea, since punctating incompetency was not only tarnishing the reputation of the presses but souring tempers as well.

33. John Wilson, *A Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation* (Manchester: Printed and published by the author, 1844), 4, 6.

34. *Ibid.*, 7–12.

A few years ago a very celebrated critic received from his printer, a proof-sheet on which were written, opposite a particular passage, the words, "There is some ambiguity here." The critic replied, "There is no ambiguity here but what is caused by your profuse use of the comma, which you sprinkle over the page as from a dredge-box."<sup>35</sup>

Punctuation is in a state of great confusion, says Wilson. (No news to us.) One teacher "embarrasses the learner with an additional pause" (the semicomma); while another "discards the colon altogether as a useless point. Some grammarians would unfeelingly lop off the dash, as an excrescence on a printed page; but others again, are so partial to its form and use, as to call in its aid on every possible occasion." Most interestingly, Wilson proclaims that there is room for choice in the matter of pointing. One can apply it for beauty, force, elegance. But that basic rule, never to violate grammar, must hold firm. In this two-tiered way, Wilson resolves the dilemma: Is-it-an-art-or-a-science? Simply, punctuation can embellish effects but is itself grounded in science. The aesthetic (often rhetorical) side is wingèd, the grammar side is fixed. (This two-tiered view will be more thoroughly pinned down by Huntington, a few pages along.)

Though there has been discord in the past caused by the imperfect understanding of rhetorical pointing, it should be clear, says Wilson, that one ought not to punctuate on the page in the same manner as one speaks, but only in accordance with the grammar of the sentences. That way, the meaning of the author can be retrieved easily and with little trouble by the reader. The reader, knowing what is meant by carefully structured and punctuated writing, will instinctively be able to give sound to it.<sup>36</sup> In all respects, says Wilson, punctuation should minimize the exercise of judgement in interpretation. As had Rousseau, Addison, and the somewhat follow-along Francillon, this author succeeds in balanc-

35. John Wilson and John Graham, *The Composer's Text-Book* (Glasgow: Richard Griffin and Co., 1848), 8.

36. Wilson, *Grammatical Punctuation*, 9–13. Also, see page 83 of Wilson's *A Treatise on English Punctuation* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1856).

ing by this useful means the authority of the oral pause with the visual ‘stop’. Concerning the practical application of punctuation, Wilson’s is the most definitive and clear statement to date.

In his first book (1844) Wilson gives twenty-five rules for the comma, four for the semicolon, and six for the colon, amongst which there is nothing very much new. Each rule is followed by a battery of examples, then remarks, then exceptions, and finally two sets of exercises—one for oral and the other for written practice. Among his pronouncements are instances of nineteenth-century quaintness. Strange contradictions also crop up, suggesting to the reader that though Wilson may deeply revere grammar, may indeed base his entire view of punctuation upon it, he is not all that firm about what exactly it is. Not to disappoint those who are interested, the most rattling sample of Wilsonian counsel is herewith offered. When the infinitive is used as a noun, it is wise to separate it from the rest by a comma:

The most obvious remedy is, to withdraw from all associations with bad men.

As will be realized, advice of this nature trespasses on the sacred integrity of a simple sentence and strangely divides what even the most casual had preferred to keep intact. After discussing the problems arising from restrictive and non-restrictive adjuncts, Wilson decided to allow commas between a long nominative and the verb, thus again breaking a fundamental rule (frequently broken by his contemporary fellow punctuists as well as by writers of today). Some very respectable grammarians and printers prefer, he explained, that no comma be inserted after the subject or nominative, unless it be accompanied with adjuncts which are put in a parenthetical form. In the sentence:

Inattention to business in hand, let it be what it will, is the sign of a frivolous mind.

Wilson baffles us again by suggesting that in this case the comma after “will” would be better left out. But, he is delightfully elastic about this little errancy, urging that the overall primary goal of the

printing house policy should be *uniformity*. What you make up your mind to do, do throughout.<sup>37</sup> Generally, however, Wilson's view of punctuation is more sound than not.

He believes, like Rousseau, in the practice of using the semi-colon in sentences already strewn with commas that divide the smaller portions, and between the several short sentences in a string of short sentences. The colon should be used in its place when there is no conjunction.<sup>38</sup> About the period, or full-point, he is unhelpfully vague. It serves [in the *Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation*, page 56] "to indicate the end of a sentence which is assertive in its nature, and independent of any following sentence"; and [in the *Compositor's Text-Book*, page 17] to terminate a complete and independent sentence that cannot "be connected in construction with the following sentence". Being a non-philosopher, he does not, as we see, torture himself about instinctual recognition of a sentential ending. He examines the ambivalent parenthesis, admiration mark and question mark for their hybrid rhetorical-grammatical applications, and brings up nothing new. The dash, continuing to be somewhat controversial, draws from him a cautious endorsement. The abuse of it, he says, has so annoyed some grammarians as to have caused them to question its utility and to desire its destruction as a functional grammatical point. As long, however, as modes of thought are different, and the

style of composition corresponds with the peculiarities of a writer's mind, so long will it be necessary to use the dash occasionally, with the view to developing his meaning.

He thereupon lists eight rules for the dash.<sup>39</sup>

Thus the kindly Wilson wobbles along the avenues laid out by more sophisticated intellects of his period, making it rather difficult to admire him in quite the way that he was admired in his time. He perpetuated the grace of Lindley Murray, who had also specialized in serving up established principles with wholesome human flaw.

37. Wilson, *Compositor's Text-Book*, 10, 14.

38. Wilson, *English Punctuation*, 116, 130.

39. Wilson, *Grammatical Punctuation*, 71; *English Punctuation*, 91.

Wilson's low-flying intelligence, decoupled from suspect philosophy and not too far in advance of his audience, seemed just the ticket for the democratized readers he was addressing. Perhaps too, his insider's knowledge of book production gave his voice particular weight. In any case, Wilson was enormously influential. His unqueried acceptance of the two kinds of punctuation, one for the laying out of written syntax and the other to mark those pauses "which are requisite for an accurate reading or delivery" reveals the emergent public perception of the differences between logical and rhetorical pointing. The time was ripe for simple good judgment to prevail. The reading eye was habituating to the retrieval of sense from strings of letters on the page and was no longer in need of elaborate cues to draw forth the subtleties of emphasis. Unlike the maverick rhetorician Hugh Doherty, Wilson was content to put up with that.<sup>40</sup>

Wilson's "Hints on the Preparation of 'Copy' and on Proof-reading"—the new section in his 1856 *English Punctuation* volume—gives an interesting view of disturbance inside the printing house, where so much of punctuation's history was developed. As a typographer, Wilson was in a good position to notice things beyond the range of authors and professional grammarians. The writer, he advises—with an understandably adversarial air—must learn to undertake more responsibility for the end product. Since the writer is the producer of ideas, he must be the one to ensure the clarity of their presentation. He should see that his interlineations have been introduced with sufficient directness and if points have been omitted, he will supply them and if erroneously made, correct them. On no account should paragraphing be left to the compositor. Bad copy slows the compositor. And the corrector should not be left to root out the errors of the compositor nor to conceive the unexpressed thoughts of the author.

Briefly, the process of copy preparation during the decade in which Wilson writes is as follows. The corrector is given first proof and copy. He checks to assure that page lengths and margins are equal, and that the folios and signatures are all in place. Then a boy

40. Wilson, *Compositor's Text-Book*, 23; *English Punctuation*, 19.

reads aloud to him from the manuscript. While that is in progress, the corrector's chief aim

is to make the print an accurate representation of the author's writing, or mode of expression: but his attention is also devoted to the spelling of the words, in accordance with some authorized standard; and to the punctuation, that it may develop the construction of the sentences, and the meaning intended.

The corrector ordinarily does not change ideas, improve style, or correct grammatical blunders. He can, however, mark them for query. Following that, the second proof is given to the proofreader. The proofreader places the two proofs side by side and minutely compares them. The author too attacks the proof sheets and [unless distance prevents him] brings his changes and complaints to bear. Before the job is done, third proofs will be forthcoming.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, the effort required for a perfect rendering into print of original authorial insight was immense. A few presses (most notably in Scotland) made a fetish of meticulousness, as the following publisher's advertisement illustrates:

The correction of the press has been conducted with the most sedulous attention, each sheet having been read several times, by three different Correctors.

Given that the necessary training for a reliable corrector would be expensive, it is not startling to learn that the fees paid for learned correcting in the period of the above advertisement (1812) were very heavy, "as the Oxford ledgers show".<sup>42</sup> It is again no surprise to discover that commercial pressures in succeeding decades tended to shortcut expenses of this nature, on the grounds no doubt that the reading public was now quite adept at skirting the various obstacles in a lax and mediocre text. But slack tolerance of this sort disquieted serious book lovers. Wilson stood with *them*. The hammering home of grammatical and punctuational dogma continued to be a mission.

41. Wilson, *English Punctuation*, 303–11.

42. Percy Simpson, *Proof-reading in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), 156.



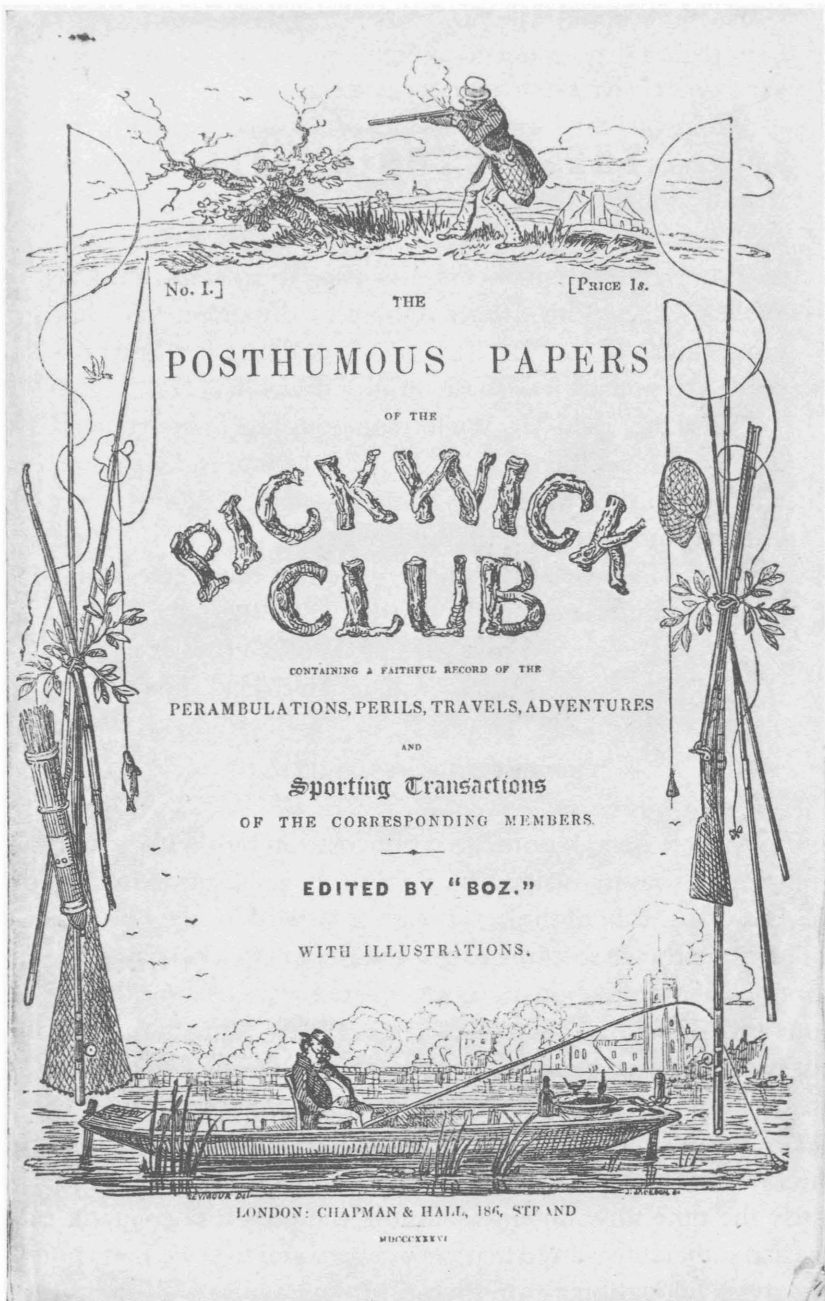
As it is always informative to enter into an admired author's private moment of creation and to see him draft his composition at the very strike of inspiration, we will pause briefly to inspect a British Library prose manuscript from this first half of the nineteenth century. As was found to have been the case in almost every examined holograph specimen up to the middle of the nineteenth century, Dickens too placed his quotation marks directly above the finishing stop or dash. The exigencies of type face eventually brought this reasonable custom to an end, and forced the comma or period to one or the other side—frequently without regard for meaning—causing a displacement, which in itself makes an interesting story. The following episode from *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, dated 1836–37 is herewith transcribed exactly from Charles Dickens' racing script. The version beneath it, with the replacement of commas for dashes and the insertion of standard quotation marks, comes from its first printing (in serial form), shortly after.

“So he is”—said Mr. Pickwick, lightening up “Good boy, that. I'll give him a shilling presently. Now then Sam, wheel away.”

“Hold on Sir”—replied Mr. Weller invigorated with the prospect of refreshments “Out o' the way young leathers. If you walley my precious life don't upset me, as the gen'lm'n said to the driver when they was a carryin' him to Tyburn.” And quickening his pace to a sharp run, Mr. Weller wheeled his master nimbly to the green hill, shot him dextrously out, by the very side of the basket, and proceeded to unpack it with the utmost dispatch.

“Weal pie”—said Mr. Weller soliloquizing as he arrayed the tables on the grass. “Wery good thing is a weal pie when you know the lady as made it, and is quite sure it an't kittens; and arter all though, where's the odds, when theyre so like weal, that the very piemen theirselves, don't know the difference?”

(British Library 39182)



The first printing of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1836) was in serial form. The above is a photograph of the cover of the initial number. Courtesy of the Syracuse University Library.

“So he is,” said Mr. Pickwick, brightening up. “Good boy, that. I’ll give him a shilling, presently. Now, then, Sam, wheel away.”

“Hold on, Sir,” said Mr. Weller, invigorated with the prospect of refreshments. “Out of the way, young leathers. If you walley my precious life don’t upset me, as the gen’l’man said to the driver, when they was a carryin’ him to Tyburn.” And quickening his pace to a sharp run, Mr. Weller wheeled his master nimbly to the green hill, shot him dexterously out by the very side of the basket, and proceeded to unpack it with the utmost dispatch.

“Weal pie,” said Mr. Weller, soliloquising, as he arranged the eatables on the grass. “Wery good thing is a weal pie, when you know the lady as made it, and is quite sure it an’t kittens; and arter all though, where’s the odds, when they’re so like weal that the wery piemen themselves don’t know the difference?”

From page 193, vol. vii (London:  
Chapman & Hall, 1836).

#### THE FRENCH RESOLUTION

In 1849 a learned rationale for punctuation by J. H. Chauvier, a Frenchman, was translated into English. Its publication in London marked, for the Englishman at least, a victory in mankind’s two-millennial struggle to come to grips with punctuation. By this time continental opinion on pointing matters—always in advance of “our friends beyond the channel” (as Philip Withers might have put it, had he not been a “goddam” himself)—had attained a sophistication worthy of twentieth-century approval. The Anglo-Saxon north simply adopted what was useful from the probings of the so-called logical French mind, and wisely let the rest go.

By the time now under discussion, the philosopher-grammarians had sufficiently sorted matters out between the two basic pointing styles (elocutionary or rhetorical, and syntactical, logical, or grammatical) to instruct, more or less consensually, an army of practising pedagogical-grammarians. The grammar of English was

better understood now and better taught; the instruments for distinguishing the grammatical segments of a written sentence were also better understood. The printing press was in place to implement and to popularize in the schools the style decreed by pundits to be 'correct'. Through this confluence of inducements, the long rambling statements of Dryden's time were gradually brought to heel—as were also, capital letter usage, comma usage, spellings, and vocabulary. Nevertheless, not all was at peace. Throughout the nineteenth century, grammarians of all ranks would continue to re-define what they already knew and to fiddle with recalcitrant inexplicables—always in the interests of greater perspicuity; while teachers boxed the ears of their dull pupils.

The translation of J. H. Chauvier's thesis, complete with necessary changes and additions for an English audience, was made by J. B. Huntington and entitled, *A Treatise on Punctuation: in which is explained, and demonstrated clearly what is a sentence, or its member, a period, or its member; what signs must follow these elements of discourse; and the only law which governs the use of the signs*, leaving very little doubt about the pointing politics of the Chauvier-Huntington team. And indeed, before so much as leafing through the Preface, we are steeling ourselves for a vigorous read.

. . . and even when the sentences are written in a true grammatical style, we not infrequently find, nay almost invariably, that punctuation has been neglected, or performed in a very slovenly manner.<sup>43</sup>

What is that interesting little mark after the word "find"? Suspensively, Huntington (we will refer to the authors hereafter simply as 'Huntington') saves that for later in his discourse, preferring meanwhile to keep us anxiously on the edges of our chairs.

First, we must be assured that he intends rigor. He will seek out the "rules that *unalterably* determine the proper use" of punctuation and set forth distinctly the grammatical nature of the signs used "and how each has its proper place unchangeable, and fixed". Ad-

43. J. B. Huntington, *A Treatise on Punctuation* (London: Simpkin Marshall & Co., 1849), ix.

mittedly severe and in no way a barrel of fun, he nevertheless manifests a knowledge sufficiently imposing to hold an audience. His will be a book for authors. In written matter punctuation should not be oratorical (that is, related to pauses coming from sound), but instead locked with grammar, where words are the “signs of thought” and precision and consistency are paramount. It is stupid to leave such a task to the printer’s discretion, for he, being habituated to arbitrary rules, frequently misapprehends and punctuates accordingly, to the ruination of both grammar and meaning.

Much confusion, Huntington tells us, has arisen from an inexact understanding of these two (the elocutionary and grammatical) ways of pointing. (Interesting in this regard is the fact that the French Academy publication of 1835 discarded all reference to the oratorical implications of punctuation, and beyond the comment that a comma is used to denote a slight pause in reading, its dictionary does not discuss values in oratory.) The quintessential punctuation should relate solely to written thought and render comprehension easy by permitting the reader *to see* the components of an entire sentence at a glance.

The genius, the nature, the principle of punctuation rests on [the following] double foundation laid by the metaphysicians, and deep-thinkers of all ages, [to wit]: *We must not separate any words which express a connection of ideas necessarily continued, but we must separate words when they cease to express such connection.*<sup>44</sup>

This position, so familiar to us by now (cf. Stackhouse, Addison, and Doherty), represents the groundswell of mid-nineteenth-century opinion about the points.

Huntington continues: the only true stops that remain controversial and whose “false use swarms in our books”—that is, the comma, the semicolon, and the colon—have nothing to do with “pulmonic weakness” or “the reader’s repose”. Since the marks of interrogation and admiration, along with the dash (that ‘coverup’

44. Huntington, *Treatise on Punctuation*, x, xvii, 5, 17, 28.

for lack of grammatical knowledge), are all steeped in oratorical impurities, he does not consider their grammatical worth. Their use in clarifying written matter would be vastly improved if the true stops (the comma, the semicolon, and the colon) were placed beneath them to indicate what portion of the sentence they bear upon. Naturally, such fastidiousness was not destined to survive. Huntington concludes (as had Rousseau, Francillon, and Wilson) that the art of oral reading can merely *draw upon* the values of true stops (that is, cannot be not bound to them slavishly) for guidance to the necessary pauses and voice inflexions required by the context of the passage. "As long as grammarians wander between the art of reading and that of punctuating, there will be obscure rules and arbitrary application."<sup>45</sup>

Huntington, like Wilson, remarks also on the two-tiered (fixed and floating) aspects of punctuation. All punctuation (whose domain by now is perceived to be only the visual one) must seek to bring out the grammatical elements—that is its fixed and scientific dimension. Thus, the signs of punctuation should be placed so as to mark the boundaries of the sentence divisions and not to intrude within those boundaries, where they will do nothing but destroy the integrity of the content they were meant to preserve. Only when the delineation of the grammatical parts is assured, may the secondary and variable artistic elements be addressed. These are the "undecided cases where custom and rules are at variance"—most noticeably in the rhetorical aspects of the dash, parenthesis, and question and admiration marks, but also, for example, in the use of capital or lowercase letters, the comma for the last of a series or for conjunctive expressions like 'however' and 'indeed', etc. Artistic pointing will reflect the tone and accent of the passion that inspires them, by which the author "throws a sudden and unforeseen movement into the sentence and renders his style dramatic in effect". Contrary to some opinion (Rousseau's and Wilson's), the length of a sentence should play no part in whether a comma or semicolon is set in. As Huntington is not proposing to deal in elegance

45. *Ibid.*, xv, 17–19, 23–24, 73, 100.

of style in this book, he offers no advice on a preferred length or frequency of parenthesis—only that of itself it be properly punctuated.

To support his thesis about the connection of necessarily continued ideas, Huntington must wrestle with the notion of a period. Quite rightly, he complains that dictionaries inadequately define the word in more or less the following way: “The period is a sentence compounded of several propositions, or of several members whose connection forms a perfect meaning”. But when is the meaning complete? Confusingly for the modern ear, he himself uses the word ‘sentence’ interchangeably with ‘member’, and means by it either a member of a string of members making up a period, or a member which can stand alone as complete. The verb is the mainstay of his sentence (and/or member) and constitutes the skeleton of a thought. (As the necessary verb may be simply ‘understood’, it should be remarked that this definition does not satisfy the modern conventional notion of a clause.) Thus, a single thought in grammatical terms constitutes only a simple sentence, or member of a sentence; and vice versa, every sentence (and/or member) represents a single and only a single thought. By that formula each word is an idea supporting the fulfillment of that thought, that is, individual words flesh out the verb skeleton, giving it the qualifications and aspects necessary to making it complete. The sentence, then, is understood to be fulfilled when a verb (present or implied) is sufficiently supported to convey some thought. Huntington does not enter into discussions of how additions to sentence members of adverbial conjunctions like ‘since’ or ‘when’, or the adverbial ‘both . . . and’ detract from that sense of sentence member fulfillment.<sup>46</sup>

When the verb has been dropped, the sentence will be represented elliptically, that is, by showing only some portion of itself. This prefiguring of twentieth-century deep-structure grammar is illustrated by the following example:

46. Huntington, *Treatise on Punctuation*, 7, 21, 102.

Before, during and after this affair you have acted like an honourable man.

which is, in fact, three sentences:

Before this affair you have acted like an honourable man.

During this affair you have acted like an honourable man.

After this affair you have acted like an honourable man.

Since we are dealing then with three sentences of equal weight (no one of the instances of honourable behavior being more critical than the others, as is illustrated by the compound structure selected to convey the group), we must separate each from the others, by commas or their equivalent 'and'. Similar elliptic sentences are evident in series of adjectives, or series of nouns, or verbs. They are also inherent in opening prepositional phrases which modify the action of the subject rather than the main verb. All of these instances will participate in the compounded nature of sentences and require inflexibly to be separated by means of the comma, whose writ, Huntington stresses, lies only in separating *compound* structures. Every compound sentence should have only as many commas as there are members or thoughts expressed. The popular, much over-used comma should not, as it so often does, mark the spot where elision has excised a verb. One should beware of sentences like the following, which demonstrates the prevailing error of applying two commas to break two thoughts into three parts.

The love of glory excites great minds, the love of money,  
vulgar minds.

Nor should the comma ever be used to separate a verb from its nominative or subject, a verb from its adverb, a verb from the object it governs, nor be placed between two words "whose connection forms a *simple sentence* [and/or member], a *single proposition*, or a *connection of necessarily continued ideas*. Irrational practice of this sort merely contributes to a career of 'endless amphibologies'." So please avoid it.

There must be no punctuation to separate words which compose a single sentence, i.e., member. Each word, being an *idea*, will



adhere to others in order to transmit a *thought*; and each of these thoughts, being an aggregate of ideas *necessarily continued*, must maintain its integrity. Together, these two tenets—marking the boundaries between thoughts, and maintaining the integrity of the thoughts themselves—must be considered inviolable, for they both augment and insure the intelligibility of the written line.<sup>47</sup> This so often repeated entreaty brings to mind the sins of the heretic Wilson, who advocated the comma before an infinitive used nominatively and so uncontritely relished the division of a long subject from its predicate.

Where the comma separates those members of sentences “in which a common *idea* prevails”, the semicolon separates from each other those members of a period “in which a ruling ‘*thought*’ prevails” by logical connection over the various member divisions. In the sentence, for example:

To be noble is to prefer honour to interest; to be vile is to prefer interest to honour.

the logical thought connection is the word ‘prefer’. Therefore, the semicolon is applicable.

Huntington does not approve of those grammarians who advise a semicolon before the conjunctions ‘but’, ‘because’, ‘since’, etc., or use it when they grow weary at the sight of too many commas breaking up subdivisions. Though he did not mention Rousseau’s suggestion that a string of semicolons be relieved by a colon, he would certainly not have approved of that either. For punctuation is nothing if it does not distinguish the sentences and members of a period. Ideally, it springs only from grammatical meaning, and not necessarily from the idea that arises in the mind of the reader, nor even from that idea which the author probably intended to express. Huntington’s prescription for the colon is the standard one, a sturdy survivor of all the preceding years of dissidence and muddle. “A colon terminates every member of a period of which the next member is an elucidation, or explanation”; and, turning the tables: a colon terminates every member which is the development, ex-

47. Huntington, *Treatise on Punctuation*, 38–53 passim.

planation or elucidation of some following recapitulatory member. Also it may be used in introducing speech on the page.<sup>48</sup>

To keep the members within the period separated without risk of confusion, Huntington recommends the use of two new stops. The ‘reverse comma’, whose unexplained appearance in the preface so puzzled us, and the ‘straight comma’. The reverse comma, the author informs us, is useful to mark a member which is incidental to and explanatory of a principal member. Any incidental sentence or expression, whether interjectory, apostrophic, or of any other kind intended as incidental, must be placed between two commas—that is, so that the incidental unit may itself be seen as a thought. However, if there are many such incidentals, then a reader will be obliged to devote full attention to collecting them up as he goes along. Most assuredly, the ordinary reader will confound them with the principal. The reverse comma will rescue him from unseemly floundering and help him to “follow the original thoughts of the author with facilities afforded by punctuation”. Thus, every incidental or explanatory sentence should be enclosed by two commas “of opposite curvature, which assume the value of a semi-paranthesis (,-)”.<sup>49</sup>

To avoid the massing up of look-alike commas in a long compound sentence and also to avoid the conspicuousness and wrong usage of the semicolon, whose legitimate application is for complex sentences only—though you would not know it by the exultant use that others make of it—Huntington offers us the ‘straight comma’, that is, a comma “without curvature”. In dividing the members of compound sentences, where other grammarians have advised the arbitrary insertion of a semicolon merely for balance, we can more properly deploy the more appropriate ‘straight comma’. Watch how expertly it advances the clarity:

48. Huntington, *Ibid.*, 28, 60–62, 65–73 *passim*. Women of today will appreciate the following. Huntington frowns upon “the propriety of scattering with a discreet variety among the sentences commas, semi-colons, and colons so as not to offend the eyes of the reader by a too frequent repetition of the same sign. Ladies without meaning to displease them, seem generally to adopt this rule as their model.”

49. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

The clear, pure, and cool atmosphere, the fresh, varied, and undulating landscape, the rippling, expansive, and transparent waters of the lake, the light, warm, and refreshing breeze, the genial, unclouded, and declining rays of an autumnal sun unite to cheer the careworn student.<sup>50</sup>

With Huntington we bring to a close the study of this half-century. As has been seen, the unflagging analysis of oral-aural and visual conflict in language both simplified punctuation and rendered it teachable to average folk. The push and pull between favorite and despised doctrines had brought interesting results, though at the stage under inspection here, conclusive opinion was never totally brought together within a single volume. The victorious view discarded rhetorical pointing in general, and in particular refused the elaborate offerings of Walker and Doherty for special all-inclusive marks to extract nuance of meaning from voice sounds. As the public became progressively more comfortable with the experience of rapid visual intake, so it was happy enough to risk misinterpretation without rescue by Huntington-style fastidiousness. To an acceptable extent intuition came to be relied upon in written communication.

Although, in subsequent years, there would always be forays into the thickets of muddle, the huge war was over. Despite the still dispersing mother language, a freer, more lucid global exchange of ideas was at last in place. Punctuation, which had lain for so many centuries snubbed by the exalted, misunderstood by the commoner, and relegated by all to obscurity and confusion, was now of sufficient scientific and artistic standing to be discussed in nearly every publication having to do with language, grammar, composition, or style.

50. Huntington, *Treatise on Punctuation*, 104–105, 112.