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The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Eight)

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The Punctator's World: A Discursion

BY GWEN G. ROBINSON

PART EIGHT

CLIMACTIC YEARS: 1850 TO 1900

In Queen Victoria's time, commas, colons, and all the accessory devices for breaking up text were familiar to (if not applied by) all her literate subjects. The stabilizing values of the points and the ease with which the public could now handle words on the page allowed writers to extend the boundaries of their craft, which was, and is, the reduction of the mind's contents to words that can be comprehended visually.

BY THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century, England had more or less followed Continental example and drawn the line between elocutionary and syntactic pointing. Elocutionary puncts[1] are oral aids. They mark pauses for the ear and impart meaning by gathering words the way voices do, by rhythm, emphasis, and intonation. Syntactical[2] puncts inform the eye. Less prone to whim or variation, they mark out grammatical structures and indicate degrees of dominance among the sentence parts.

Though Huntington's work (see Part Seven of "The Punctator's World") had essentially persuaded *scholars* toward a bias against elocutionary divisions, in the end it was the practical John Wilson who pushed the *public* to pointing syntactically. For his highly influential *Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation* (1844), Wilson drew copiously and candidly from his predecessor Lindley Murray (see Part Six), with whose work the public was already familiar. Wilson's *Treatise* was a bestseller. It sailed through repeated editions, well into the decades of our concern, and eventually (though it would

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1. Known also as 'euphuistic' or 'rhetorical' puncts (or points or stops).
2. Known also as 'grammatical' or 'logical' puncts (or points or stops).

take time) cleared the stage of the few, still bleating, elocutionary loiterers. The art of punctuation, the affable Wilson declared, was to be "founded more on a grammatical than on a rhetorical basis". This unremarkable statement, so mildly favoring the eye over the ear, and logic over instinct, took its inspiration from the rational conservatism that was permeating intellectual circles of the time. Because Wilson's opinion was so perfectly unstartling, the public swallowed it without a cough. Except in poetry,[3] syntactical pointing—that is, the use of the puncts to elucidate grammatical entities (phrases, clauses) within the word-string of an English sentence—maintained the advantage throughout the century and beyond.

With norms established both theoretically and practically, punctuation's next victory was to stretch those norms as far as they would go, indeed to a degree whereat the points might transubstantiate into *integral factors in written sentence formulation.* 'Proper punctuation' (of textbook dullness) had already succeeded in conveying a measure of *true meaning*—to which, in time, were added dabs of *nuance.* But now, suddenly, punctuation claimed a higher summit yet. By controlling both movement and emphasis, it came to be viewed as mysteriously privy to an author's intent—indeed, *the telling feature* of his style and personality.[4] With the stage so set, enter at last the experimentalist aesthetes, with their untiring pens. To secure meaning from their long, complex sentences for a public whose analytical prowess was not always up to it, they set the puncts to arduous labors. In this way did written words push into new terrain.

A BRIEF PREVIEW OF HOW THE PUNCTS PROGRESSED
THROUGH THE REIGN OF VICTORIA

Before enlarging on the pointing habits of specific Victorian writers, let us reel at speed through the latter half of the century to acquaint ourselves with the background against which those writers worked. We shall touch upon the doings of schoolmasters, and

3. And drama, which being conversation anyway, does not count.
4. E. L. Thorndike, "The Psychology of Punctuation", *The American Journal of Psychology* 61 (2 April 1948): 222–28 is interesting on this score.

then upon the swelling applause of professional grammarians, who were beginning to recognize the conspicuous glamor of a well pointed page. We shall as well take note of what the public was learning to tolerate in print.

One should understand that throughout the entire nineteenth century, classroom instruction remained grimly inflexible. Before indulging in 'artistic effects', young scholars had first to be herded through the gates of civilized literary tradition, for which purpose instruction books abounded. School lessons dealt with spelling, capitals, points, the placement of quotation marks, paragraphing, diction, and all the controversial and 'correct' applications of the written English language. If "child*rens*" is wrong, then is "chick-*ens*" a legitimate plural? Should one say "I need not have troubled myself"; or "I should not have needed to trouble myself"? And why do young writers not get it straight that "sanitary" comes from *sanitas* (appertaining to health) and "sanitory" from *sano* (to cure)?[5] For drill, there were exercises galore. Thus, please fix:

> when did miss white return to baltimore[6]

Nothing escaped the pedagogical lens.

Meanwhile, on tertiary levels, grammarians were recording a steady rise in the fortunes of syntactical punctuation. In 1850, after carefully citing both the logical and rhetorical styles of pointing in his *English Grammar*, W. C. Fowler, professor of rhetoric at Amherst College, had only this to say:

> Current practice is generally more in accordance with the rhetorical. Still, there is diversity among authors and print-ers in their application.[7]

But by 1863, George P. Marsh, the renowned American lecturer on the English language, had burrowed more deeply into the specifics of the situation. Because the relations of its constituent

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5. Henry Alford, *A Plea for the Queen's English* (London: Strahan, 1864), 19, 34, 140.

6. Isaac King, *Three Hundred Sentences for Practice in Use of Capitals and Punctuation* (White House Station, N. J.: William Morgan, 1891), 93, 164, 278.

7. William C. Fowler, *English Grammar* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1850), 668.

words are not determined by inflection (as is the case with Latin) but rather by position, written English language (said Marsh) has very obvious punctuational needs. Unpointed English sentences of any length tend to be obscure. However, chopping them up is not the answer. Why? Because a diet of short sentences, unattached phrases, and floating clauses *will diminish our intellectual powers*. In Marsh's own words:

> The use of commas, semicolons and brackets, supplies the place of inflections, and enables us to introduce, without danger of equivocation, qualifications, illustrations and par-enthetical limitations, which, with our English syntax would render a long period almost unintelligible, unless its members were divided by marks of punctuation. Without this auxiliary, we should be obliged to make our written style much more disjointed than it now is, the sentences would be cut up into a multitude of distinct propositions, and the leading thought consequently often separated from its incidents and its adjuncts. The practice of thus framing our written style cannot but materially influence our use of language as a medium of unspoken thought, and, of course, our habits of intellectual conception and ratiocination. *It is an advantage of no mean importance to be able to grasp in one grammatical expression a general truth, with the necessary limita-tions, qualifications and conditions, which its practical application requires, and the habitual omission of which characterizes the shal-low thinker; and hence the involution and concentration of thought and style, which punctuation facilitates, is valuable as an antidote to the many distracting influences of modern social life*. (Italics added)[8]

Do not laugh, dear reader. Others than Marsh have noted the possible effect of written words upon the cerebral cortex. Socrates himself predicted that the ubiquitousness of writing would cause

8. George P. Marsh, *Lectures on the English Language* (New York: Charles Scrib-ner, 1860), 414–15. These lectures were first delivered in 1858–59 at Columbia University and were vastly admired and influential on both sides of the Atlantic.

human memory to atrophy. And he was right. Who now can say the *Iliad* through without a stumble? As for the "shallow thinker", that dreaded being has multiplied in this "modern social life". He and his kind are like rabbits on the green—evidence aplenty that Marsh's Law still richly applies. What could be shallower, more wondrously inane, than the following example of popular modern writing? which was, alas, randomly plucked from the various "distracting influences" that make up our daily breakfast reading matter. These innocent paragraphs on the marvels to be experienced along the Great Ocean Road come from the Tourism Victoria Offices (Australia), with authorship unclaimed. Ungoverned by any conceptual focus, the ideas fly out like shrapnel. Hear, then, this:

NURSERY FOR THE SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE.

On the shores of Lady Bay, is the city of Warrnambool.

Originally a sealing and whaling port,[9] more than twenty ships were lost in Lady Bay alone.

No wonder it's called the Shipwreck Coast.

The Southern Right Whale comes in to calve in the shallows.

You can watch these gentle giants from a viewing platform at Logan's Beach.

Today the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum brings to life Warrnambool's colorful maritime history and that of The Shipwreck Coast.

You could spend a whole day here, reliving the past.

Ten minutes from Warrnambool is the Tower Hill Game Reserve.

Here you can drive through a real volcano.

But don't worry, it's been extinct for years.

On the way to Port Fairy you pass the town of Killarney.

The rolling green fields that surround you are like Irish Meadows.

That's why the Irish settled here.

It reminded them of home.

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9. As will have been appreciated, this rare comma marks off a dangling modifier.

It is with some sense of relief that we revert to Marsh, who sanely carries on:

> On the other hand the principles of punctuation are subtle, and *an exact logical training is requisite for the just application of them* . . . for it is as true in our days as it was in Chaucer's, that—
>
> > A reader that pointeth ill
> > A good sentence may oft spill.

Though it might seem that Marsh (and Chaucer) had placed the final laurel, subsequent thinkers for the remainder of the century continued to gild the image of the punct. In 1884 Paul Allardyce, English author of the briskly selling handbook *"Stops" or How to Punctuate*, incited the stops to more presumptions. Stops were, he said,

> intimately connected with style. As forms of thought are infinite in number, so are the modes of expression; and punctuation, adapting itself to these, is an instrument capable of manipulation in a thousand ways.[10]

Although the decades progressed with praise of intensifying grandiloquence, punctuation's syntactical capability would remain its firmest asset. Indicative of this fundamental view are the opening remarks of John Hart in *Punctuation* (1886):

> It should not be forgotten that the first and the main end of the points is to mark grammatical divisions.[11]

But over that sober opinion the buildup of approbation persisted, increasingly enhanced by terms like 'science' and 'artistry' and 'delicacy'. In 1893, Webster Edgerly prefaced his American *One Hundred Lessons* as follows:

> Probably the science and art of Punctuation involve more

10. Paul Allardyce, *"Stops" or How to Punctuate* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1884), 12.

11. John S. Hart, *Punctuation and the Use of Capital Letters* (Philadelphia: Eldredge and Brother, 1886), 10.

departments of learning than any other one branch of study.[12]

By 1900 punctuation was quite prepared for the crowning honor bestowed upon it by William Chauncey Genung (another Professor of Rhetoric at Amherst College). With his statement of commendation, punctuation arrived at the climax of its career. Writers, said Genung, had begun to use the points for special effects.

> Accordingly we find that in modern writing punctuation is a much more flexible thing, and more open to individuality of style, than was formerly the case . . . . It is this skillful employment of punctuation as a flexible, living, artistic thing which makes it *so truly a cardinal factor in the organism of the sentence.*[13] (Italics added)

In a mere fifty years, how immodest the puncts had become!

Now back to 1850 once more, for a look at the printing side of the scene. By that time of course, England's reading public had long been accustomed to text divided into chapters and paragraphs; to sentences introduced by capital letters and terminated by full stops fortified by extra spacing; to all the sentential divisions signaled by parentheses, colons, semicolons, commas, dashes, question marks, and exclamation marks—that is, all the marks (commonly called 'stops') that separate meaningful word groups; and finally, to the characterization of speech by inverted commas, and to hyphenation, underlining, and italics—that is, all the various graphic devices (usually included in the overall concept of punctuation) that assist in clarifying the written message but have nothing to do with signifying cadences. Thomas Browne's immensely involved sentences (see Part Four) had been delighting educated minds for two centuries. More recent writers (William Hazlitt, for example) had on occasion enjoyed dazzling their elite literary audiences with crescendoing locutions, in which batteries of puncts separated, classified, and

12. Webster Edgerly, *One Hundred Lessons in Punctuation: A System of Fixed Rules* (Washington D.C.: Shaftesbury College Publishing House, 1893), 3.

13. John Franklin Genung, *The Working Principles of Rhetoric* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1901), 334.

rendered digestible piled-up clauses and interjectory remarks. By 1859 Charles Dickens's publishers could confidently accept his famous opening sentence for *The Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . ", knowing that even the commonest of commoners, drilled in school on one thousand exercises ("the fair will be held on wednesday fred"), could thrill to its somber, continuing beat.

Another interesting facet of mid-century punctuation is that the graphic devices (the nonpausal marks) were also pushing out the boundaries of writing efficiency. Charlotte Brontë in her best-selling *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel very definitely aimed at the middle-brow public, was able to rely on quotation marks alone[14] to engage her readers *en scène* in the heat of vocal exchange.

> "Ah! Jane. But I want a wife."
> "Do you, sir?"
> "Yes; is it news to you?"
> "Of course; you said nothing about it before."
> "Is it unwelcome news?"
> "That depends on circumstances, sir—on your choice."
> "Which you shall make for me, Jane. I will abide by your decision."
> "Choose then, sir—*her who loves you best*."
> "I will at least choose—*her I love best*. Jane, will you marry me?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "A crippled man twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?"
> "Yes, sir."
> "Truly, Jane?"

14. M. B. Parkes provides a wonderful discussion of a novelist's problem in eliciting the realism of conversation. See his *Pause and Effect* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 92–94.

"Most truly, sir."

"Oh my darling! God bless you and reward you!"[15]

Thanks to a stabilized pointing convention, the Victorian *hoi polloi* could safely tingle to all manner of excitement.

POETIC PUNCTUATION

As has been mentioned previously (in Part Four), poets of earlier centuries had a penchant for pointing their verses at each line's end. This, they deemed, gave shape to their product and invited the incantatory spell traditionally associated with poetic effusion.[16] But as logic, nourished by the printing press, more and more invaded the page, those harsh and interruptive line-end pauses lost their appeal, and obliged poets to reconsider what they wished their pause marks to indicate.

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), whose aesthetic mannerisms and interest in song might well have encouraged a more antiquated set of habits, nevertheless showed respect for the underlying grammar of his lines—even in manuscript. In print, he was helped (if that is the word) by his publisher Chatto and Windus, not only with stronger pointing but with a stanzaic layout of lines (a feature which, by breaking up the shape of the poem for visual satisfaction, must be included in the concept of punctuation). Of course, it is hard to know what went on between printer and poet—what conferences of persuasion, exasperation, or threat—in the interim between the initial scrawl and final printed version. But clearly, something almost always did, for one sees again and again the implantation of change between pen-ink and press-ink versions of the same lines, with the usual effect of firming the boundaries of interpretation.

Swinburne's "A Ballad of Life" offers a good example of printerly intrusion. The following lines are from his manuscript in Syracuse University's Department of Special Collections:

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15. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, n.d.), 508.
16. It is still a convention today to begin each new line of verse with a capital letter.

Manuscript fragment of "Ballad of Life", by Algernon Charles Swinburne
(courtesy of Syracuse University Library).

Forth, ballad, and take roses in both arms
Even till the top rose touch thee in the throat
Where the least thornprick harms,
And girdled in thy golden singing-coat
Come thou before my lady and say this:
"Borgia, thy gold hair's colour burns in me,
Thy mouth makes heat my blood in fevorish rhymes;
Therefore, so many as these roses be,
Kiss me so many times."
Then it may be, seeing how sweet she is,
That she will stoop herself none otherwise
Than a blown vine-branch doth,
And kiss thee with soft laughing on thine eyes,
Ballad, and on thy mouth.[17]

17. Algernon Charles Swinburne Collection, Syracuse University Library, Department of Special Collections.

The vocatively pointed "Forth, ballad"; the comma after "harms" (though, alas, not after the "girdled" clause); the use of the colon before the quoted message; the semicolon succeeded by "Therefore", itself followed by a comma; the quotation marks; the comma-ed off participial "seeing how sweet she is"; the absence of a stop after "otherwise"—all these doings smack of a syntactical orientation that seeks to disambiguate meaning. Nevertheless—tamper, the printer would.

Here follow the same lines as printed in the first printing of the poem in 1866. The most striking change is to be seen in the format, whose uneven indentations do little to aid interpretation. But there are punctuational changes as well, and they at least are interesting.

Forth, ballad, and take roses in both arms, [*comma added*]
 Even till the top rose touch thee in the throat
Where the least thornprick harms; [*semicolon for comma*]
 And girdled in thy golden singing-coat, [*comma added*]
Come thou before my lady and say this; [*semicolon for colon*]
 Borgia, thy gold hair's colour burns in me, [*quotation marks,
         strangely left out*]
  Thy mouth makes heat my blood in feverish rhymes; [*the
        spelling of "feverish" has been changed*]
 Therefore, so many as these roses be,
  Kiss me so many times. [*quotation marks left out*]
Then it may be, seeing how sweet she is,
 That she will stoop herself none otherwise
  Than a blown vine-branch doth,
 And kiss thee with soft laughter on thine eyes, [*'laughter' instead
        of 'laughing'*]
  Ballad, and on thy mouth.[18]

Meanwhile other poets of this era were straining to break away from pure syntactic prescriptions and to reach for the quarter tones of nuance in the way that speech does. For this, writers with sensitive ears had always been willing (or at least would have been, if

18. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads* (London: Edward Moxon & Co., 1866), 4.

they had known what they were about) to vitiate the clarity of their syntax by additions of elocutionary points—most notably, in the form of commas and dashes.[19] The manuscripts of Robert Browning (1806–1861), particularly those of the highly rhetorical dramatic monologues, show an abundant and unorthodox use of the comma and dash. The poetic manuscripts of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) are profuse with dashes—the dash being notoriously (though not necessarily) a rhetorical instrument—many of which were removed by the printer.[20] But particularly interesting in respect to artistic punctuation was Emily Dickinson's (1830–1886) persistent and multifaceted use of the dash.

In dealing with this poet it should be remembered that she never herself prepared manuscripts for a printer and that her own long-hand produced 'fair copies' of frequently varied punctuation as well as numerous idiosyncrasies of line arrangement, spelling, and capitalization. All of these 'aberrations' were regularized, of course, by printers, until the 1955 Harvard edition, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Johnson broke precedent by instructing The Belknap Press to reproduce to the best of its printerly ability those multitudes of oddly positioned short and long dashes, off-the-line marks, curves, and slants that so distinguished Emily Dickinson's manuscript pages and about which her reading admirers had heretofore known nothing. Although the comma (usually a slant, but occasionally a forward curve) appeared along with other conventional punctuating marks (i.e., the full stop, the exclamation, and question mark), her pointing was distinctive both in its peculiar reliance on the dash and its striking absence of the colons and semicolons that we find, say, in the manuscripts of Swinburne.[21] In general, critics of the Harvard edition were more baffled by, than ecstatic over, revelations of Dickinson's actual pointing. Concerning her ubiquitous

19. Poetic mix of elocutionary and logical pointing was discussed in "The Punctator's World, Part Four", *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 25 (Spring 1990): 99–125.

20. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation* (Oslo: American Institute, University of Oslo, 1976), 27.

21. Or in the published products of Robert Browning, whom Emily Dickinson very much admired.

dash, Johnson himself noted that she used it capriciously, often in substitution for a period—indeed, it may in fact have been a hasty, lengthened dot intended for one. On occasion her dashes and commas are indistinguishable. Says Johnson:

> Within lines she uses dashes with no grammatical function whatsoever. They frequently become visual representations of a musical beat.[22]

To this, of course, others have added their say. All Dickinson stress marks and dividing verticals, elongated periods and dashes have been listed, discussed, and argued over for their sometimes inexplicable, often grammatically intrusive presence. The numerous variations between the standard dash and the elongated period appear, we are told, at three different levels on the line, each indicating a musical direction (a rise or cadence in voice sound) that slightly adjusts the significance of phrasing. Others have submitted that the curious dashes were expressive of the way her mind worked—in impressionistic spurts, tentatively, breathlessly.[23] Dashes are in fact present to an extreme in the verses of her most critical year, 1861, when she was thirty-one. Dickinson's manuscript poem about marriage contains no other punctuation marks than thirty dashes and an ending exclamation point.[24] It is a song giving vent to emotion, and though controlled in its artistry, its energy derives more from her need to cry out than to be heard. There is no time for conceptual governances or strings of logically descending modifiers. The pauses must be frequent. They must measure her word gush to the pulse of her physiological stress. The delicacy with which Dickinson was able to achieve these effects owed much to the indecisiveness of the dash.

Critics have again and again noted the extreme effort required to

22. Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, 3. See also Thomas H. Johnson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), Preface, lxiii.

23. Austin Warren, "Emily Dickinson", *Sewanee Review* 65 (Autumn 1957): 565–86, which was cited by Lindberg-Seyersted in *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation* on page 10.

24. See Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, n.3., p. 12.

divine the intended purpose of each Dickinsonian dash. Might it be there to indicate "the pause of anticipation of suspense"? Is it "equivalent to the phrasing marks of music"? or indicative of "the stress of italics"? The overall effect of her dashes seems "either to reproduce pauses in her own reading of the poems or to render the clauses and phrases in a fluidity of transition lost by a rigid system". Since Dickinson's employment of the puncts was so inconsistent and ambiguous, it has even been recommended that future editors of her poetry "omit . . . all punctuation, or all save that of the period".[25]

What were the influences that encouraged this reserved lady poet from puritan Amherst to experiment so wildly with the points? Since books were her pleasure, let us look there for the source of her inspiration. Notable amongst the Dickinson family's library books was Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism*, a textbook used both at the Amherst Academy (1839–40)[26] and at Amherst College (1835–49). The *Elements* was an eminent book, whose contents Dickinson must have known well. Of particular interest to us is this excerpt:

> Language would have no great power, were it confined to the natural order of ideas. I shall soon have an opportunity to make it evident, that by inversion a thousand beauties may be compassed, which must be relinquished in a natural arrangement.[27]

How appealing to her sensitivities must have been that invitation to invert the "natural order of ideas".

Also of likely impact was Samuel P. Newman's *A Practical System of Rhetoric*, from which we find the following statement:

> It should ever be impressed on the student, that, in forming

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25. Austin Warren, "Emily Dickinson", 567.

26. Emily Dickinson attended the Academy from 1840 to 1847.

27. Lord Henry Home Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (New York: Collins & Hannay, 1830), 254. I was guided to this reference and to all the following books that might have influenced Dickinson by Carlton Lowenberg's alphabetically listed *Emily Dickinson's Textbooks* (Lafayette, Calif., 1986).

a style, he is to acquire a manner of writing to some extent, peculiarly his own, and which is to be the index to the modes of his thinking—the development of his intellectual traits and feelings.[28]

In dealing with Dickinson's punctuational quirks, one should especially remember the educational interest of her time in rhetorical delivery. It was a subject for which school books were provided at the Amherst Academy during her enrollment there.[29] Because her pointing reflexes are so obviously responsive to the principles of nineteenth-century elocution, scholarly theory suggests that Dickinson used derivatives of her school texts' rhetoric rules for both the standard grammatical stops (that is, the comma, semicolon, colon, etc.) and the rhetorical marks for maintaining monotone (—) or for falling (`) and rising (´) inflections. The traditional hymnbook use of the dash to denote "an expressive suspension" was very familiar to her and undoubtedly played some part in her profuse reliance upon dashes to break up her own sequences. Whatever the truth might be, her variable dashes evince no detectable system of longer or shorter pause, and in general her punctuation remained always unconventional and private.[30]

It is startling to see how the strong punctuation of the early publications could destroy the supra-linguistic subtleness of a Dickinson poem. To illustrate the sad discrepancy let us look at two versions of the opening verse of her poem "I heard a fly buzz when

28. Samuel P. Newman, *A Practical System of Rhetoric, or the Principles and Rules of Style, Inferred from Examples of Writing* . . . (Andover: Gould and Newman, 1839), 80. This book, which went through more than sixty editions, was in use at Mt. Holyoke Seminary during Emily Dickinson's year there, and available on the Amherst College library shelves before then. The author was an eminent professor of Greek and Latin at Bowdoin College and the brother of Emily Dickinson's uncle. It would seem impossible that Emily Dickinson was not acquainted with his thinking.

29. For example, Ebenezer Porter's *The Rhetorical Reader; Consisting of Instructions for Regulating the Voice, with a Rhetorical Notation* . . . (New York: Dayton & Saxton, 1841). This book in its various forms went through more than a hundred editions.

30. Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, 16, 17.

I died—": first, as it appeared in the attempted manuscript-facsimile of the Harvard edition; and second, in an earlier (1924) printed form.

THE HARVARD VERSION[31]

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

A 1924 RENDERING[32]

I Heard a fly buzz when I died;
 The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
 Between the heaves of storm.

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted's very complete study of Emily Dickinson's manuscript version of this poem brings her to the following conclusion:

> The lack of periods, and other strong pace-stopping marks, makes of the poem a continuum, appropriate to its theme and situation: the dying moment of the poetic persona, performing her last acts and observing the scene as from a distance of death. The final dash (in the manuscript definitely a dash, not a lengthened dot), substituting for the normal period, is especially felicitous: a gradual blurring of the vision of the one dying, not a sharp, definite darkness descending upon her, is paralleled by the 'open' dash.[33]

In the 1924 rendering of this poem, the semicolon at the end of the first line after 'died' alters the tone of the poem entirely. Dickinson's original opening is both matter-of-fact and suggestive. The

31. T. H. Johnson, *Poems of Emily Dickinson* 1:358.
32. *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Conrad Aiken (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), 246.
33. Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, 13–14.

dashes evoke an offhandedness, a something more and other than a realistic description. They define the mood and control the tone of a racing, impressionistic mind.

Despite her apparent casualness, Emily Dickinson is known from a manuscript letter in the Boston Public Library to have been very upset by the punctuation—the insertion of a question mark—in the third line of an unauthorized publication of her poem "A narrow Fellow in the Grass", which *The Springfield Republican* printed in this way:

> You may have met him—did you not?
> His notice instant is,

Whereas two extant manuscript copies read as follows.

<div align="center">A</div>

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides—
> You may have met Him—did you not
> His notice sudden is—

<div align="center">B</div>

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides—
> You may have met him? Did you not
> His notice instant is—[34]

In her letter to a friend Dickinson complained that "the third and fourth [lines] were one" and so, she had been "defeated too of the third line by the punctuation". Says Lindberg-Seyersted:

> Emily Dickinson's intention in leaving out every punctuation mark after the question "did you not" was obviously to avoid a pedantic emphasis on this sentence, which, in its turn, *is* a question syntactically, but whose rhetorical function is that of a tagged-on conversational phrase, a "question

34. Ibid., 22, 23. Often, the different printed versions of a Dickinson poem will vary slightly.

tag", as identified in modern phonetics. A question mark would overdo the *pause which naturally occurs at the line-end*, and, semantically, make too much out of this unobtrusive insertion, which serves to emphasize the informal tone, and the direct address to a second person, a fellow-observer of nature's lesser inhabitants.[35] (Italics added)

To which we would add that the line break following "did you not" is an example of colometric sense division, discussed in Part One. The elocutionary wait that it commands is sufficient for the sense of query to emerge.

That Emily Dickinson sometimes wavered between variations of punctuation in copying out duplicates of her poems would seem to indicate that her pointing was less a matter of consistent system than "a conscious, but impressionistic method of stressing and arranging the rhythmical units of her verse", indeed, a search to add delicate touches of meaning to the linguistic units. Her points are creations of the moment, seldom deliberated, but inherent nevertheless in her vision.

> It is significant that when she made her semi-final or final copies of the penciled rough drafts, she did not discard the dashes as belonging only to an experimental initial stage, but retained them as essential for the poem. There are also cases where the rough draft lacks punctuation marks, added in the fair copy.[36]

Students of Victorian pointing (if there be such people) will remember that it was a time when handwritten punctuation was still more chaotically confused than the printers allowed the public to witness. The dash was a prominent feature of manuscript poetry and letter writing. Its calligraphed presence gives an air of spontaneity and intimacy. Reproduction in print almost always disfavors it, for the reason that the type's heavy black bar tends to destroy its potential for delicacy. The thin scratch of a well placed pen-dash can elicit a myriad of sensations. Out of hesitant breathlessness it

35. Lindberg-Seyersted, *Emily Dickinson's Punctuation*, 23.
36. Ibid., 24.

allows an easy change of pace. It enhances semantic meanings in a highly suppressed syntax, while hinting of unclaimed significance, of unfulfilled expectancy. Its message of indecision suggests a dithering over time, an agitation of thinking, and frustration at the ineffability of a matter that is bursting to be told. When there was not room in her lines for subject or predicate, Emily Dickinson used the rhetorical dash syntactically to complete the sense of elliptical phrases and fill in the grammatical vacuum. While the puncts of prose and the printed puncts of all literature were becoming more fixed and more logical in orientation, Emily Dickinson never abandoned her own idiosyncratic application of elocutionary pointing. It was part and parcel of what she wished to say.[37]

THE EXPERIMENTAL AESTHETES: PUNCTUATION'S NOBLE ACHIEVEMENT

By the middle of the nineteenth century Science had usurped from Literature its traditional jurisdiction over cultural knowledge. Stung by their loss of status, Victorian literaries turned to Art—Art for Art's sake—which was impervious to laboratory rules and the distracting disclosures of The Royal Society. Writers now strove to empower written language to deal with the elaborate output of their imaginations.

Of all the blows that Science dealt to the humanistic organism perhaps the most bruising was the new scientific philology. In the space of a few years this cadet discipline brought to ruin the age-old mystique of words. One could no longer maintain that the English language was derived from the grandeur of English civilization, let alone from the god-given *logos* of the Bible. Where the Church had persistently taught that speech (particularly when preserved in one or another of the classical languages) was the divine indication of human primacy, French neogrammarian logic and German phonetic studies were demonstrating that all language, no matter how literary or civilized, owed its formulation to the negligence of successive speakers throughout the history of mankind. Thus, ultimately, did the articulate lips of Victorian gentlemen receive their

37. Ibid., 6, 29.

instruction from the undoubtedly not so clean ones of their early barbarian ancestors. This unsavory prospect played havoc with the 'sanctity' of all the ancient languages, but most notably, Latin. Where English scholars had once thought Latin to represent most fully the logical forms and operations underlying all thought (if not reality itself), it was now proved as inglorious as any vernacular. Victorian civilization, hitherto proud of its imperial powers and culture—both of which it associated with those of Rome—was correspondingly undermined.

Nevertheless, writers would find solace within this collapsed structure of national beliefs. Ebulliently resilient, as it befits young authors to be, the new generation seized the chance to remodel the written language and to disengage it from the rigidities of logic (which was *not* their meat). Though schoolmasters persisted in saying their piece, they could not say away the delicious flamboyance of style exhorted and exhibited by the young up-comers. And so, while conventions of syntax and the laws of grammatical pointing continued to guide those whose feet liked the feel of clay, Icarian efforts were stirring the air overhead, signaling fresh attempts at literary fame.

To appreciate the faults and achievements of the *fin de siècle* writer, we will need to backstep briefly into the preneophilology years of the early nineteenth century, a time when English literaries were avidly attending the debate of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the essential virtues of written language. Both poets, neither one conventionally religious, accepted the divine nature of *logos* with its unity of inward idea with outward sign, and simply transferred its heritage of spirituality to their own literary goals.[38] We see in the Wordsworth and Coleridge conflict a reemergence of the paired, always dilemmatic principles of written language use: simple directness (usually more ear-oriented)

38. Linda Dowling, *Decadence and the* Fin de Siècle *Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 25–41. Also consulted for the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy were: *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), s.v. "Poetic Diction", 630; William Wordsworth's *Preface* (1800) to the *Lyrical Ballads*; and chapters 14–22 of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.

versus ornate artistry (usually more eye-oriented); or, to resurrect the classical terms, Atticism *versus* Asianism (see Parts One and Four). Which of the two styles would more graciously befit English Literature? Wordsworth thumped for the former, for linguistic immediacy and the transparency, best found, he claimed, in the speaking voices of simple folk living on the glebe. Their untutored verbalizations, coming direct from the wrangles of the heart, allowed a closer interplay of sensation with expression. Such directness Wordsworth endeavored to transmit to his poetry. Taking his cues from the writings of John Locke and from the democratized atmosphere following the American and French revolutions, Wordsworth generally mistrusted slick words with their baggage of ungovernable associations.

In the opposite camp Coleridge upheld complexity, with all the refinements of thought that inspire word-crafting for the page. He was convinced that the English language had an intrinsic beauty, a numinous vitality of its own, and that its literature could express the unique inner life of the English people, as Latin and its literature had done for the Romans. Languages, said Coleridge, were organic wholes, possessing history and capable of growth and decline. English, if nurtured by a clerisy of poets, philosophers, and guardians, might well be made the world's *lingua communis*, a language so articulate and responsive, exact and powerful, that it would give access to the communion of universal ideas. Whereas the spoken word was but transitive and casual, the written word could be made to be *without accident*. It could raise man above his partial, bumbling life and place him in a larger historical and cultural context.

For a time Coleridge's vision elevated the written word to a rank above speech. Writers, influenced by him, continued for a number of decades to accept the biblical aura of *logos* with all its implications for the God-given supremacy of man. But, as we have seen, the growth of science worked against such a faith. Facts verifying the vulgar, hybrid past of English were furiously multiplying. The mid-century decades saw the Philological Society busily organizing a dictionary to augment the work of Samuel Johnson and uncover the chronicle of our language. So unprescriptive of 'correct' usage and 'good' taste did considerations grow to be that J.A.H. Murray,

the eminent and driving editor of the Philological Society's new *Oxford English Dictionary*, would shortly present his sponsors with the belief that the English language was best understood "as a center without a circumference".[39] In order to recover the true linguistic story of English—its vanishing technical vocabulary, dialect, and slang—he had already (in 1879) broadened the instructions to his literary army of specimen gatherers: that they should supply quotations for "*every* word that strikes you as rare, obsolete, old-fashioned, new, peculiar, or used in a peculiar way".[40] In its spirit of historical discovery, this mandate repudiated absolutely the principles of Coleridge's autocratic clerisy. For the first time, English words (including provincial words, archaicisms, and idioms) were to be authoritatively and *indiscriminately* listed regardless of 'accepted' practice. The objective of the Oxford compilation was to be as methodically inclusive as possible: to expand the list without bias so that the words of all the English language might be recorded *as they were*, and not how they *ought to be*. What schoolmasters, scholars, church, or aristocracy approved was mattering less and less.

If all members of cognate word groups were held to be of equal historical interest on grounds of having once, *somewhere, sometime,* been spoken, then a rupture between the spoken and written forms of the language was inevitable. In the opinion of the belletrists, speech was too all permissive, too variegated. Vocalized forms tended to wander off the mark. They thrived in provincial pockets.[41] By approving equal values amongst varying word forms, philologists were irresponsibly encouraging independence from a communicable norm. England would become a literary Tower of Babel. Its noble literature would disintegrate under a future burden of "brooks" from the south, "becks" from the north, "burns" from Scotland, "creeks" or "branches" from America, "billabongs" from Australia,

39. J.A.H. Murray, "Ninth Annual Address of the President: 21 May 1880", *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1880–82), 131; as cited by Linda Dowling in *Language and Decadence*, 99.

40. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Preface, xv.

41. It is interesting to note how eminent and popular writers—Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, to name a few—had long since accepted substandard dialect speech as viable artistic material.

and *who knows what* from India? From such madness only ignorance and confusion could ensue. Speech, so volatile and off-the-cuff, was an untrustworthy animal.

Nevertheless, voice sounds are seductive. Compared to them, the language of ink seems coldly contrived, limited, unregenerative, and inanimate, its silence suggestive of death. The consuming eye necessarily deals with print from a distance. Eyes do that. They measure the space between us and what they see, whereas the ears hit home with their news. Because voice sounds were particularly favored in the de-regulated mid-century literary environment, popular speech *à la mode de* Wordsworth gradually gained an ascendancy of intellectual prestige over the formal constraints of previous literary language. Speech again was praised for its natural pureness. Writing, conversely, was considered to falsify. Even the slowness of setting it down was seen to detract from the transparency required of passing a thought from one mind to another. Orthography, too, was perceived to distort words. Why, for example, should a northerner's short 'a' pronunciation of *bath* be written in the same way as the very different long 'a' of the southerner's? Furthermore, the durability of paper—the probability of text being reproduced multitudinously—tended to exaggerate the lifespan of vogue words and constructions. Of all these faults was writing deemed guilty. The more ornate and literary it was, the more it betrayed the true communication of speech.[42] Such carping, incited and abetted by science, did not serve the cultivated literary artist, let alone his ambition of a *lingua communis*. The time had come to reverse the pendulum's swing.

THE GRAND MASTER OF PROSE STYLE

In simple terms, this was the state of affairs out of which Walter Pater, classicist, art critic, and master of English prose, would attempt to remodel and rescue Coleridge's hopes for literary perfection. True to his times, Pater did not scorn the findings of neophilology. Instead, he sought to dissolve the antagonism between literature

42. Dowling, *Decadence*, 82–83, 92.

and science by finding a new objective for writers. He advised them to become philologists in their own right so that they could write English more fastidiously and in more scholarly fashion give etymological significance to the words they chose. He urged them to strive for a new aesthetic that would reflect the heterogeneity of nature so recently exposed by biologists; and specifically to that end, to exploit the variety of picturesque idioms now available in the enlarged word horde of acceptable English, including as well those words, however exotic, that they might find lively from elsewhere. Furthermore, he said, they should take pride in the inherited strains of Teutonic and Romantic languages, for it was that very mix that ensured the likelihood of English becoming "the universal medium for communication"—a true *lingua communis*. In his own publications, Pater himself treated mongrel English with the same literary care that Apuleius had applied to vulgar Latin—and proved thereby how richly expressive it could indeed be made to be.[43]

English, being the most linear and analytic of all the European languages, is, as we have already seen, particularly prone to scatter into small bits. A reader of English must hang on to his rope (so to speak) and gather up meaning hand over hand in the order in which the words are presented within the phrases, and the phrases within the clauses. *The placement of words is everything.* Latin, by way of comparison, is architectured.[44] It permits a more arbitrary order of words. Its inflections (of which English has hardly any) allow it to bind distant words together, to intermingle words from different phrases, to amass in the end a dominating thought that makes of its heterogeneous fragments a homogeneous whole, a texture that does not so easily break apart. In seeking the same classical coherence for English, Pater restructured his syntax to simulate the multilayered effect of a fully rounded Latin period. He broke the progress of cognitive sequences to "catch at any exquisite passion",[45] so that his

43. Dowling, *Decadence*, 46, 121–30, *passim*.
44. Latin, though it no longer carried sacred overtones, was still a language with implications of privilege.
45. Dowling, *Decadence*, 90, 110.

language might emulate as closely as possible man's internal, always adjusting response to outside reality, and in that way allow objective and subjective impulses to blend. It was Pater's goal to expose, as though with the plate of a camera, the thinking mind with all its accompanying apparatus of fine emotion.[46] Believing that the contemplation of art offered good exercise for the contemplation of life, that the human intellect was restive, alert, and wired to feeling, Pater spun out his elaborate sentences to suggest a total and synchronous human response to the stimulus of vision. In this way might language be taught to perpetuate the transitory and give exemption from the flux and sprawl of consciousness.[47]

In order to compact the agglomerative ramble of English and make it more Latin-like in its architecture, that is, more accommodating of small ideas within the full-blown thought,[48] Pater loaded the conventional sentence with the weight of a paragraph. Minutiae became magnified. Words sparkled independently from phrases, as did phrases from clauses, and clauses from sentences. With its host of interruptive stops to mirror the hops and skips of the mind, Pater's writing gave the appearance of being fractionary; and yet the faltering starts and interjectory qualifications, the irregularities of juxtaposition that disbalanced the reader's expectation, were all the time ingeniously driven towards an integrated view. Amply qualified as a scholar-artist to amend the language for his new *lingua communis*, Pater also broke the customs of verb tense usage, and shifted clausal and phrasal word groups like the pieces of a puzzle into unconventional rhythms that were insistently surprising and demanding of attention. At the same time he used vocabularies from science, technology, dialects, and the spoken vernacular. He coined new words both to shortcut tedium and to startle.[49] In justification of his own unorthodoxies, he advised the aspiring writer to

show his intelligence of the rules of language in his freedoms

46. George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe* 3 (New York: The Humanities Press, 1961): 546–48.
47. Dowling, *Decadence*, 113, 132.
48. *A la mode de* Marsh.
49. Dowling, *Decadence*, 132–34, *passim*.

with it, addition or expansion, which like the spontaneities of manner in a well-bred person will still further illustrate good taste. —The right vocabulary![50]

With this strange use of the exclamation mark (not at all an unusual feature in Pater's texts) we are brought up sharp to face our underlying subject. How soundless, in fact, is Pater's writing! And how dependent on punctuation!

Pater, indeed, wrote for the page, and what he wrote was a learnèd language, full of verbal arabesques and studied posturings. He was said to have arranged his notes on slips of paper. Once these had been ordered by topic, he wrote out his chapters in longhand on the alternate lines of ruled paper, inserting into the spaces new clauses, words, and rephrasings. He repeated this procedure, which again required crossings-out and interlinear corrections. At this stage he frequently hired a typesetter to print out a draft in order that he might better judge the effect. This process would continue until the product in its full grace and harmoniousness satisfied him. And so close was his attention to the form he was constructing that the words he set up in his early drafts to choose from for difficult concepts were sometimes quite varied in meaning.[51] His grandest sentences were too multifaceted and commodious of detail to be taken in without study, or appreciated without concentration. They required the eye. *And the eye required punctuation.* There, on the page, and free from the exigencies of time, the eye could follow the twists and turns of reason's thread as signaled by the points, and so, leisurely disentangle the elaborate weave. In the chapter entitled "Style" in his early book *Appreciations* (1889), Pater speaks of the complexity of his art, whose goal was

> to bring a highly qualified matter into compass at one view.
> For the literary architecture, if it is to be rich and expressive, involves not only foresight of the end in the beginning,

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50. Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (Calcutta: Rupa and Co., 1967), 8.

51. A. C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1926), 201–2. See also, Dowling, *Decadence*, 127.

but also development or growth of design, in the process of execution, with many irregularities, surprises, and afterthoughts; the contingent as well as the necessary being subsumed under the unity of the whole.[52]

What is this "whole"? There is an achievable aesthetic unity of conceptual opposites, Pater thought, which man is morally obliged to seek. For example, as life reflects death, so each of a seemingly antagonistic pair will suggest its partner: thus, light suggests shadow; male, female; past, present; imagination, reality; artistic involvement, critical detachment; and so on. The writer's task is to translate the wholeness of his thinking experience with its full resonance of associations and mystique of circumstance into language (necessarily a visual language). He must seek to evoke simultaneously for his reader both feeling and thought.[53] In short, the ambitions of Paterean prose were very demanding. Though in many ways imitative of spontaneity, a verbal composition developed with so much in mind to accomplish could scarcely be called spontaneous. Nevertheless, all that self-conscious crafting made a high moment for punctuation. By keeping order amidst this silent verbosity of the page, the punct achieved its highest distinction. Literary artists embraced it for the flexibility, *animus*, and subtlety that it allowed. They appreciated the way it could regulate the flow and disambiguate complexities. Because punctuation was now so well established a feature of both reading and writing, it was quite up to maintaining comprehensibility in this its most challenging enterprise.

To examine the action, we will now focus on the following single sentence from Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean* (published in 1885), in which he discusses and illustrates his stylistic theories:

His [Flavian's] dilettantism, his assiduous preoccupation with what might seem but the details of mere form or manner, was, after all, bent upon the function of bringing to the surface, sincerely and in their integrity, certain strong personal

52. Pater, *Appreciations*, 14.
53. Richard Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 213–34.

intuitions, certain visions or apprehensions of things as be-
ing, with important results, in this way rather than in that—
apprehensions which the artistic or literary expression was
called upon to follow, with the exactness of wax or clay,
clothing the model within it.[54]

We see in the first three lines the basic sentence: namely "dilet-
tantism was bent". Around that core, the ancillary remnants vibrate.
The first two commas interject a definitive elaboration of "dilet-
tantism" with their implanted, authorial hesitancies "but" and
"or". The second pair of commas, marking off "after all", give us a
quick glimpse of the author as he sees beyond the appearances to
the fact, for no matter how truthful a historian wishes to be, he
inserts himself by his selection of facts. It was a part of Pater's vision
that the expositor's viewpoint remain a palpable part of the state-
ment. Continuing: two commas isolate "sincerely and in their
integrity", which act as a group to define what follows, a task
which is indicated by "their". With this, the movement is thrown
forward to "intuitions", which is itself marked off to be defined
with the paired words "visions" and "apprehensions", joined again
by the author's hesitant "or". Then, once more, the authorial voice
inserts itself, sweeping omnisciently into the future: "with impor-
tant results". Finally, the fearful, hesitating word "apprehensions"
(the most vibrant of the triad) is again taken up, after a dash–pause
that demands a sharp specificity of attention. The final two commas
introduce two modifications for "follow": the action of "follow"
must be done with the exactness of wax, *ah! or clay*; and be done so
that it *clothes* the model within it. In a statement of such high preci-
sion, "clothes" might have benefited by some auxiliary detail—a
clause or two to suggest the clinging fit of a satin gown as opposed
to the loose bulk of a tweed cape. For why stop now?

With his highly influential *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*
(1873) and his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater had bravely
and earnestly (and even, it could be said, *patriotically*) set out to lead
the way into a new writing style, a style that he hoped would inject

54. Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (London:
Macmillan and Co., 1885), 110.

the passive page with the vibrancy of living matter and portray, by the evidence of its energies, the writer's own cerebral and sensual energies in contest. Yet, in forcing English to such an effort, Pater made style too much the focus. Though meaning could be followed (most easily in good clear print), his elaborate syntax contradicted the measure of voice rhythms, and so, despite its claim to vibrancy, seemed dead. Nevertheless, Pater's work stretched the capabilities of what written English could do. Its representations of scattered mental responses to stimuli undoubtedly eased the way for subsequent writers to deal with fictional streams of consciousness. Though in some sense he can be seen as rescuing for English literature that mystical aura that science had 'destroyed', it would appear (even in his own early and ambitious terms) that Pater was struggling for a prize that English could not give. His need of so much punctuation, however imaginatively and artistically he applied it, demonstrates a failure, of which he himself seems sensible.

> Say what you have to say, what you have a will to say, in the simplest, the most direct and exact manner possible, with no surplusage:—there, is the justification of the sentence so fortunately born, "entire, smooth, round," that it needs no punctuation, and also (that is the point!) of the most elaborate period, if it be right in its elaboration.[55]

English cannot deal with labyrinthine prose in the manner so zealously prescribed by Pater, nor will the most sophisticated artistry suffice to help it do so. However magnificent, Pater's own writing style lacked the fire that comes from a cry of the heart; for cries of the heart are necessarily both terse and sonorous. Oscar Wilde, one of Pater's most admiring disciples, regretted the master's disposition to compose for the printed page. In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde wrote:

> Since the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country, there has been a tendency in litera-

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55. Pater, *Appreciations*, 23.

ture to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons of pleasure it should abide always. Even the work of Mr. Pater, who is, on the whole, the most perfect master of English prose now creating amongst us, is often far more like a piece of mosaic than a passage in music, and seems, here and there, to lack the true rhythmical life of words.[56]

While incarcerated in the Reading Gaol (1895–97), the deeply humiliated Oscar Wilde came well to understand how elaborations that please the eye are not so closely allied to the heart. The artifice demanded by any literary form or style plainly impairs the candor of emotion. The following excerpt comes from Wilde's long prison letter to Lord Alfred Douglas ("Bosie").

I cannot reconstruct my letter, or rewrite it. You must take it as it stands, blotted in many places with tears, in some with the signs of passion or pain, and make it out as best you can, blots, corrections, and all. As for the corrections and errata, I have made them in order that my words should be an absolute expression of my thoughts, and err neither through surplusage nor through being inadequate. Language requires to be tuned, like a violin: and just as too many or too few vibrations in the voice of the singer or the trembling of the string will make the note false, so too much or too little in words will spoil the message. As it stands, at any rate, my letter has its definite meaning behind every phrase. There is in it nothing of rhetoric. Wherever there is erasion or substitution, however slight, however elaborate, it is because I am seeking to render my real impression, to find for my mood its exact equivalent. *Whatever is just in feeling, comes always last in form.* (Italics added)[57]

(Additional Ms. 50141A, f. 37v in the British Library)

56. Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross 4 (New York: Bigelow, Brown, and Co., 1891): 117. I was led to this reference by Linda Dowling in *Language and Decadence*, p. 184.

57. From Oscar Wilde's Reading Gaol letter to Lord Alfred Douglas. The man-

Though Pater may have failed of pure sublimity in the art of crafting written words, he greatly revitalized literary aspirations in his own lifetime. His critical philosophy and his own admired prose came to affect profoundly the sensitivities of subsequent writers: not only Oscar Wilde, but Robert Louis Stevenson, William Butler Yeats, Joseph Conrad, Henry James, James Joyce, to mention an eminent few. Despite Pater's avowed preference for straightforward syntax in prose, his own acrobatic example had exercised punctuation well. Though heavily reliant on "those stigmata of written vernacular languages",[58] he extended (as he had proposed to do in the first place) the boundaries of what could be said on paper. Again and again, he achieved lines of breathtaking beauty.

Nevertheless, as the century ended, the pendulum had already begun its inevitable swing back, away from the grand formalities of an all-incorporative statement. Humans do not really crave completeness. Once again, the literary landscape began to fill with experimenting scribblers in search of simplicity, directness, and a convincing sincerity. With the advance of new fashions, the puncts —despite the requirements of Pater's vast and verbose following —would be obliged to restrain themselves a little.

uscript (on forty foolscap folios), later bowdlerized, became famous under the published title *De Profundis*.

58. Marsh, *Lectures*, 414.