

THE STOPS BUCK HERE — PUNCTUATION & *DIFFÉRANCE*

John Lennard

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', v

Delaying, not forgetting, Eliot's poetry of *différance*, I begin with a memory. In 1989, concluding a doctoral thesis on the exploitation of lunulae in English printed verse, I reported two typical reactions to my work — first that there could be no such subject, & second (from the same people a few minutes later) that it was clearly too large a topic for anyone to tackle.¹ What I *didn't* say was that initial disbelief was usually amused but subsequent dismissal often irritated.

Soon afterwards I provoked this double reaction again, in one of those wilfully terrifying interviews for research fellowships at All Souls College, Oxford, where fellows may spectate & intervene. I had about 30 people watching & a trio to conduct the interview. At first spectators only murmured, but as I finished the obligatory sketch of doctoral work an old man cackled that my 'study of brackets' reminded him of a book by a former Warden on — wait for it — *half-lines in Virgil* ! There followed merry jests (*Quelle blague*, a paren-thesis !) & a general collapse of stout parties. By chance I knew *Half-lines and Repetitions in Virgil* by John Sparrow (1906–92)², published when he was only 25, & flattering association half-offset hooted derogation, but the old man did not mean to flatter, irritation dulled caution, & it proved unwise to ask (however politely) if he truly thought half-lines self-evidently half-as-important as whole ones. Stout parties, recollecting themselves, waxed stouter (Daniel is *never* supposed to bite a lion) & the fellowship audibly vanished from my reach — but my question stands

Epigraph: *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* (2 vols, ed. Ricks & McCue, London: Faber, 2015), 1.183–84.

¹ *But I Digress* (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1991), p. 242. For kneejerk sneering by reviewers see e.g. Baldick, 'Bracketeering', *TLS* 4633 (17 Jan. 1992).

² Oxford: Clarendon P., 1931; repr. NYC & London: Garland, 1977.

better scrutiny than my heckler's remark.

Consider it coldly. An analogy between a half-line (one short of a normative measure) & a parenthesis (a rhetorical figure, variously marked, intercluding one unit of discourse within another) is specious : no likeness exists between either things compared (incompletion, interclusion) or their contexts (Latin verse, English print). The comparison was of acts of attention, study of half-lines & parentheses being comparable as (supposed) incompletion or subordination make them equally risible as scholarly topics. *That* was the humour of it, and waspish ridicule partly explains the harsh response to my question — but why should studying punctuation attract such scorn ? Because its marks are small ?

Invoking an ex-Warden with a contested place in All Souls' recent history as an 'in-joke' was mere high-table sally ; here was no providence in the fall of a Sparrow. Isolated by youth in a crowded, abruptly hostile interview, I couldn't understand the force of disapproval I was made to feel & supposed institutional loyalty to have trumped logic. Now I summon it as a notable but not atypical example of a common reaction that reveals both potent prejudice (as foolish as all such) & a sorry intellectual confusion we tolerate always to our detriment & in the digital world at our peril. But the stops buck here.



Punctuation did not always seem trivial, and its major theorist-practitioners have been intellectual heavyweights. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), in *De Doctrina Christiana*, knew mispunctuating sacred texts could imperil an immortal soul & in teaching betray others to damnation.³ Charlemagne (747–814) employed scribes who codified punctuation as they did script.⁴ Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), a wily chancellor of Florence during its Late-Medieval wars, fathered lunulae & joined-up writing, composing diplomatic letters using both a Visconti Duke of Milan

³ *De Doctrina Christiana* (ed. Green, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1963), III.iii.6.

⁴ Parkes, *Pause and Effect* (Aldershot: Scolar P., 1992), p. 30 ff..

thought worth a thousand Florentine horsemen.⁵ And Christopher Marlowe (1564–93) in *Edward II* (pr.1594) pointedly turned licensing regicide on a construction editors now usually clarify with spurious commas :

‘Edwardum occidere nolite timere, bonum est;
Fear not to kill the king, ’tis good he die.’
But read it thus, and that’s another sense:
‘Edwardum occidere nolite, timere bonum est;
Kill not the king, ’tis good to fear the worst.’
Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go,
That, being dead, if it chance to be found,
Matrevis and the rest may bear the blame,
And we be quit that caused it to be done. [5.4.8–16]⁶

The offending commas (*not* in the 1594 octavo⁷) follow “*timere*” & “*nolite*” : the whole point is that “Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go”. As printed here each Latin line means only one thing, a fell comma being strict in its arrest ; *Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est* means both. Similarly un/pointed confusions occur, to upend meaning in *Ralph Roister Doister*, a Mid-Sixteenth-Century proto-farce by Nicholas Udall (1504–56), & garble it in the prologue to ‘Pyramus & Thisbe’ in Shakespeare’s (1564–1616) *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where “This fellow doth not stand vpon points”.⁸ All three playwrights would have known from school the primary classical model of ambiguous pointing, the prophecy of the Apollonian oracle to Pyrrhus reported in Cicero’s (106–43 BCE) *De Divinatione* with the spectre of ‘Pyrrhic victories’⁹ ; erroneous reading can have severe consequences, and Marlowe’s elegant lesson in ‘deniability’ is one

⁵ Ullman, *The Origin and Development of Humanistic Script* (Rome: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 1960) & *The Humanism of Coluccio Salutati* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1963), p. 14.

⁶ *Edward the Second* (ed. Forker, Manchester: MUP, 1994), pp. 296–97.

⁷ *The troublesome raigne and lamentable death of Edward the second, King of England: with the tragicall fall of proud Mortimer: As it was sundrie times publicquely acted in the honourable citie of London, by the right honorable the Earle of Pem-brooke his seruants. Written by Chri. Marlow Gent.* (London: for William Iones, dwelling neere Holbourne conduit, at the signe of the Gunne. 1594), L1r.

⁸ *Ralph Roister Doister*, ll. 1126–60, 1289–1323, in Tydeman, ed., *Four Tudor Comedies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 157–58, 165–66; *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. (London: Jaggard & Blount, 1623), TLN 1916, O2v = R’side 5.1.118. See Lamb’s essay in Vol. 1.

⁹ *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione* (ed. & trans. Falconer, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1923), ll.56.116 (pp. 501–03).

lawyers & politicians apply daily. Was it really so risible, then, for William Cobbett (1763–1835), considering the “wild work” of Eighteenth-Century letters, earnestly to warn that the dash “without measure, must be a most perilous thing for a young grammarian to handle”?¹⁰ However different their worlds & conceptions of danger, his echo of Augustine is striking.

Between Augustine & Cobbett falls the long span this *History* surveys. The theories & manuals of rhetoric Augustine knew concerned oratory rather than script & made very limited reference to punctuation — most Western marks had not been invented & punctuating was regarded by Romans as a privilege of free readers, not business for enslaved scribes.¹¹ Augustine’s problem was not a vague fear readers might misunderstand a well-presented text :

1. in principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et deus erat verbum
2. hoc erat in principio apud deum
3. omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est

1. In the beginning was the Word, & the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2. The same was in the beginning with God.

3. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

[Jn 1.1–3, Vulgate/KJV, historiated ‘I’, indices, & marginalia omitted]

The problem was that without help readers would *not* be able mentally to generate such a text from *scriptio continua* in scrolls & early codices :

inprincipioeratverbumetverbumeratapuddeumetdeuseratverbumhoceratinpri
ncipioapuddeumomniaperipsumfactasuntetsineipsofactumestnihilquodfactu
mest

inthebeginningwastheword&thewordwaswithgodandthewordwasgodthesamewasinthebeginningw
ithgodallthingsweremadebyhimandwithouthimwasnotanythingmadethatwasmade

Even with modern typographic clarity care is needed in a mother-tongue to parse

¹⁰ Cobbett, *A Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters. Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in general; but more especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-Boys. To which are added, Six Lessons, intended to prevent Statesmen from using false grammar, and from writing in an awkward manner.* (1818; intro. Burchfield, Oxford & NYC: OUP, 1984), p. 65.

¹¹ Parkes, *Pause*, p. 11, & see Kleberg, *Buchhandel und Verlagswesen in der Antike* (‘Book-trade & distribution in Antiquity’, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967), pp. 22–68.

& construe *scriptio continua* ; in Latin as a second/third language, especially if a mother-tongue had expectations of (say) the whereabouts of verbs, clerical orthodoxy was at risk, never mind that of any literate laity. Augustine used this passage, moreover, for a danger in transition from first to second verse, where a stop can seem correct though actually a word early :

1. in principio erat verbum et verbum erat apud deum et deus erat
2. verbum hoc erat in principio apud deum
1. in the beginning was the word and the word was with god and god was
2. the same word was in the beginning with god

This error, once made, is hard to detect but forestalls the divinity of the Word, exposing a reader & his community to mortal sin.¹² For want of a pilcrow the soul was lost ...

As Christianity conquered Europe such practical spiritual concerns drove priests, scribes, & scholars to disseminate conventions to signpost, discipline, & disambiguate sacred meaning ; and thanks to Malcolm Parkes (1930–2013), dedicatee of this *History*, it has since 1992 been possible to summarise with some accuracy the development of Western punctuation, largely in scripture & its commentaries. Interword-spaces emerged in Old Irish (which has initial verbs) in the later-Seventh Century, driven partly by interlinear glossing of the Vulgate, and spread through Celtic & Germanic vernaculars into church-Latin.¹³ Aided by codification & innovations by Carolingian scribes — especially development of *litterae notabiliores* (‘more notable letters’) to signal beginnings¹⁴ — prose & verse periods came over several centuries to be normatively construed (if variously punctuated) in the manner of Cicero & Quintilian (c.35–100) known as analysis *per cola et commata*, literally ‘by *cola* and *commata*’, but better “by

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24, & see ‘The Contribution of Insular Scribes of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries to the ‘Grammar of Legibility’’ (1987), in Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers* (London & Rio Grande, OH: Hambledon P., 1991), pp. 1–18, ~ ‘Palaeographical Commentary’ in Bischoff *et al.*, eds, *The Épinal: Erfurt, Werden, & Corpus Glossaries* (Copenhagen & Baltimore, MD: Rosenkilde & Bagge, 1988), pp. 13–25, & Saenger, *Space Between Words* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34

clauses and pauses”.¹⁵

Words were the most basic unit, primarily indicated by space, and built into *commata* distinguished by commas, as *commata* built into *cola* distinguished by colons : *cola*, conceived as anatomical ‘members’, legs or stages, made up the body of a period: one or more periods formed a paragraph, and one or more paragraphs a *capitulum*, or heading (whence ‘chapter’), which could itself be bound within a structure mapped on contents-pages & latterly in indices¹⁶ : the underlying metaphor was corporeal, and the whole period, beneath its title, displayed the complete expression of a finished thought.

Alternating founts map four *cola*, each of four *commata*. Cicero & Quintilian recommended periods of four *cola*, and beyond clarity of display & maximal rhetorical definition their system provides terminology for reference : the parenthesis about ‘chapter’ is in the third *comma* of the third *colon*, and the fourth *colon* is predicated on “anatomical ‘members’”, “legs”, & “body” in the second, & “heading” in the third, where the index about indices appears. Where modern sentences insist narrowly on grammar, periods display argument, a disciplined movement of thought. If indicators (of whatever form) are misplaced, *commata* & *cola* make no rightful sense and hypertextual capacity to interface with commentaries & indices is disabled : for punctuation is a thing of power.

It is correspondingly clear that the Church Fathers understood punctuation of sacred texts, like codifications of scripture into canon & apocrypha, chapter & verse, principally as a method of facilitating & enforcing orthodoxy. Parkes has clear examples, individual scribes repunctuating scripture to impose particular interpretations¹⁷ : but if a given system was practical, embodied current orthodoxy, & (later) adequately supported concordancing, no-one was concerned with the *particular* punctuation-marks & -spaces used. In a more slowly interconnected world pressure to standardise was muted, and across the later-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41 ff.; de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 2016), p. 20.

¹⁶ On indices see Duncan, *Index, A History of the* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

¹⁷ Parkes, ‘Punctuation, or, Pause and Effect’, in Murphy, ed., *Mediæval Eloquence* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California P., 1978), pp. 127–42, & *Pause*, pp. 72–73.

Middle Ages multivariant repertoires of practices + conventions generated mainly by major monastic scriptoria came to dominate regions & overlap within emergent nations.

By the Twelfth Century word-separation was widely established & a limited general repertoire of marks (*de facto* comma, colon, full-stop, & question-mark, though forms were variant) had emerged, all related to primary Ciceronian terms (*comma, colon, periodus, interrogatio*) ; there were also conventional layouts, a ‘grammar of legibility’. Then came Humanism, substantially predicated on the pedagogy needed to disseminate rediscovered classical texts. Humanist cursive, the joined-up script Salutati sponsored & as Florentine Chancellor disseminated, adapted Caroline minuscule (developed under Charlemagne), and its looping forms, far more rapidly written & read than earlier scripts¹⁸, had by the Mid-Sixteenth Century taken hold in local variants across most of Christian Europe.¹⁹ His lunulae, as Erasmus (1466–1536) dubbed the ‘little moons’ of the type-form, displaying parentheses for all to see, were a logical & pedagogical tool of elegant simplicity, as proliferation attests, and part of a wider pattern.²⁰ Iacopo Alpoleio da Urbisaglia (fl.1360s) claimed to have invented the *punctus admirativus*, ‘!’, & probably gave it its present form.²¹ Salutati certainly helped disseminate it, beginning the long & sorry road to journalistic ‘screamers’ ; so too, decisively, did the master typographers who fashioned the great roman & italic type founts (complete with punctuation-marks) on which Western literacy still rests.²²

The craft of Venetians Aldus Manutius (Aldo Manuzzi, c.1449/52–1515) and Pietro, Cardinal Bembo (1470–1547) is well-known, and Aldine & Bembine types

¹⁸ Saenger, *Space, passim*, strongly implicates separated word-shapes (bouma) seen in parafoveal vision in accelerating silent reading, cursive ‘t’ acquiring an ascender above x-height being esp. significant.

¹⁹ See Ullman, *Origin*.

²⁰ Erasmus, *De Recta Latini Græcisque Sermonis Pronuntiatione* (Basel: Frobenius, 1530). On some complications see Lennard, *But*, p. 249n.1.

²¹ F. Novati, ‘Di un Ars punctuandi erroneamente attribuita a Fr. Petrarca’ (‘On an Art of punct. wrongly attributed to Fr. Petrarch’), *Rendiconte del Reale Istituto Lombardo di Scienze e Lettere* (‘Report of the Royal Lombard Institute of Science & Letters’), series 2, XLII (1909), pp. 83–118.

²² Parkes, *Pause*, pp. 49, 51.

still used, with many derivative founts. Less well-known is that Aldus invented the apostrophe & semi-circular comma, and Bembo the semi-colon, expressly an intermediary stop combining the upper-point of the colon with the new form of comma (the old became the solidus).²³ Both included all the new marks in their founts, and the force of print is seen in the rapid standardisation of alphasymbolic forms its economics imposed. Printers & type-founders have vested interests in promoting mass-literacy (never a mainstream Christian goal) & were natural recruits to Humanist reformation of notation. Where Salutati's joined-up writing had gone before, roman & italic founts followed, a century or so later but at the same rapid pace, in their new punctuation-marks & reshaped letters a conspicuous blazon of Early Modernity.

The Western approach to punctuation has ever since been determined (within practical constraints of the codex & changing dictates of printing technology) by variant fusions of a pedagogic & aesthetic logic seeking elegant clarity of display, and a commercial logic of cost. Lunulae, for example, became the mathematical sign of aggregation in the Eighteenth Century, displacing the vinculum, a bar above symbols to be aggregated, because they (like English) require setting only one terrace of type, whereas the vinculum (like Greek) requires two. Double-terracing is tricky & qualified compositors paid more, so lunulae were cheaper.²⁴ Similarly, inverted initial exclamation- & question-marks, '¡', '¿', prescribed in Spanish by the Real Academia Española in 1754, flourished because printers could invert existing type-sorts²⁵; but the *punctus percontativus*, '¿', occasionally used c. 1500–1650 to mark a 'rhetorical question' (a *percontatio* not an *interrogatio*), required a new type-sort. Some London printers had percontation-marks in the 1580s–1620s, but within a few decades it had been priced to death.²⁶

Other innovations & refinements did better. After much experimentation in

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 49, 51–52.

²⁴ Cajori, *A History of Mathematical Notations* (2 vols, Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1928), 1.384–5, 390–4.

²⁵ Parkes, *Pause*, p. 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53, & see the Early-Modern Intro. in Vol. 2.

Eighteenth-Century epistolary & Gothic novels, notations for ellipsis & their various distinctions ('G-d', '****', '...') were finally established in proto-Modernist work²⁷; and after centuries of variant practice Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) in her 1846 MS of *The Professor* (pr.1857) employed the exact conventions that remain current for inverted commas & *alinéa* indicating dialogue.²⁸ From c. 1700–1950, new combinate-marks Baker dubbed the commash, semi-/colash etc. (',—'/'—';—'/'—', etc.), flourished²⁹; the substantial expansion of marks they represent coincides with commercial cramping & machine-press uniformity of the printed page. In parallel there were codifications & revisions of mathematical, legal, & other punctuations³⁰, and occasional development of new conventions for old marks, such as using lunulae to display the number of letters in the answer to a crossword-clue — 'Little moons hold a relevant datum (7)' — or indicate on UK road signs that one must change roads to reach the bracketed destination. The apetail, '@', an 'a' with an elaborated abbreviation-stroke, long fallen into dully commercial use in ledgers & bills of lading as 'at ... each', was revived in US sports notation & addresses, and now has many functions in social media.³¹

To be alive to this history, *in toto* coextensive with the practice of reading & as close to us all as the nearest printed document or web-page, is to know that most punctuation has been left to fend for itself by the abrupt obsolescence of metal type. Technologies ever change — Medieval use of colour, suppressed by the hand-press, returned with lithography — but the scale of obsolescence is now absolute. Despite mechanisation there had before 1904 been no fundamental shift in the physical & material constraints of getting properly patterned ink onto appropriate paper since the invention of movable type, but they were tested by offset-printing & transcended by digital setting. There are of course *new*

²⁷ Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015).

²⁸ Parkes, *Pause*, p. 94.

²⁹ Baker, 'The History of Punctuation', in *The Size of Thoughts* (London: Chatto, 1996), pp. 82–88.

³⁰ Lennard, *But*, p. 214.

³¹ See Houston, *Shady Characters* (NYC: Norton, 2013), ch. 5.

constraints, but the conceptual underpinning of digital print-technology is as remarkable a victory over an intrinsic limitation as the shift from electron to scanning tunnelling microscopes — and that won a Nobel.³²

There is now no reason any computer-user should not be able at will to generate on screen *and* page any graphic symbol for any purpose. *De facto*, we no longer have upper- & lower-case letters (derived from type-cases), nor any type, only (industrially) digital offset & (domestically) a variable digital package, half-cursor, half-printhead. The proprietary interface controls are works-in-progress & do not usually include software for creation of additional sorts within a fount, but it exists. The ability cheaply to extend any fount to include particular needs its standard version omits has wide implications, not least for academic & professional standards of quotation & editing. The long-lost percontation-mark could without prohibitive cost or difficulty be reproduced in editions of texts that use it, rather than flipped aside as editorial roadkill ; so too the wide variety of Medieval punctuation-marks & layouts that rote ‘modernisation’³³ currently filters through a standard character-set into a machine-press layout, with ligatures, long-s, breathings & accents, manicules, & anything else ever used. But far more is at stake than no longer having to type OE thorn, ‘þ’, by superimposing ‘b’ on ‘p’, as students learned to do, or even the acute challenge to standard editorial practices. Deprived of the material & logistical constraints of metal type, our new digital environment is terrifyingly free. McGann argues that to understand it we must remember the page in web-page & re-understand the book³⁴ — but with punctuation, what does that mean ?

³² The smallest things that can be seen with optical & electron microscopes are limited by the wavelengths of light & electrons; the scanning tunnelling microscope, for which Gerd Binnig & Heinrich Rohrer (1933–2013) shared the 1986 Nobel Prize in Physics, uses quantum tunnelling to map individual atoms.

³³ The term is v. problematical in theory & practice alike. While orthography may perh. be said to be modernised, ‘brought into conformity with present practice’, marked, spatial, & deictic punct. is, when ‘modernised’, deleted, altered, moved, or added; not all functions of original punct. are retained & new punct. adds new functions, while no two ‘modernised’ versions of the ‘same’ passage are identical. A car may be a modern equivalent of an Early-Modern horse, but is not a ‘modernised’ horse.

³⁴ McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago, IL: U. of Chicago P., 1983); *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, NJ: PUP, 1991); *Radiant Textuality* (NYC & Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001).



Within the constraints of successive technologies of writing & printing, from papyrus & stylus to keyboard & inkjet, the association of punctuation with authority, control, & orthodoxies of one or another kind is very clear. Roman circumscriptions of scribal authority, Augustine's alarm at the vulnerability of the divine *logos* to misplaced stops, Humanist pedagogy, & swift adoption of emoticons to control tonality in plain-text e-mails³⁵ all point to the same complex truth : when it matters what we write & read, it matters how we punctuate — acutely so in English, largely unprotected by a flexible grammar & minimal agreements from the determining influence of marks, spaces, cases, & faces that form its punctuation. To control punctuation is to control much, and my sin in that All Souls interview was in every sense an offence against authority, beginning with undertaking work on punctuation at all.

As always when up against authority, clear theoretical analysis would be invaluable, but a great virtue of *Pause and Effect* & the palæographical facts to which it is anchored is an understanding that the histories of usage (which I have been discussing) & of theory are sharply distinct. As every theorist must be a practitioner, praxis historically comprehends theory — but before Parkes theory had yet to comprehend praxis in any fashion, and has had amazingly little to say of any substance. How many of us could give a straightforward account of how punctuational practice is acquired by children, or of what it is, exactly, they acquire ? I know from four decades of asking that few can give more than a rudimentary account of their own practices of punctuation, & the intelligent youngster's question about semi-/colons has become a bourgeois bogey as bad as the birds & the bees because most cannot give a sensible answer.³⁶ By way of a

³⁵ Emoticons, invented in digital form by Scott Fahlman in 1982, evolved into wider use on Usenet in the 1990s, with plain-text emphases (*sigh*, -groan-, etc.); see Giannoulis & Wilde, eds, *Emoticons, Kaomoji, and Emoji* (NYC & London: Routledge, 2020), p. 3.

³⁶ Some investigation has been done, as Hall & Robinson, eds, *Learning about Punctuation* (Clevedon, Philadelphia, PA, & Adelaide, SA: Multilingual Matters, 1996), & Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?* (Cambridge: Open Bk Pub., 2011).

yardstick, most literates can readily offer better analyses of road-signs, class-difference, or law, and a fair number of grammar & diction. Behind those capacities stand acknowledged codifications turning data into knowledge by giving terminology, imposing regulation, & assuming authority. Whether as directly enforced as a Highway Code on drivers & Statute Law on citizens, as widely disseminated as Marx's terminology of class-conflict, or as basic as the needs to learn language & control register, such codifications are first-order maps of general understanding. For punctuation there has been no such map, only disputatiously prescriptive grammaticasting, little disseminated terminology (most marks are nameless to many), & little general understanding beyond the PDE rule-of-thumb that sentences begin with capital letters & end with full-stops.

For two millennia highly authoritarian grammars have come & gone. Many ignore everything but words, and their few precepts of punctuation have limited relation to contemporaneous literary or mass-practice. At present, in the US & some of its dominions, the MLA, MHRA, & Chicago 'Manuals' represent mildly variant academic repertoires that codify many conventions without reference to historical & textual context or concern for cumulative inconsistency. Their largely untheorised practices are often enforced though no-one can explain why a plainly (albeit monumentally) inadequate code should be obeyed *ad absurdum*. In the Anglophone world at large the most widely remembered general authorities are probably still *The King's English* (1906) & *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) by H. W. (1858–1933) & F. G. Fowler (1871–1918), and *You Have A Point There* (1953) by Eric Partridge (1894–1979), available in updated editions.³⁷ All are tempered by practical knowledge of type (both Fowlers & Partridge were lexicographers) but intellectually rooted in neoclassical philology — and no coherent neoclassical theory of punctuation has ever emerged from endlessly

³⁷ Fowlers, *The King's English* (1906; 3/e, 1931; Oxford: OUP, 2003); H. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926; 2/e, 1965; 3/e, 1996; 4/e, ed. Butterfield, Oxford: OUP, 2015); Partridge, *You Have A Point There* (1953; London & NYC: Routledge, 2005). Truss's hyped *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (London: Profile Bks, 2003; NYC: Penguin, 2004) cts Parkes, but did not understand his work & rehashes old prescriptivism.

repeated confusions & misapprehended half-truths.

In a long view, noting obvious differences in the power of punctuation-marks in (1) classical Greek & Latin (synthetic languages, with rigid grammars using inflection to build meaning into compound units) ; (2) Romance languages (less synthetic but still widely inflected) ; & (3) PDE (highly analytic, with very flexible grammar using many prepositions & a recorded vocabulary at least twice as large as any other language), it is clear that punctuation is, like prosody, a field where classical inheritance is too fraught with inapplicability ever to be rendered coherent in its own terms. Even at the head of the neoclassical tradition in England such remarks of punctuation as Ben Jonson (1572–1637) included in his *English Grammar* (1640) are of limited use in reading his 1616 *Workes*³⁸ ; with lesser scholars pointlessness is all, for to try to apprehend Jacobethine & later English punctuation with the tools of Cicero is like trying to understand gunpowder-war without knowledge of any military development later than the gladiatorial distinction of *secutor* & *retiarius*.³⁹

Nor, interestingly, has linguistics yet produced anything resembling a theory of punctuation, or looked likely to do so.⁴⁰ In mathematical & computational systems of punctuation there are of necessity stringent values, but theoretical accounts of mathematical operators do not work for verbal operators. After two millennia of intermittent but widespread effort the West remains unable to develop any adequate understanding of a taught practice coextensive with writing. The only possible conclusion is the existence of systemic misconceptions blocking progress, and a first necessary tactic must be their exposure.



³⁸ *The English Grammar Made by Ben Jonson for the benefit of all Strangers out of his observation of the English Language now spoken and in use*, in *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson. The second volume* (London: J. Dawson, 1640); *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson* (London: W. Stansby, 1616); & see van den Berg's essay in Vol. 2.

³⁹ A *secutor* had sword & shield, a *retiarius* trident & net: Dunkle, *Gladiators* (2008; London & NYC: Routledge, 2013), pp. 107–13.

⁴⁰ See Nunberg, *The Linguistics of Punctuation* (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language & Information, 1990).

Mutatis mutandis, half of all Western grammarians have favoured an elocutionary model of punctuation, in which marks (& sometimes space) guide orality, the other half a syntactical model, in which marks (& some spaces) indicate units of meaning. Neither creed has cared to notice that it depends whether one is reading silently or aloud, or that punctuation clearly functions in both modes ; both, however, usually admit that some punctuation is deictic, signalling like *italics* or SMALL CAPS a local stress or self-contained distinction. The theoretical efforts of two millennia are so easily summarised because almost all have insisted on a supposed need for regulatory pre- & proscription — broadly, a consequence of the extent to which punctuation is consistently of concern to religious, legal, & other authorities able to bias conceptualisation, with pedagogic desire for precepts that may readily be taught.

Grammarians & subsequently lexicographers have also tended to conceive & define ‘punctuation’ as ‘punctuation-marks’, insisting on etymology (*punctus*, ‘a point’) & restricting acknowledgement of other forms of punctuating to the verb (‘The speech was punctuated by jeers.’) — but what most frequently punctuates text on this page & has the largest key on any QWERTY keyboard ? Spaces & marks go together & one need only momentarily ponder the concept of punctuation to realise it is potentially of a very high order, an abstract & epitome of a practice basic to perceptions of space & time. Page-turning punctuates reading books, as clicking scrollbars reading web-pages ; information overload, a snowstorm of incomprehensible words and/or images, is precisely a failure adequately to punctuate (or read the punctuation of) incoming data. Browsers, keyboards, & libraries are punctuational devices imposing spatial & alphanumeric operating systems on data they process. What does/n’t go inside little moons & how one should deploy Bembo’s semi-colon, if excellent questions, are the least of it, and from the history excavated by Parkes the grammarians’ chain of mistakes is clear.

It is evident from the current forms of the full-stop, colon, & question-mark, ‘. : ?’, that the value of any given mark (such as the ‘.’ all use) is *always* relative,

dependent on degrees of conjunction with other marks in the same document and its historical & geographical contexts. A ‘.’ is a full-stop & not anything else only when context insists it is precisely not a ‘,’ or a ‘:’ — for in conventional repertoires punctuation-marks (like letter-forms) work through differentiation within a limited system, and with far greater exemplary force than cats being cats because they aren’t bats, cuts, cars, or Cato. A point can function within a single text, in less than 0.5 of a sentence, as a decimal-point ; in various marks : & on its own ... but only as part of a known system.

New marks (‘; ... :—’) trade on established marks within systems that flourish or perish ; as marks do. Every literate constantly operates on that basis : all familiar with its prescribed Twentieth-Century usage can register a continuing butchery of conventions once governing the possessive apostrophe ; all using the Web or social media know an explosion of new & repurposed punctuation. Especially in highly analytical literary English, it is abundantly clear to any reader of facsimiles that punctuation in every age is a matter of convention, and to any reader of grammarians that a major cause of their muddle is a repeated clash of misconceived authoritarian prescriptions with inarticulate common-sense. If, in base 10, $2 + 2 \neq 4$, something is very wrong, and ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ can sensibly be called a rule ; but if a punctuation-mark or -space is placed where some dispute its propriety, its possibility of meaning is not therefore in doubt# There is an onus on the punctuator, if communication is desired, to use it consistently, allowing inference within the enabling set of symbols that articulate nuanced distinction (as here, that ‘#’ = ‘.’)# But even that entirely practical onus can be challenged # as by poets#

Punctuation, that is, resembles dress-sense, not mathematics, and its logic is fuzzy. However conventional it may now be in certain cultures to wear white to weddings or end sentences with full-stops, nude weddings & missing full-stops are by no means necessarily meaningless They are unconventional behaviours whose significance can only be inferred from context. Here, in prose, my

advertent games are a visual mnemonic, irritating to some ; in poems by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) & others matters are different, and the absence of a stop or the linking separation of a hyphen may articulate much ; but the fate of *The Waste Land* (1922) warns. By its centenary one might hope for a good standard essay on the layout & typography of that famously influential poem, those being its most obvious & notorious declarations of Modernism, but were you to look for one your only real prizes would be the facsimile drafts, which like most facsimiles (& poems) does not verbally articulate the textual theory it embodies, and some notes in Rainey’s annotated edition & the Ricks & McCue *Poems*.⁴¹ The deafening critical silence suggests that Eliot’s material poetics, re-animating space to draw in the page as artefact, are embarrassingly far beyond the analytical capacities of any system rooted in a binary opposition of elocutionary & syntactical ; and they are an extreme version of an universal case.

A surprising number of people know *The Waste Land* was once called ‘He do the Police in different voices’, some that the line is from *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) by Charles Dickens (1812–70), where Betty Higden says “You mightn’t think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.”.⁴² Critics have manhandled this sideways in disputes about counting Eliot’s voice/s in the poem⁴³, none I have read seeming to understand that for Eliot (as for Dickens, who read a mean newspaper) Betty’s admiration is for interpretative performance of punctuation. Eliot’s notoriously deadpan recording of *The Waste Land* (‘He barely do voices at all’)⁴⁴ harbours the same

⁴¹ THE WASTE LAND *a facsimile & transcript* OF THE ORIGINAL DRAFTS INCLUDING THE ANNOTATIONS OF EZRA POUND (ed. V. Eliot, London: Faber, 1971); *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose* (ed. Rainey, 2005; 2/e, New Haven, CT, & London: Yale UP, 2006). Bedient, *He Do the Police in Different Voices* (Chicago, IL, & London: U. of Chicago P., 1986), gets an honourable mention for unusually acute perception of ventriloquy, but notices typography only intermittently & never as a principle; Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land* (New Haven, CT, & London: Yale UP, 2005) clarifies composition; Hollis, *The Waste Land* (London: Faber, 2022) thinks about typewriters far more than layout.

⁴² *Our Mutual Friend* (2 vols, London: Chapman & Hall, 1865), 1.149 (ch. xvi).

⁴³ For an example, see <http://hedothepolice.org>; acc. 13 Nov. 2023.

⁴⁴ *The Waste Land / and Other Poems read by T. S. Eliot* (Caedmon Records TC1326, 1971). On Eliot’s recordings see Fuller’s essay above & Camlot, *Phono-poetics* (Stamford, CA: Stamford UP, 2019), pp. 137–68.

understanding of punctuation as his preparation of a text antithetical to newspapers & still a by-word for Modernism.⁴⁵ Both text & reading invite counter-/performance, but Eliot traded marks for spaces whose conventions he could not establish single-handed, and the central problem he posed via Sloppy is the ontology & epistemology of performing quotations as fragments shored against ruin. The entrenched assumption that syntactical & elocutionary modes are mutually exclusive, locked in feedback with absurd restriction to punctuation-marks of supposedly absolute value, makes it impossible to model not just Eliot's but all punctuation. So, to begin to be practical, space *must* (as this *History* shows) be added to analysis of elocutionary & syntactical functions.

The scale deployed in these pages points the way in eight levels⁴⁶ :

- (1) most basically, the punctuation of the blank page by alphasymbolic forms ;
- (2) interword-spaces, of which line-, stanza-, paragraph-, & section-breaks are intense variants ;
- (3) punctuation-marks & spaces conventionally associated with their use ;
- (4) the detail of the *mise-en-page*, with deictic punctuation (capitalisation, distinguishing faces & founts, etc.) ;
- (5) the principles of the *mise-en-page* (measure, founts, margins, leading, running-heads, catchwords, etc.) ;
- (6) the page or opening as primary unit, in MSS, broadsheets, volumes of poetry, graphic novels, coffee-table books, etc. ;
- (7) articulated sub-/sections, whether prolegomena, chapters, parts, appendices, or addenda ; &
- (8) the leaf, scroll, or codex as a physical object punctuating space and/or a distinct member of a set.

One revelation of this as an analytical tool is that because in print levels 1–4 (with some of 7) have typically been within the domain of writers, but levels 5–8 typically controlled or powerfully determined by artisanal facts & functionaries, the scale is historically sensitive. Consider the pages of a high-status Medieval codex, hand-written & illuminated, with a multi-coloured, highly articulated

⁴⁵ Eliot tolerated but didn't like radio-adaptations dramatising the poem: *Poems* (ed. McCue & Ricks), 1.572–73.

⁴⁶ It was first pub. in the 4/e of Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1977; 4/e, 1998; 5/e, rev. Habib, London: Penguin, 2014), & see Lennard, 'Mark, space, axis, function', in Bray *et al.*, eds, *Ma(r)king the Text* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 1–11.

layout including historiated capitals, marginalia, running-heads, variant scripts, & multiple levels of capitulum but only four or five punctuation-marks consistently used, often only two or three. Conversely, the stereotypically uniform pages of a cheap later-Nineteenth-Century novel, with little spatial articulation (narrow margins, poor leading, paragraph- & chapter-breaks only) or unused page-space, and no fancy imposition (all minimised by the economics of mass-editions), may deploy as many as 19 marks. Consider also how the impact of Modernism is writ large using the scale, in work by Eliot, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), & the last 40 pages of *Ulysses* (1918–20) by James Joyce (1882–1941), or in comparing, say, the punctuation Lord Tennyson (1809–92) used in *Maud* (1855) with Eliot’s in *The Waste Land*. Surrounding territory has been mapped by McGann, but his cartography was handicapped by the theoretical invisibility of punctuation.⁴⁷

It could now be extended. Certainly a critical reading of *The Waste Land* comprehending in the context of reinvigorated spatial punctuation the crowded, columnated newspaper layouts Sloppy navigated is readily imaginable. Those pesky notes of Eliot’s would be less problematical⁴⁸, readily described & articulated within the codex that in 1922 contained *The Waste Land*, and, with issues of notating & performing quotations as a focus, the nature of the material joke they embody is also in focus, as also in notorious punctuations by Laurence Sterne (1713–68) in *Tristram Shandy* (1760–67) & Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) in *Pale Fire* (1962). Eliot’s relation, at a particular techno-moment, to the paper on which he wrote & typed, the printed pages he sought to command, also snaps into clarity⁴⁹: his adaptation of dramatic monologue & its command of the page by exposing them to the typewriter & (with senses of space orientally aroused) a

⁴⁷ McGann, *Black Riders* (Princeton, NJ: PUP, 1993).

⁴⁸ Booth, *Reading The Waste Land from the Bottom Up* (NYC & Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) sensibly embraces the notes.

⁴⁹ The annotations in *Poems* (ed. Ricks & McCue) detail wr. technologies, but do not interpret critically; Rainey, *Revisiting*, investigates exhaustively.

far less commercially determined poetics of layout than Robert Browning (1812–89) would have believed possible, or in later life found acceptable in its readiness to let readers sink or swim. The scale also deals with texts in all genres, enabling links with aspects of shape-poetry that flicker in ‘The Hollow Men’ (1926) & *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (1939).

The scale reveals that conventions of articulating written syntax — in Parkes’s memorable phrase, punctuation as “a feature of the ‘pragmatics’ of the written medium”⁵⁰ — show over six or more centuries, across Europe, a technologically driven transfer of meaning from spaces to marks of punctuation.⁵¹ Humanism or something associated (the General Editors’ money is on Bembo’s semi-colon) dismantled the Ciceronian period ; its replacement, the grammatical sentence that can be seen emerging in prose by John Dryden (1631–1700) & Daniel Defoe (c.1660–1731), is at the heart of the novel (a child of the printing-press).⁵² As Humanism’s most original gift to the Enlightenment both fictional & factual sentences at first found themselves beautifully displayed in well-printed books, but after c.1820 transfer from spaces to marks accelerated with new technologies. To printers space costs what paper costs ; the bigger a print-run, the dearer each space. All books are affected, and as technologies of lighting made cramped pages legible without daylight, that is what readers increasingly got.⁵³

How exactly the advent of machine-press & stereotype technology interlocks, in English fiction with the disciplined linearity of realist Victorian novels, as in French with the *naturalisme* of Émile Zola (1840–1902), remains to be mapped, but that it does so is beyond doubt.⁵⁴ Many can testify besides that the trend

⁵⁰ Parkes, *Pause*, p. 2.

⁵¹ Cf. Saenger, *Space*, p. 52, & Moreau-Maréchal, ‘Recherches sur la ponctuation’, *Scriptorium* 22 (1968), pp. 56–66

⁵² Robinson, *The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), & see the Early-Modern Intro. in Vol. 2.

⁵³ See Williams, *The Social Life of Books* (New Haven, CT, & London: Yale UP, 2017), pp. 64–70, & Eliot, ‘Reading by Artificial Light in the Victorian Age’, in Bradley & John, eds, *Reading and the Victorians* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 15–30,

⁵⁴ The most detailed investigations are Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (Chicago, IL: U. of Chicago P., 1976) & *Victorian Fiction* (1995; rev. Houndmills & NYC: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), Dooley, *Author and*

towards hyperextended (or labyrinthine) printed sentences is sufficiently advanced in later novels by Henry James (1843–1916), as in those of Marcel Proust (1871–1922), to make both notoriously acquired tastes. In this as in other things James & Proust are exemplary, if *élite* — much later-Victorian & *belle époque* prose tends to over-extension — but with Modernism (& a mass melting-down of stereotype plates for munitions in 1914–18) the whole long-term process suffered fundamental challenge. Devalorisation of spatial punctuation & layout (approaching an extreme in Nineteenth-Century machine-press books) has for a century now been progressively reversed by a sequence of technologies in the hands of successive *avant gardes* — including Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Joyce, Eliot, E. E. cummings (1894–1962), Samuel Beckett (1906–89), Harold Pinter (1930–2008), Alasdair Gray (1934–2019), & Douglas Coupland — and latterly thrown in the air by digital democratisation of final textual control.

This punctuational view of literary & intellectual history offers many questions to ponder but poses a hard one. None of this history is hard to see, nor was the scale hard to construct ; nor should it have been wanting. The collective Western critical failure until the later-Twentieth Century to think with any real cogency about punctuation can to some degree be explained by its importance to authority & unwillingness or inability of theorist-pedagogues to bypass inherited misconceptions. Latter-day notions that its study is risible are unaccounted for.



Whatever one's taste in the literary theory of the last century, it is striking that no self-avowed semiotician seems adequately to have noticed that punctuation is a primary semiotic system coextensive with words, on which conveyance of meaning is patently dependent. The scale of recent collective inattention to an obvious subject strongly suggests that, like an unknown gas-giant blighting Newton's calculations, another agent is somewhere in the frame.

Printer in Victorian England (Charlottesville, VA, & London: UP of Virginia, 1992), esp. concerned with changes to proofing, & Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form* (Baltimore, MD, & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

Besides the New Bibliographical labelling of punctuation *tout court* as an ‘accidental’ (on which see the General Introduction above, §III), the culprit to whom all evidence points is Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). In founding linguistics as the study of theoretical *langue*, excluding practical *parole* & preferring ‘everything that may be said’ to ‘everything that has been said’, he imposed a crippling limitation that belated invention of pragmatics to study the influence of context on meaning has yet to rectify.⁵⁵ His bias was passed to Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) & the Prague Circle, whose functional analysis of communication ignored the materiality of texts in particular media, and thence to post-war Parisian literary theorists who (combining it with Marxism, psychoanalysis, & feminisms) did so much to set Humanities’ agendas during the later-Twentieth Century. Its most obvious & widespread sign is the operating assumption that texts are somehow apprehended outwith a material medium — a blindness to the books (& computers) amid which we all work sufficiently exasperating to have provoked a great deal of work on book-history. Yet why should so many evidently clever people, explicitly concerned to explain the nature & limits of meaning, have persistently ignored a co-constitutive semiotic system intimately intertwined with the one they claimed to be working on ? Even readers of Asterix (where Egyptians speak hieroglyphs, Goths blackletter⁵⁶) are expected to know ‘**STOP** that !’ & ‘Stop *that* !’ are differently inflected & context-specific.

There are honourable exceptions. Roland Barthes (1915–80) was led by logic towards the Wittgensteinian enumeration of *S/Z* (1970), Hélène Cixous to Joycean superimposition by need to self-identify as *Juifemme* (‘Jewoman’), & Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) by ludic desire to mild experiment with layout — but none, in this respect, ever attempted properly to theorise his own practice.⁵⁷ Their

⁵⁵ de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (ed. Bally & Sechehaye, Lausanne & Paris: Librairie Payot, 1916).

⁵⁶ Goscinny & Uderzo, *Asterix the Legionary* (1967; trans. Bell & Hockridge, London: Hodder, 1974), p. 16 ff..

⁵⁷ Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1970); Cixous, *‘Coming to Writing’ and Other Essays* (trans. Cornell & Jenson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991); Derrida, ‘Living On—Borderlines’, trans. Hulbert, in Bloom *et al.*,

blinkers seem doubly odd given the amenability of punctuational repertoires to description as *différance* engines, locuting through precisely cadenced sets of differentiations created by the various stops, ‘, ; : .’, tonal indicators, ‘? !’, rules, ‘- — —’, & other marks or forms of punctuation. But the purpose of such engines, disambiguation & hence definition (< *dē-finiō*, ‘to limit’) of meaning, is no part of what Derrida punningly intended by *différance*⁵⁸: a punctuation-mark depends upon other signs to be what it is (its meaning is differential) but does *not* thereby defer its meaning (the English form of Derrida’s pun adding *deference* to his fusion of *deferral* & *difference*). The function of punctuating is antithetical to the outcomes Derrida & other post-Saussurean (literary) theorists typically seek in using *différance* (as they conceive it) to deny not simply the relevance but the possibility of fixed intentional meaning.

At some level this telling desire clearly arises from more personal denials, of natal or cultural identity & the Mid-Twentieth-Century history that violently shaped the lives of all major post-war theorists. It also needs to be put in the contexts of France’s very centralised & often intolerant academic culture, & of the French Left during the *via dolorosa* of the Cold War.⁵⁹ But below these orders of explanation is a baser, more witting calculation, for to deny punctuation’s role in meaning is an obligatory corollary of using *différance* to deny intentional meaning. Conversely, to consider punctuation clearly is to see the controlled historical operation of *différance* within a punctuational repertoire, *and the consequence of its operation, the **control of différence** among words*.

Without punctuation to distinguish at an individual & articulate at a general

Deconstruction and Criticism (NYC: Seabury P., 1979), pp. 31–63. Derrida’s nearest approach to an admission may be his claim in ‘Différance’, p. 5, in *Margins of Philosophy* (trans. Bass, Chicago, IL: U. of Chicago P., 1982), pp. 1–27, that “nonphonetic signs [...] can barely tolerate the concept of the sign itself”, qtd Szendy, *Of Stigmatology* (2013; trans. Plug, NYC: Fordham UP, 2018), who adds (p. 117n.4) a strikingly hostile qtn from *Of Grammatology* (trans. Spivak, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), p. 227: “Accents are, like punctuation, an evil of writing: not only an invention of *copyists* but of copyists who are *strangers* to the language which they transcribe”.

⁵⁸ The term was first used in ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’ (1963); trans. Bass, as ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London & NYC: Routledge, 1978), p. 75.

⁵⁹ See Wood, ‘Viscounts Swapping Stories’, *LRB* 23.21 (1 Nov. 2001), pp. 23–24.

level, everything from letter-forms to constituent volumes, there would be only random *différance*, which is nothing : the snowed-out screen speckles with it & its paper analogue is an evenly grey page. Unchecked *différance* is permanent deferral of meaning : the spectre Derrida sometimes championed & came to represent in a wide academic imaginary was the death of punctuation : when grey is polarised into black & white, the whole range of punctuation & its harnessed operation of *différance* are co-extensive with writing, and escalate in complexity with levels of the scale.

At levels 2–3 the old joke about ‘the/rapists’ is a warning about the wrong kind of inter-space ; *joe said bob is a fool* is ambiguous because under-punctuated, but “*Joe*”, *said Bob*, “*is a fool*”. & *Joe said “Bob is a fool.”* no more so than ‘fool’ is polysemic ; the role of full-stops & multiple functions of ‘.’ are acknowledged in the conventional attachment of asymmetric space to a ‘.’ functioning as a full-stop ; & at levels 4–7 paragraphing, indentation, blank-lines, asterisks, & section-breaks dance a quadrille of possible articulations. Up at level 8 the best image is the 2/e of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), a cadence of 20 uniform spines standing as the outermost articulation of the single most sustained & meticulous encounter between punctuation & meaning in modern Humanities.

Punctuation exists to do what words alone cannot ; and here again at last is my epigraph, which in the way of poetry says it all in organising its own nature :

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

Famous long before Derrida’s acid pun, Eliot’s proleptic gloss on *différance* precisely apprehends *and* reports the frustration of shaping language that matters, but neither counsels despair nor embodies what it glosses. Remarking in turn the indentation, capitalisation, interword-spaces, commas, lineation, & full-stop, please read the lines again, noting exactly how Eliot did *not* write ‘wordstrainer

ackandsometimesbreakundertheburdenunderthetensionslipslideperishdecaywithi
mprecisionwillnotstayinplacewillnotstaystill’, but a specifically disambiguated &
balanced sentence that is also profoundly shaped by poetic form.

There could, for example, be an Oxford comma after “Crack” (‘words strain,
crack, and sometimes break’), but the *commata* are “Words strain, [/] Crack and
sometimes break, under the burden,”, a different sense of possible suddenness
given impetus by the line-break. It would equally make sense to read ‘break under
the burden’, but commas instead display across the next line-break a phrasal
repetition (“, under the burden, [/] Under the tension,”) with a cadence Eliot
established in part I of ‘Burnt Norton’ (“Through the first gate, [/] Into our first
world,”) & performs in his recording.⁶⁰ Just as ‘strain’, ‘crack’, & ‘break’ form a
triple differentiation to activate relevant senses of each, so ‘burden’ & ‘tension’
form a double ; “slip, slide, perish, [/] Decay” a quadruple summarising the Fall ;
and “will not stay in place, [/] Will not stay still.” another double with cadenced
phrasal repetition across a line-break. Excluding one as it imposes another
reading, this punctuation has no truck with deferral, only with making immanent,
and by using it Eliot was able in 1935 to communicate an intensely articulated
subset of his considered thoughts.

Perhaps aware of Heisenbergian uncertainty but addicted to the skull beneath
the skin & corporeally conceived periods of his beloved Jacobethans, Eliot’s pre-
emptive strike against *différance* embodies a paradoxical achievement. His poetic
career shows a systematic self- & group-education in how readers (hypocritical
or otherwise) could be drawn into unconventionally punctuated work by its
capacity to resonate more adequately with modern meaning than anything pre-
Modernist. His attraction to Anglo-Catholicism was in fair part to liturgical &
psalmodic traditions centrally concerned with older punctuational repertoires that
do not survive elsewhere, and are bound into ‘The Hollow Men’ & ‘Ash-

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot reads his *Four Quartets* (1957; Caedmon Records TC1403, 1971).

Wednesday’.⁶¹ The *Quartets*, if drawn-out in composition, have a constant five-part structure established in ‘Burnt Norton’, internal sectioning by un/numbered spaces often corresponding with shifts of verse-form and/or register. Much as Coleridge in ‘Dejection’ could honestly despair of inspiration in consummate artistry (“I see them all so excellently fair, [/] I see, not feel, how beautiful they are !”⁶²), Eliot conveys paradoxical truth by articulating it across levels of readerly attention. He may say here that “Words [...] Will not stay still.”, and in excising one sentence my epigraphy locally boosts a sense of finality ; but ‘still’ is thematic in ‘Burnt Norton’, and in §§ II & IV, closely preceding this “Will not stay still.”, Eliot notes “the still point of the turning world.”⁶³, the full-stops points that still the turning words.



The lines after my epigraph have been tempting me ever since I recalled that All Souls interview :

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The temptation was those “Shrieking voices [/] Scolding, mocking”, wearily familiar but unexpectedly perturbing from my heckler & Fellows, and later the aptness of my own laments as disconsolate chimera. But the lines make their way in, finally, because in them Eliot most openly allows iambic pentameter to sound (“The crying shadow in the funeral dance”), and so with them that its submerged

⁶¹ See Lennard, *But*, pp. 198–203.

⁶² ‘Dejection: An Ode’, ll. 37–8, in *Poetical Works* (ed. E. Coleridge, 1912; Oxford: OUP, 1969), p. 364.

⁶³ *Burnt Norton* ll. 64, 139, in *Poems*, l.181, 183.

presence in the epigraph can be most readily judged.

Verse, Eliot wrote in 1928, “whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of *punctuation*; the usual marks of punctuation themselves are differently employed”.⁶⁴ As often a semi-colon proves treacherous, the statement following that one being at best half-true (try ‘may be differently’); Eliot’s first observation, however, is superbly true, not only of verse but of any equivalently well-organised set of forms. All the internal distinctions & conjunctions punctuation achieves within Eliot’s verse are parsed within a constant play of lines & clauses, units of form & grammar, and if freely catalectic or hypermetric, often burdened with deliberately stuttered *commata*, & sometimes set aside for ME hemistichic forms⁶⁵, the heroic line never quite goes away & variously lends coherence of layout & sound, drawing on the historically magnificent punctuation of English verse to articulate Eliot’s sacred Modernist endeavour. Remove only the distinctive punctuation of poetry, line-breaks (+ companionate capitalisation), and much of what matters is lost: ‘Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still. Shrieking voices scolding, mocking, or merely chattering, always assail them. The Word in the desert is most attacked by voices of temptation, the crying shadow in the funeral dance, the loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.’ — pointedly *not* what Eliot said, and revealing the heroic line as a servitor of optical & martial resolution, and framer of hope.

Augustine would see in Eliot’s approach the shaping hand of faith. After the *Quartets* he turned to drama because in them he had imagined the relations of meaning with his experiences of common modernity & grace as fully as print media available to a non-dramatic poet allowed. His punctuation was always precise, in presence & absence, frequently innovative, & latterly, like Augustine’s

⁶⁴ Eliot, letter to *TLS* 1391, 27 Sept. 1928; *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* (8 vols, ed. Schuchard *et al.*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014–19), 3.495. See also Fuller’s essay above.

⁶⁵ Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook* (1996; 2/e, Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 164–68.

concern for punctuation as a cure of souls, as serious as the Christian's desire for honesty with God.⁶⁶ So I ask again about the laughter studying punctuation provokes ; after all these tales that hang thereby, what heads might do so too ?

Punctuation (at all levels, in all modes, in élite & popular forms) is to meaning as cartilage is to bone, bearing stress & permitting articulation. Marks, spaces, cases, & faces are co-extensive with writing in all genres, subject to historical & cultural contexts, intrinsic to professional activity, & frequently critical, in every sense, but their meaning is always relative within particular repertoires & sets of conventions. Punctuation tames & manipulates *différance*, and always had the measure of the nihilism that so frightened the academies in its Parisian cap & gown — for what would anyone have made of Derrida had he published only in *scriptio continua* ? one shudders to think, but few would ever have been involved. Like grammatical or verbal evolutions, changes in punctuation are intrinsically general, phenomena of a mass-environment, propagation in one age & subsequent survival determined by factors ranging from technologies of writing & printing to practices of teaching & professional training, degrees of religious & civil authority, & particularities of philosophical awareness. Now more than ever, lacking the constraints of codex & metal type, to plunge on without any clear understanding of critical system-components is to jeopardise the survival of intentional meaning in the digital world, as in print. But to see (and hear) the stops buck makes, if not all the *différance* in the word, more than enough to matter.

⁶⁶ Lennard, *But*, pp. 180–213.

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