

FROM RULE-BREAKING TO RULE-BREAKING: NOTES ON PUNCTUATION IN THE EARLY NOVEL AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

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RESUMEN

Durante mucho tiempo, la mayoría de los críticos han ignorado la puntuación en los textos literarios. Sin embargo, la puntuación constituye una parte esencial del proceso creativo. La manera en que cada escritor emplea los signos de puntuación dice tanto de su sensibilidad creativa como de su uso de metáforas, metonimia y de cualquier otro “trope”. En este artículo se intenta revisar cómo se empleó, en las primeras novelas británicas, el “trope of punctuation” y se pretende demostrar, además, que muchas de las reglas que hoy guían a los estudiantes de composición eran desconocidas durante el Renacimiento y los siglos XVII, XVIII y XIX. Lo mismo puede decirse de la poesía estadounidense contemporánea, en la que muchos poetas cometen “errores” (i.e., *comma splices, fragments, run-on sentences*) con fines poéticos. Este artículo trata, además, sobre el empleo de la puntuación en la antigüedad y explora el uso creativo de la puntuación, que constituye una parte integral de mucha de la literatura que leemos y valoramos.

Palabras clave: Puntuación, “trope”, antigüedad, “early novel”, poesía contemporánea.

ABSTRACT

Most literary critics have long ignored punctuation in literary texts. And yet punctuation is a vital part of the creative process. How individual writers use punctuation can tell us as much about their creative sensibilities as their use of metaphor, metonymy, or any other literary trope. This article attempts to review the use of the “trope” of punctuation in the early English novel and show that many of the rules that today guide student compositions were completely unknown throughout the Renaissance as well as the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Much the same can be said for contemporary American poetry, where poets of all shapes and sizes matter-of-factly and consciously write comma splices, fragments, and run-on sentences for poetic effect. This article reviews the use of punctuation in antiquity and then explores the rather remarkable creative use, or perhaps creative misuse, of punctuation, which makes up an integral part of so much of the literature that we read and value.

Key words: Punctuation, tropes, antiquity, early novel, contemporary poetry.

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I.

Seldom do we think of the history of punctuation. Indeed we often think of punctuation as if it were ahistorical, as if it were, say, a child without parents, a world without origin. In one of the few studies of punctuation, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, M.B. Parkes surveys the development of punctuation from antiquity down to the Renaissance. Parkes's monumental study, as thorough an analysis as one can imagine, details the rather remarkable development of punctuation through multiple languages down to the present.

It is a startling fact to know that nearly all texts in antiquity were read aloud and went unpunctuated. In antiquity, silent reading was unheard of, and punctuation, surprisingly, was the task of the reader. As Parkes states,

[In antiquity] texts were mostly read aloud. A reader on his own might murmur the sounds of the words to himself, but the ideal was a kind of expressive declamation with well modulated pronunciation, in which the text was carefully phrased (*distincta*) by means of appropriate pauses. (Parkes 1993: 9)

Parkes tells us of Augustine's wonder at finding Ambrose reading silently:

Instances of silent reading were so rare that the young Augustine was astonished when he encountered Ambrose reading without making a sound. However, the ancient perception of the written word as a record of the spoken word would ensure that a reader always heard the words of the text in his mind, 'thus it is that when a word is written it makes a sign to the eyes whereby that which pertains to the ears enters the mind.' (9)

If reading was done aloud in antiquity and texts were essentially unpunctuated, then it was up to each individual reader to insert his/her own pauses within a text. Few texts were punctuated, or to use Parkes's phrase, "pointed in Antiquity," (Parkes 1993: 68) a remarkable fact that must have made for an extraordinary reading experience. One can only imagine the inevitable arbitrariness in the marks in a text whose placement and meaning were subject to the judgment of each individual reader. Parkes reviews this remarkable process of interactive reading that would put many modern-day notions of reader-response to shame:

For most part the decision as to how to phrase a text when reading aloud—when to pause, and for how long—was left to the discretion of the informed and experienced reader. Punctuation was inserted by teachers or pupils in copies of school texts, like the late-first-century Giessen Cicero and the late-fifth-century Bembine Terence, as an ancillary apparatus of the *praelectio* (that is, before the text was read aloud as an exercise). (67)

The emphasis was on both breath and meaning: when to make the appropriate pauses and take breath, and how best literally to estimate and enhance meaning by inserting precisely such pauses. Parkes explains the matter as such:

The function of pauses in reading aloud was not simply to provide opportunities to take breath, or to emphasize particular cadences or metres, but primarily to bring out the meaning of a text. Quintilian observed that 'the virtue of correct phrasing may be a small thing, but without it delivery can have no other virtue.' (Parkes 1993: 66)

One can imagine the innumerable questions that a reader might pose to himself or herself in the reading of texts. Where does the punctuation go? How do you phrase this?

Where the pause? As one might assume, stories abound in antiquity concerning the difficulties that readers inevitably had in locating meaning via punctuation:

A second-century writer, Aulus Gellius, tells how, when asked to read in public a passage he did not know, he exclaimed 'How can I read what I do not understand? What I shall read will be confused and not properly phrased' (*indistincta*) [. . .]. In order to avoid such gross misunderstanding, some readers sought advice about punctuation as well as the emendation of texts from more learned readers. Marcus Cornelius Fronto, one of the foremost narrators of the second century and a man of philological interests, replied to a request of Volumnius Quadratus by promising him 'You shall have the works of Cicero corrected and punctuated' (*distinctos*)' (*Ciceronianos emendatos et distinctos habebis*); the context makes clear that he was marking the copies himself. (11)

It was not until the sixth century that silent reading took hold in ways that permitted it to overshadow reading aloud. According to Parkes, it was Isidore of Sevilla who made silent reading "the norm." Punctuation became "no longer merely a guide to the oral performance of the written word," but it began to be an integral part of "the written medium," which, in turn, as one might assume, helped "speed up the process of silent reading" (69-70).

This switch from reading aloud to silent reading was a crucial moment in the history of punctuation. But it was, of course, Christianity and the Catholic Church that helped increase the role of punctuation in the life of readers and writers. Parkes explains the relationship between punctuation and the Church, and public worship as such,

Since many of the faithful were unable to read for themselves, these readings in the liturgy provided the only opportunity for them to hear the Word of God. Texts were intoned where necessary in order that they might be heard by all members of an assembled congregation. Both the pastoral function of the liturgy and its decorum demanded a high standard of oral delivery from those who were officiating [. . .]. From the seventh century onwards copies of liturgical texts often contain more punctuation than those of other contemporary texts. Alcuin considered attention to liturgical texts. In addition to his 'editorial' work, he recognized that well prepared and well presented copies were essential for the proper performance of the liturgy. He wrote a treatise on orthography to ensure standardization of spelling and to reduce the amount of a variation in pronunciation, and he recognized the need for scribes to pay special attention to the punctuation of liturgical books. (35)

If the theologically correct transmission of the liturgy was important and helped in the fostering of punctuation, so too was the reading of the Bible. It was Jerome, the great Latin translator of the Bible, who, preoccupied about the transmission of biblical doctrine, introduced the importance of punctuation in regards to biblical studies. Punctuation, if misplaced or done capriciously, could easily lead to differing, if not contradictory, readings of the Bible. If a reader made unnecessary pauses, meaning could change. Augustine, for example, had a clear understanding of the inextricable relationship between meaning and punctuation, and punctuation quickly became a matter of theological rectitude:

For Augustine as well as Ausonius, appropriate pauses enhanced the general meaningfulness of the reading, but Augustine added a new dimension to the concept: this meaningfulness must be in harmony with the orthodox doctrines of the Church. Augustine's adoption of this principal is reflected in copies where the main pauses have already been indicated in accordance with received interpretations. (15)

It was nothing less than heretical to make pauses in Christian texts where no pause was meant, or where the Church did not sanction such a pause. Citing directly Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*, Parkes claims that Saint Augustine,

established an important difference between the reading of Christian texts and pagan ones, in that he was unwilling to allow the Christian reader much discretion in matters of pausing. When in doubt about where to pause the Christian reader must first consult the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), which is derived from studying the less difficult passages of scripture and from the authority of the Church. (67)

But it was precisely Church monks and monastic copyists who avoided punctuation in texts using a somewhat curious theological argument to justify its absence. Parkes cites Cassian, who argued for the absence of punctuation because it permitted a text to operate more fully on the mind and sink deeply into the theological consciousness. Punctuation would only interrupt the “continuity of meditation”:

This continuity of meditation will confer on us a double reward. The first is that while the attention is occupied in reading and the preparation of lections, it cannot possibly be taken captive by any snares of harmful thoughts; the second, that our mind is too busy to understand at the time passages that we run through over and over in an effort to memorize them, and we can see them in a clearer light afterwards when we are free from the distractions of all actions and sights and especially if we turn them over silently in our thoughts at night, or that understanding of the most hidden meanings (*sensus*), which we did not imagine we even faintly perceived when we were awake, is revealed to us while we are at rest and, as it were, sunk in the stupor of sleep. (qtd. in Parkes 1993: 18)

Parkes goes on to comment at length on this intriguing passage from Cassian and to explain why monks felt no need to punctuate texts:

By this leisurely yet carefully cultivated process of reading, the monk rapidly passed that level of attainment which had need of such elementary aids as punctuation; as a result, monks rarely inserted punctuation in manuscripts while they were reading. Indifference to the heritage of literary scholarship as such ensured that few of the manuscripts which were copied and preserved in the monasteries or similar Christian centres were fully punctuated. The marking of a pause within a *sententia* was frequently omitted to encourage the reader to discover its significance for himself, and many sixth-century manuscript scribes or readers marked only the *distinctio* to indicate the end of *sententia*. (18)

Thus only the ending of a sentence was punctuated and many monks, as Parkes notes, simply omitted punctuation, especially if they felt that punctuation interfered with the theological “continuity” of the text and the complete apprehension of its meaning.

If the early Church played a vital role in the evolution of punctuation, so too did the Renaissance. The Renaissance humanists, as we all know, discovered texts that had gone unread for years, and their search for new material was done far and wide in the hopes of expanding knowledge:

[. . .] the humanists sought to broaden their experience of the works of classical authors in order to enrich their own modes of expression. They searched for copies of the originals of texts which they had hitherto encountered only in imperfect copies, excerpts, references in other works; but in the process they also rediscovered a number of important texts which had not been read for centuries. (47)

Once texts were discovered, the traditional role of the scribe was altered by the humanist scholars:

The humanists made new demands upon the scribe who had to copy their texts. One of their principal objectives was to ensure that these texts could be read easily, in order to facilitate both the dissemination of the ideals they wished to promote and movement of the standard of laity in general [. . .] whereas

scholars like Petrarch or Polizian sought to collate or emend texts, many others (including those without the critical discrimination for such a task) merely adhered a received text for the sake of clarity, or to ensure the readers were not hindered by what they regarded as unnecessary difficulties. Punctuation of a text was part of this process of clarification, but it occupied a limbo somewhere between these two levels of copying and interpretation. (47)

Parkes goes on to explain how “this concern to discriminate between the available marks for more careful disambiguation of the texts” resulted in the evolution of “new marks which began to appear in new texts and finally passed into the general repertory” (48).

It was ultimately, however, the advent of printing that helped greatly in the “stabilization” (the term is Parkes’s) of the marks that we use today. Prior to the Renaissance, or, more specifically, prior to the advent of printing, there were no standard texts but only copies of text, and a text, as Parkes states, before the advent of printing merely “left its author and fell among the scribes” (70). Elsewhere Parkes states that printing “ensured that the same punctuation appeared on the pages of every copy of a single issue of a text” (70) and “new forms [of punctuation] passed into the general repertoire of punctuation when they came to be employed for a wider public in printed texts” (49).

According to Parkes, for example, it was a London printer Henry Denham, who, in 1560, was one of the persons responsible for the wider acceptance of the use of the semi-colon. Denham, who published Holinshed and other writers of the Renaissance, began to place this newborn child of punctuation into literary as well as historical texts.¹ Whatever war has raged down through the centuries between authors struggling to maintain editorial sovereignty over their texts against the encroachment of editors, it surely began here in the Renaissance. In some cases, early printers acted as editors who began to repunctuate texts and began to exert control over them. In other cases, printers remained aloof and merely served as conveyors of texts, refusing to repunctuate a text that fell into their hands.

Many of the early rules of punctuation were based on “elocutionary” criteria. It was rhetoric and a widely held belief in the “superiority of spoken over written language” that seems to have guided many of the early rules concerning where to pause in a sentence. Thus, punctuation, for the most part, was meant to signal pauses, and a semi-colon and colon were meant to signal the length of pauses, or to indicate, what Parkes terms “longer pauses than the commas” (91). Much the same had occurred in antiquity:

Since the second century B.C. the basic unit in a western text has been the paragraph or *capitulum*. This identifies a principal topic in a text, or point of focus in an argument or narrative. Within the paragraph constituent somatic and grammatical structure are linked to a continuum of relationships. Ancient discussions of the process of reading (written at a time when the attitude towards a text was dominated by the ideal of the orator) indicate that, when a reader was declaiming or reading aloud, he was expected to introduce pauses at the ends of larger structures and certain shorter ones within the paragraph. According to the grammarians these pauses were assigned arbitrary time values, the main feature of which is that they were graded in relation to each other. Different time values would produce a minor medial pause when the sense is incomplete, a major medial pause when the sense is complete but the independent idea or *sententia* is not, and a final pause when the idea or *sententia* is complete. (65)

We need not discuss here the use of such terms as colon, *cola*, *commata*, and period used in antiquity to divide rhetorical units of thought. Suffice it to say that rhythm was vital and that a sentence was broken down into its constituent parts based on rhythm and breath.

No doubt, after the Renaissance and thereafter, there were many manuals of punctuation—some obscure and no longer read today, and a good many that have been forever

lost—but, in spite of these manuals, there were few, if any, universally accepted rules for the punctuation of a text.² Whatever rules there were, changed with time and changed with each author's interpretation of those rules. And the emphasis from antiquity to nearly the late twentieth century has been on breath and pause, or the phrase that Parkes uses for the title of his study, *pause and effect*.

II.

But this consensus on the importance of the pause in antiquity, and thereafter, or on a specific set of rules that guided those pauses was far from established or made universal rules in the Renaissance or the post-Renaissance. Where to place a pause was surely not universally accepted or universally understood which becomes more than obvious when we look at novels published in the post-Renaissance. It is quite remarkable how often the rules of punctuation, which we today acknowledge and accept so readily, were nonexistent prior to the twentieth century. Punctuation was not formalized until the mid-to-late twentieth century, and most texts prior to the modern age, seem to have come out of some wilderness of punctuation.

As one might well assume, the relationship of punctuation to author is as complicated as there are authors in the world. Some authors were actively involved with punctuation of their texts, while others were not:

When examining the practice of individuals one must also exercise caution. Punctuation is and always has been a personal matter. Some writers, like Petrarch when copying his own works, or Charles Dickens when correcting proofs, have paid meticulous attention to punctuation. Others have felt the need for guidance as a corrective to lax or idiosyncratic usage: Jean Jacques Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Charlotte Bronte asked their respective publishers to correct the punctuation in the manuscripts. However, we may presume that an author understood his or her own texts. (Parkes 1993: 5)

A great many authors of the Renaissance and thereafter had their own personal rules for punctuation, dependent on their vision of, and adherence to, the received texts that historically governed punctuation—one thinks of Cicero, in particular, whose influence on writing and punctuation remained constant for centuries. Parkes speaks, for example, of Francis Bacon's "attitude to the functions of logic and rhetoric." Bacon regarded logic "as determining the method of transmitting knowledge, rhetoric as the means of illuminating it for the reader" (89). Parkes goes on to explain that "this restoration of a relationship between the logical and rhetorical characteristics of discourse is reflected in the punctuation of his own works" (89). And Parkes is right: Bacon's own personal relation to punctuation dictated his own personal punctuation style.

What is important, however, is the ability (or inability) to see the varying levels of intervention in a manuscript on the part of printer or, for that matter, on the part of a modern-day editor. This fact poses significant problems for any analysis of historical texts. Parkes emphasizes the difficulties when he quotes from the original manuscript of Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Pennilesse* and then compares the punctuation with that of a modern-day editor of the same text:

Having spent many yeeres in studying how to live, and liv'de a long time without mony: having tired my youth with follie, and surfetted my minde with vanitie, I began at length to looke backe to repentaunce, & addresse my endeavors to prosperitie: But all in vaine, I sate up late, and rose eraely [*sic*], contended with

the colde, and conversed with scarcitie: for all my labours turned to losse, my vulgar Muse was despised & neglected, my paines not regarded or slightly rewarded, and I my selfe (in prime of my best wit) laid open to povertie. (Parkes 1993: 88)

Here is a modern-day editor's punctuated version with modernized spelling of the passage above:

Having spent many years in studying how to live, and lived a long time without money: having tired my youth with folly, and surfeited my mind with vanity, I began at length to look back to repentance, & address my endeavors to prosperity: But all in vain, I sate up late, and rose early, contended with the cold, and conversed with scarcity: for all my labors turned to lose, my vulgar Muse was despised & neglected, my pains not regarded or slightly rewarded, and I my self (in prime of my best wit) laid open to poverty. (88)

As Parkes's two examples illustrate, the punctuation of any text becomes all the more difficult when we consider all the copyists, editors, correctors, typesetters, who, by all accounts, often punctuated or repunctuated an author's text. That many texts seem to be punctuated in such odd ways only speaks to the fact that they were originally punctuated as such or that a modern-day editor maintained a hands-off attitude towards a text.

Because we have no access to original manuscripts, and because we can only rely on editions that have been handed down to us by modern-day editors, nearly every comment or observation that we point out in regards to texts in the post-Renaissance must be made with certain caveats. We have neither the economic resources to search out the original manuscripts of the texts that we have chosen to review, nor do we have the capacity to trace the complex chain in the transmission of a text from author to publisher to the twentieth century. The texts that we have today were surely edited works—either by the author, or by an ancient editor or a modern-day editor. But yet the arbitrariness of punctuation, and the near anarchic difference from text to text in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century, makes our case in and of itself: these texts seem to come from some unknown planetary world of punctuation—orbits so widely different from our own that the text seems oddly out of shape. They come to us filled with notions vastly distinct about punctuation than ours in the late twentieth century—be it often the result of a modern-day editor (who permits what we today would consider errors to go uncorrected for the sake of literary purity or be it that the texts come to us directly via a route that has no significant truck with a modern-day editor.) And no wonder that a good many students have no clue concerning the rules of punctuation when so much of the punctuation in the great literature they read seems to be at odds with so many of the rules of punctuation that inform their writing classes.

The present rules for punctuation, as stated in most grammar and rhetoric textbooks, are easy enough to delineate: Semi-colons divide independent clauses, fragments are lacking a noun or a verb, predicates should not be separated from their subjects by a comma, independent clauses are connected by a comma when a coordinate conjunction is asked for. The basic rules are simple enough.

And yet when we turn our attention to the early novel, we find all manner of oddities of punctuation that seem out-of-sync with so many of our present day standards for punctuation. In *Rasselas*, Dr. Johnson, for example, writes the following sentence:

Here Imlac entered, and interrupted them. (Henderson 1967: 57)

In 1759, Dr. Johnson seems to have no problem placing a comma between compound predicates. If this sentence had been written today, such a comma would violate the rule of not separating the two parts of a compound predicate with a comma. That Dr. Johnson does so within such a short sentence only aggravates the problem by today's standards and stylistic norms.

If Johnson was quick to insert such pauses in the eighteenth century, as he does above, then so too was Dickens in the nineteenth century. Here is Dickens, writing in *David Copperfield*:

I left the scarcely-tasted breakfast, and went and rested my head at another table in the corner of the little room, which Minnie hastily cleared, lest I should spot the mourning that was lying there with my tears. (Dickens n.d.:134)

Like Dr. Johnson, Dickens, who, according to Parkes, meticulously edited his own works and oversaw the punctuation of his novels, inserts above a comma between compound predicates. Here is Dickens again in *David Copperfield*,

The work being now finished, the two girls whose names I had not heard brushed the shreds and threads from the dresses, and went into the shop to put that to rights, and wait for customers. (135)

Dickens uses the comma to separate the two verbs “brushed” and “went.” This sentence might well be acceptable under the rules governing punctuation today, given that we have quite a distance to bridge between the two verbs—the sentence is long and intricate with intervening complements. Moreover, just prior to the second verb, Dickens has conjoined two nouns (“shreds” and “threads”), which might justify the comma before the second predicate. But, for a good many other readers, the insertion of the comma between the two predicates, “brushed” and “went,” is totally unnecessary.

Elsewhere, Jane Austin in *Pride and Prejudice* writes the following sentence:

Mr. Bennet was perfectly satisfied; and quitted the house under the delightful persuasion that, allowing for the necessary preparations of settlements, new carriages and wedding clothes, she should undoubtedly see her daughter settled at Netherfield, in the course of three or four months. (Austin 1966: 72)

Here, the two predicates are not separated by a comma but by a far more egregious punctuation mark—a semi-colon separates the twin elements of the compound predicate. The fact that Austin uses a semi-colon in this position makes the second part of the predicate a fragment, which is unacceptable by today's standards of punctuation.

Still another of the most salient violations of contemporary rules of punctuation in the early novel is the separation of subject and its corresponding predicate by means of a comma. In *Practical English Handbook*, Watkins and Dillingham emphatically warn students not to make such a separation: “Do not use a comma to separate subject and verb” (Watkins and Dillingham 1986: 134). Here are two examples from different authors of the violation of this rule, one from Nashe's *Unfortunate Travelor*, and the other from Stern's *Tristram Shandy*:

This sweating sickness, was a disease that a man then might catch and never go to a hothouse. (Henderson 1967: 281)

What rendered the account of this affair the more intricate to my uncle Toby, was this, —that in the attack of the counterscarp [. . .]. (Sterne n.d.: 71)

It should be noted that to separate a subject from its predicate is near heresy in contemporary writing. It is seldom seen and never tolerated. And yet in the novels above, we find many examples where subject and predicate are separated by such a comma. The reason for such an insertion is lost on us. Even if the comma was inserted to indicate a potential pause, which it no doubt was, it is oddly out of place. Who would write, as Nash does, *The sweating sickness, was a disease that a man* [. . .]? Does the taking of breath here make sense? From the standpoint of the contemporary rules of punctuation, it goes without saying that the comma fails to offer us any meaningful pause.

Another misused comma is the repeated use of a comma to separate a verbal from its corresponding complement. Note below Dickens, writing again in *David Copperfield*:

Another cause of our being sometimes apart was, that I had naturally an interest in going over the Blunderstone, and revisiting the all familiar scene of my childhood; while Steerforth, after being there once, had naturally no great interest in going there again. (Dickens n.d.: 335)

In the sentence above, Dickens separates the linking verb from its corresponding nominal subject complement, and the sentence seems to collapse under the weight of this pause. For whatever reason, Dickens opts to place the comma after the linking verb. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe writes a sentence that contains a similar apparent punctuation fault:

My very heart sunk within me when I thought, that at one blast all my powder might be destroyed, on which, not my defence [sic] only, but the providing me food, as I thought, depended entirely. (Defoe 1968: 72)

Defoe above sets off with a comma the nominal direct object from the corresponding transitive verb, which today would be unheard of and construed as a punctuation fault. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen does much the same:

He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger. (Austen 1966: 35)

Austen inserts a comma between the transitive verb and its corresponding nominal direct object. The sentence would have been better punctuated had she placed the comma after the subordinating conjunction. Hence the sentence should read, by our standards today, “He really believed that, were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger [...]” Here is another example from Jane Austen:

Elizabeth related to Jane the next day, what had passed between Mr. Wickham and herself. (59)

And still another from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*:

You may remember, that a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas’s library. (Shelley 1971: 8)

In all the examples above, a comma has been used to separate a transitive verbal from its corresponding nominal direct object, which would be unheard of by today's standards of punctuation. Unless there is a parenthetical expression inserted between the transitive verbal and its complement, as is found in the corrected sentence of Jane Austin above, there should never be a separation between those two elements in a transitive sentence.

If the use of the comma to separate a verbal from its corresponding complement is often found in the early novel, then the misuse, by contemporary standards, of the semi-colon was even more widely done. The rule for the use of the semi-colon today is as clear as any of the previously cited rules: Both sides of the semi-colon, with only one exception, a long list with internal punctuation, must be complete sentences or independent clauses. That is standard regulatory fare for the semi-colon in the late twentieth century. But, oddly enough, the beginnings of the novel are replete with idiosyncratic and eccentric, if not exotic, uses of the semi-colon. Here is Thomas Stern in *Tristram Shandy*:

When I reflect, Brother Toby, upon Man; and take a view of that dark side of him which represents his life as open to so many causes of trouble— [. . .]. (Stern n.d.: 248)

The two predicates in the relative clause are separated by semi-colons. The entire example is nothing more than an introductory adverbial clause. Here Stern bifurcates the clause with the use of the semi-colon, which, to any modern reader, would violate the rules governing the semi-colon. Here is another, more flagrant example of the violation of the rule for the semi-colon from William Beckford's novel *Vathek*:

In the first of these were tables continually covered with the most exquisite dainties; which were supplied by both night and day, according to their constant consumption; whilst the most delicious wines and choicest cordials flowed forth from a hundred fountains that were never exhausted. (Henderson 1967: 195)

With the use of two semi-colons, Beckford sets off a nonrestrictive adjectival relative clause from its antecedent, which makes the dependent clause a fragment and, in turn, makes the succeeding adverbial dependent clause also a fragment.

If we cross the ocean, we hear Mark Twain abusing the semi-colon in America:

'Well, it is lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.' (Twain 1977: 175)

Twain converts an adverbial dependent clause at the end of a sentence into a fragment by the interpolation of the semicolon after the main clause. This semi-colon, like in the previous examples, is stunningly out-of-place. Twain might well have placed the semi-colon here for the sake of emphasizing what he perceived to be a needed pause in the spoken word, but surely the ensuing fragment after the semi-colon seems odd to the eyes of a contemporary reader.

If Twain uses fragments after or before a semi-colon, so too does Jane Austin. Here we have Austin writing a remarkably punctuated sentence in *Pride and Prejudice*:

The housekeeper came; a respectable looking elderly woman, much less fine, and more civil, than she had any notion of finding her. (Austin 1966: 167)

Austin separates a nominal appositive from its referent with a semicolon instead of the traditional twentieth century use of the comma and, hence, in the example above, the far side of the semi-colon is nothing more than a fragment. That neither she nor an editor seemed to be preoccupied with correcting this error suggests just to what extent this contemporary error was pervasive in the nineteenth century. Here is Austin again in *Pride and Prejudice*:

They were of a respectable family, in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than their brother's fortune, and their own had been acquired by trade. (9)

The misuse of the semi-colon, and consequent fragment, quaint as it is, would be challenged, rightly or wrongly, by even the laxest of rhetoric teachers today.

We could go on and on citing examples of this misuse, by today's standards, of the semi-colon.³ Here, for example, is Samuel Richardson in *Clarissa*, an example that we have selected almost at random:

As to your arguments; I hope you will believe me, when I assure you, as I now do, that your opinion, and your reasoning, have, and will always have, great and deserved weight with me: and that I respect you still more than I did, if possible, for your expostulations in support of my cousin's pious injunctions to me. (Richardson 1950: 761)

Be it because of Richardson himself or someone else, the odd punctuation of this sentence—the placement of the semi-colon after an introductory adverbial phrase—was not done capriciously or arbitrarily. That Richardson, or an editor, had a reason, however obscure, for why they punctuated this sentence as such seems obvious. That the semi-colon seems to have had few, if any, objective and universally accepted rules governing its use also seems obvious. No rule could have been fashioned to justify this semi-colon either then or now except perhaps the belief that the semi-colon represents a more powerful pause than the comma, or in other words that a particular lengthy pause, a long breath needs to be taken here by the reader.

It would not be enough for us merely to cite example after example of punctuation that violates contemporary standards. That would be an interesting exercise but of little consequence. But is it correct to assume that these texts were in violation of standards in their own time? And why were they punctuated as such? Would it be wrong, or far-fetched, to assume that Richardson, Dr. Johnson or Dickens, or, for that matter, any other author that we have cited above, felt that they were punctuating their texts improperly? These, and other authors, must have felt that whatever punctuation was there was correct. (Would any author mispunctuate a text on purpose?) These texts were sent out into the world fully sanctioned by their authors or by an editor or a printer, we assume—an assumption that makes us wonder what rules or sensibilities governed their punctuation.

The difference between punctuation in the past and punctuation today seems to be rooted in the received rules for punctuation that, say, someone like Dr. Johnson, a Latinist and scholar, poet and critic, must have felt guided his choice of marks in the eighteenth century. That we know little about this subject or that few persons, other than Parkes, seem to be interested in studying the ambiance in which punctuation has occurred down through the years is in itself intriguing. As mentioned, these texts were no doubt viewed both by author and

reader alike as correctly punctuated, and, only we, today, view them as being mispunctuated—from the vantage point of our modern-day rules of punctuation.

III.

Before we begin to think of punctuation in twentieth century contemporary poetry, it is edifying first to listen to Parkes discuss Virginia Woolf, one of the few examples of a contemporary author that he cites in his book. Here is the passage that Parkes selects from *Mrs. Dalloway*:

And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach. What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and rocks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, ‘Musing among the vegetables?’—was that it?—‘I prefer men to cauliflowers’—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when he had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife; his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!— a few sayings like this about cabbages. (Parkes 1993: 95)

And here is Parkes’s discussion of that passage:

The paragraph provides boundaries within which the reader is encouraged to accept a variety of different linguistic or stylistic features as being mimetic of that particular moment in time. Within those limits the novelist adopts both direct and free indirect speech [. . .] The punctuation within the paragraph reinforces the impression created by linguistic features. The exclamation marks as well as the absence of verbs at the beginning—‘What a lark!’ ‘What a plunge!’—alert the reader to the fact that direct speech (or rather ‘direct thought’) is being represented, and another—‘how strange it was’—appears near the end. The semicolons after ‘like the flap of a wave; the kiss of the wave;’ represent hesitations in the monologue, but the unusual pauses also arrest the attention of readers, thus encouraging them to relate back to the image of ‘children on a beach’ at the beginning, and emphasizing the continuum in this representation of consciousness. (Parkes 1993: 95)

Hesitations in the monologue? The usual pauses arrest the attention of the readers? These claims by Parkes might well be true, but are there no rules for the semi-colon other than the vagaries of style and breath? And are they vagaries? Parkes has us think that the injunctions of pause and effect passed down from antiquity seem to hold sway even over someone such as Virginia Woolf. There is no discussion here, by Parkes, of the correctness or appropriateness of these semi-colons from, say, a compositional or grammatical point of view. Parkes speaks about the semi-colons as if this passage by Woolf had been written in antiquity where pauses (and all punctuation for purposes of declamation) meant taking breath. As in the case cited above of Richardson in *Clarissa*, Virginia Woolf would not have considered this sentence from *Mrs. Dalloway* mispunctuated. Indeed, she no doubt took great pride in the correctness of her punctuation, and her choices of punctuation are willful.

To be sure, if Virginia Woolf’s paragraph had fallen into the hands of a modern-day editor, it would have come to us punctuated, rightly or wrongly, in wildly different manner.

Today, punctuation has been, for lack of a better term, smoothed out. It has been made universal through the insistence of rhetoric professors and copy editors. The rules are published in as many places as there are manuals of style, which range from the *Manual of Style* of the *New York Times* to that of the *Random House Reader*. And the formalization of rules based on grammar, not breath or rhythm or pauses, has had a monumental impact on writing today, especially in the twentieth century novel.⁴

But today's rules refer to grammar and the structural limitations that we impose on sentences which, like buildings, must follow the rules established by their builders, or they will surely collapse. Parkes speaks of *deictic* and *equiparative* punctuation, and if by these terms he means that in the history of punctuation there was a shift in emphasis from oratory to grammar, then he is surely correct (Parkes 1993: 70). The emphasis today on grammar—as a defining and determinate force in the placement of commas and semi-colons—has universalized both the reading public's expectations for what a text should look like (at least in terms of punctuation) as well as to enjoin writers to mark a text in conformity with the rules of contemporary punctuation.⁵

Whether this trend to standardize punctuation has been salutary for writing is an altogether different question, and one that goes beyond the scope of this modest essay. The process of universalization of punctuation was not done until the twentieth century, and that explains the wide array of oddly punctuated texts in the early novel. That we today might consider these texts mispunctuated speaks to our arrogance in imposing our rules on the past, and that writers in the past viewed their punctuation correctly speaks to the absence of a uniform set of rules. No one wants to quibble with Dickens or Dr. Johnson, much less repunctuate their texts by contemporary standards—that few persons even mention the disparities in punctuation, on the other hand, is a point of some interest.

What is remarkable, moreover, to our minds, is how this process seems to have come full circle in contemporary poetry, which seems to permit the breaking of rules far more than in other arenas of writing, i.e., the novel or non-fiction. If in the past the early novel was filled with what we are calling unintentional rule-breaking (there were no rules, in the contemporary sense of the word, to break!), then it has come back to haunt American poetry, where the violation, willful or otherwise, is so rampant that one questions if anyone cares at all about the rules of punctuation in poetry.

One need not go very far to see a host of contemporary poets using fragments in poetry, fragments that seem so out of place that one wonders if they were written by poets (who have never been overly concerned with the more polite rules that govern composition) who, as poets are prone to do, disregard rules without any qualms or compunction. Here is James Merrill writing a fragment for poetic effect in *The Fire Screen*:

A gray maidservant lets me in
To Mrs. Livingston's box. It's already begun!
The box is full of grownups. She sits me down
Beside her. Meanwhile a ravishing din

Swells from below—Scene One
Of *Das Rheingold*. The entire proscenium
Is covered with a rippling azure scrim.
The three sopranos dart hither and you

On invisible strings. Cold lights
 Cling to bare arms, fair tresses. Flat
 And natural aglitter like paillettes
 Upon the great green sonorous depths float
 Until with pulsing wealth the house is filled,
 No one belonging, everybody thrilled.
 (Merrill 47)

The fragment here is not the typical two-word fragment, or what grammarians call an independent grammatical expression, that one finds in so much of contemporary poetry—the casual, intentional exclamation or insertion that is patently intentional and that serves the purpose of something like end punctuation but in words. Here, the fragment (“Flat / And natural aglitter like paillettes / Upon the great sonorous depths float [...]”) lacks a subject, and the verb “float” serves as the verb for an adjectival phrase which, for all intents and purposes, is nothing more than a dangling modifier. What is Merrill doing here? Is this intentional? And if so, for what end? To what purpose?

In Merrill’s poem “Ouzo for Robin,” the opening entire stanza is a fragment:

Dread of an impending umpteenth
 Birthday thinning blood to water, clear
 Spirits to this opal-tinted white—
 Uncle, this confusion unto death.
 (Merrill 18)

Effective? Or is this a form of cheating? A form of making the poem look more syntactically, if not thematically, complex—one of the standard virtues of twentieth-century poetry. Or is Merrill’s use of the fragment for the purpose of using punctuation to maintain a consistent meter or even line length? Is this the modern-day equivalent of Alexander Pope’s acrobatic syntax in order to get the rime right? Or is this a form of making a poem wonderfully mysterious and evocative in ways that only a poet might conceive—be it intentional or intuitive? Indeed, the stanza seems far more complex, both in thought and form, than if it had been written, say, using standard English syntax. And once Merrill sets the tone of the poem with this fragment—which no doubt mirrors a fragmentary thought process—a cascade of more fragments is inevitable. Here is the rest of the poem:

Last night’s hurled glass. On the wall a mark
 Explored by sunlight inching blindly
 Forth from the tavern onto tree-tarred
 Heights of gild and moleskin, now gone dark

Thorn needle launched in spinning groves’ loud
 Black. A salt spray, a drenching music!
 Each dance done, wet hawk like features cling
 To one more tumblerful of numb cloud.

Joy as part of dread, rancor as part.
 Lamplight swaying rafters. Later, stars.
 Case presented, point by brilliant point,
 Against the uncounselable heart.

Ground trampled hard. Again. The treasure
 Buried. Rancor. Joy. Tonight's blank grin.
 Threshold where the woken cherub shrieks
 To stop it, stamping with displeasure.
 (Merrill 18)

In the remaining four stanzas, there are technically nine more fragments in a relatively short poem. And one could easily argue that the tumbling cascading syntax is made far more evocative and imitative through the odd punctuation; indeed, the engine of the poem, the little motor that scoots the poem along, seems to be done not by word order or diction but odd syntax coupled with odd punctuation. It is the use of the fragments, we might add, that also gives the poem an unusually exotic form—and makes for the odd downhill slide that, for anyone accustomed to the smooth highway, seems bumpy indeed. At times, Merrill can be coy and fanciful and yet so much of that coyness seems rooted in a great deal of pedestrian rule-breaking of the norms of punctuation. Nine fragments.

Parkes argues that the function of punctuation is “to resolve structural uncertainties in text, and to signal nuances of semantic significance which might otherwise not be conveyed at all, or would at best be much more difficult for a reader to figure out” (Parkes 1993: 1). While this definition might well be true, and no doubt has great merit, the matter becomes all the more obscure in poetry. If these fragments are intentional, what rules guided Merrill to make his choices? When use the fragment? When not? When is it effective and what purpose, did he *qua* poet, perceive being fulfilled in the poem through the dismantling of traditional punctuation? Here is another example from Merrill, the first page of a remarkable poem “To My Greek”:

Dear nut,
 Uncrackable by nuance or debate,
 Eat with your fingers, wear your bloomers to bed,

 Under my skin stay nude. Let past and future

 Perish upon our lips, ocean inherit
 Those paper millions. Let there be no work
 For justice, grief, convention; *you* be convention—
 Goods, bads, kaló-kaló, cockatoo-raucous.

 Coastline of white printless coves

 Already strewn with offbeat echolalia,
 Forbidden Salt Kiss Wardrobe Foot Cloud Peach
 —Name it, my chin drops sugar. Radiant dumbbell, each

 Noon's menus and small talk leave you

 Likelier, each sunset yawned away,
 Hair in eyes, head bent above the strummed
 Lexicon, gets by heart about to fail
 This or that novel mode of being together

 Without conjunctions. Still

I fear for us. Nights fall
 We toss though blindly, drenched in her appraising
 Glare, the sibyl I turn to

When all else fails me, when you do—
 (Merrill 19)

Comma splices, fragments, odd capitalization, and poetic spacing between words—an exquisite array of (mis) punctuation that surely helps the poem's rolling sense of continuity, if not its willful nuttiness. The numerous comma splices (*Lexicon*, gets by heart about to fail / This or that novel mode of being together / Without conjunctions") seem wonderfully evocative and unusual and playful. Rules ("without conjunctions") were meant to be broken, and they surely have been hammered here into golden dust to sprinkle about with all the intent of adorning a wondrous walkway.

Elsewhere, however, Merrill also seems not to be encumbered by the rules that govern the semi-colon. In his poem "The Opera Company," no amount of pretty talk can justify the use of the semi-colon in these lines:

The impressario
 Consigned to the pit

Energy, mass. He was prouder
 Of effects that called for

The voice like a green branch
 Killed in gales,

The fat, scaled voice afflicker
 From a cleft, the soaring,

Glancing fountain-voice, the voice
 Of stone that sank;

This afternoon's effulgence,
 Last night's crystallizations.

(Merrill 43)

Surely the colon is asked for here, and its use would be far more suggestive and evocative of Merrill's intent: to highlight and emphasize "this afternoon's effulgence, / Last night's crystallizations." The semi-colon fails to do so. And yet Merrill's use of the semi-colon is not that unrepresentative of the use of the semi-colon in poetry, which recalls its pre-twentieth century use: No rules, no holds barred; everything is permitted. Nowhere in writing, that is, professional writing, is the semi-colon more exotically used than in poetry, and its use seems to have neither rime nor reason other than arbitrariness or the mere personal standards, private and unknown, of each individual poet.

Like Merrill above, here is an example of Denise Levertov's use of the semi-colon from her poem "The Malice of Innocence," which finds no justification other than those conjured in the secret sensibilities of the poet:

Death and paint dominate this world, for though
 many are cured, they leave still weak,

still tremulous, still knowing mortality
 has whispered to them; have seen in the folding
 of white bedspreads according to rule

the starched pleats of a shroud.

(qtd. in Berg 1976: 181)

Let us be clear. As we mentioned earlier, we are not suggesting that this poem be “correctly” punctuated; we are merely pointing out a rather interesting fact: that in much of contemporary poetry⁶ punctuation seems to have no particular uniformity and perhaps rightly so. Poetry is poetry, and the concept of uniformity in the twentieth century is as foreign to many poets as snow is to the tropics. And yet it seems that little commentary has been spent on this curious tendency: that one needs almost to restructure the rules of punctuation with each individual poet. At times, this absence of poetic punctuation makes for glorious effects. Here is a completely unpunctuated poem—a not so unusual example in contemporary poetry.⁷ In Philip Levin’s poem “War” from his collection *1933*, the average reader would barely notice that there is no punctuation at all—except for one lone comma. Here is the first part of Levin’s two-part poem:

At noon my sister
 comes home in cab
 she stops on the landing
 embracing a sack
 of groceries and looks back
 she’s lost her new stockings

and her black gloves
 somewhere she’s
 been awake for days
 she fumbles in her purse
 feeling the dark wads
 of money

Before the sink
 she cries in the half light
 shaking out the yellow chips
 sinking her hands
 slowly in water
 twisting and untwisting
 the two slips
 she stares out
 the bathroom window
 the ore boats dark
 against the Canadian shore

Later the radio argues
 and she falls asleep
 on the sofa
 the kettle steams and steams
 the windows go black
 she dreams her husband
 is home, his fists burned red

he wants his children
and will have them
she wakens believing
her life is over

She tells herself
she will sleep again
and waken with another man
in another life
she tells herself
this war will end
when she can
no longer stand it
the way the rain ends
when a jar
over flowers on the sill
she tells herself
she must be strong
so her mother
will kiss her
so the two slips will dry
(Levin 1976: 23-4)

There is only one comma here in fifty lines of poetry and no end punctuation either at the end of the poem or between stanzas. The second part of the poem (not printed here) is essentially the same but with a few more commas (3) interspersed here and there. And this rhetorical strategy—and it is a strategy—works wonderfully in Levin’s poem. So much of contemporary poetry is unpunctuated, and line breaks serve unobtrusively to form units. Indeed, it seems as if it is an either/or proposition. Either there is punctuation or none at all—very few poems seem to harbor any gray area in this respect. It is almost as if a poet, once he/she sets a pattern in motion, must continue with that same pattern or the same attitude towards punctuation throughout the poem or throughout their collection, as the case might be. Here is a typical poem from W.S. Merwin’s *The Rain in the Trees*:

Sitting over words
Very late I have heard a kind of whispered sighing
Not far
Like a night wind in pines or like the sea in the dark
The echo of everything that has ever
Been spoken
Still spinning its one syllable
Between the earth and silence.
(Merwin 1998: 44)

Merwin has, in his later poetry (compare the poems from his first four collections of poetry), abandoned punctuation altogether. He treats punctuation as if it almost were cumbersome baggage which, once jettisoned, makes for efficient travel. And we need not sound petty here.

We are not asking Faulkner to punctuate *The Sound and the Fury* or Joyce to punctuate Molly’s soliloquy in *Ulysses*. What interests us is to what extent punctuation has become a form of making the poetic more poetic, making punctuation into one more creative choice that can bring creative dissonance or harmony to a text. To be sure, there is something

wondrous in this mispunctuation. Its effect is to spawn one more trope in the poetic arsenal—what we shall call the trope of punctuation.

Throughout his remarkable collection, *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, Yusef Komunyakaa consistently writes fragments that assist on some level his poetic efforts. Here is one such poem “Ides of March”:

The wind rallies all day
With fists on doors & windows,
As St. Vitus’ dance ascends
The turnstile of budding branches

Till a smoke bloom falls.
An elf’s piñata on the bottom
Doorstep. Which oak rafter
Did this wasp next cling to?

The third, the fourth? I wait
For wind to nudge a second one
Down, for it to skedaddle
For a moment wedged into eaves.

Like a warning or curse throbbing
With sockets of remembered fire,
For a boy’s red-tailed kite
To break free from the power line.
(Komunyakaa 2000: 30)

The fragment in the second sentence is barely noticeable—an appositive which, for unknown reasons, is made into a sentence. Is there any poetic justification for such a sentence? And why the fragment and not the comma? Small matters, indeed. Here is another poem “Slime Moulds” from Komunyakaa, where the use of the fragment, as a trope, is far more interesting:

They’re here. Among blades
Of grass, like divided cells.
Between plant & animal. Good
For nothing. In a rainstorm, sores

Glom together. Yellow-white
Pieces of a puzzle. Unable to be
Seen till united. Something
Left over from a world before—

Beyond modern reason. Primeval
Fingers reduced & multiplied
A hundredfold, the most basic
Love & need shaped them into a belief

System. The color of scrambled eggs.
Good for something we never thought
About, these pets of aliens crawl up
The Judas trees in bloom.
(Komunyakaa 2000: 11)

Here the fragments seem wonderfully evocative, and they are clearly not only intentional but understandable as poetic tropes.

If fragments are common in contemporary poetry, as we have seen, then surely the elliptical use of “and” (and the resultant comma splice) has also long been a staple of contemporary poetry. Here, for example, is Galway Kinnell, writing in the *Book of Nightmares*:

The black
 Wood reddens, the death-watches inside
 Begin running out of time. I can see
 The dead, crossed limbs
 Longing again for the universe, I can hear
 In the wet wood the snap
 And re-snap of the same embrace being torn.
 (Kinnell 1971: 3)

Nothing wrong here. Kinnell’s comma splice is less a comma splice than an elliptical “and.” Kinnell is simply suppressing the “ands” and running sentences into each other. Kinnell seems to be a master at precisely this type of suppression:

Somewhere out ahead of me
 a black bear sits alone
 on his hillside, nodding from side
 to side. He sniffs
 the blossom-smells, the rained earth,
 finally he gets up,
 eats a few flowers, trudges away,
 his fur glistening
 in the rain.
 (4)

Below is still another example from the same introductory poem from the *Book of Nightmares*:

A round-
 cheeked girlchild comes awake
 in her crib. The green

 swaddlings tear open,
 a filament or vestment
 tears, the blue
 flower opens.
 (5)

The suppression of the coordinate conjunction is common in poetry. Listen to Philip Levin in “How Much Earth”:

How much earth.
 The great ice fields slip
 and the broken veins of an eye
 startle under light, a hand is planted
 and the grave blooms upward

in sunlight and walks the road.
(qtd. in Berg 1976: 200)

Why do Kinnell and Levin suppress the “and” in the previous examples? Perhaps they do so for reasons of meter (here in Levin’s poem for the sake of the avoidance of the anapest in essentially iambic line with a truncated opening foot). Common enough in contemporary poetry. Here is a more complex example from Levin’s collection *1933*, from a poem titled “Grandmother in Heaven”:

Darkness gathering in the branches
of the elm, the car lights gone home,

someone’s beautiful Polish daughter
with a worn basket of spotted eggs,

an elbow of cabbage, carrots, leaves,
chicken claws scratching the air,

she comes up the cracked walk to the stairway
of shadows and lost dolls and lost breath.

Beautiful Polish daughter with hands
as round and white as buns, daughter

of no lights in the kitchen, no one sits
on the sofa, no one dreams in the tub,

she in her empty room in heaven
unpacking the basket piece by piece

on the silent, enameled table
with a little word for each, a curse

for the bad back and the black radish
and three quick spits for the pot.

(Levin 1976: 5)

And what a remarkable poem! Levin uses what we can only term the enjambment not of lines but punctuation and sentences: sentences rammed into each other, trains striking trains, on the same track, with all the softness of roses striking the ground. What wonder! And how much of the magic, we wonder, is attributable to the punctuation? How mundane a suggestion. And yet how can we speak of the punctuation here? How can we begin to describe what is going on with both the grammar and syntax, with individual lines, if we were not able to discuss the punctuation—a topic so mundane and pedestrian that a good many critics seldom seem to be even remotely interested in it? To be sure, poetry is more than punctuation and yet poets often violate the unspeakable: the very same rules that are so adamantly taught to students in composition courses around the world.

In the end, we know little about why so many early novels were punctuated as they were; whatever rules existed in the past seem to have been often individual rules. And it seems the same is occurring today in poetry. Poets, willful as they are, seem to violate rules of punctuation in ways that would not be permitted anywhere else. Does anyone else sense this

tension between compositional guidelines and poetic texts? That so much of poetry ignores these guidelines might well signal changes in the language. Are our rules of punctuation today as fluid as they were in the past? Will these rules undergo the same pressure to change as the language itself, say, not unlike a word that loses currency and falls by the literary wayside? Will we view today's semi-colon in the same way two hundred years from now? What makes for changes in punctuation, and what cultural and historical forces will bring about such changes? That our semi-colon is far more resilient seems to be self-evident, but who can say and how would such changes make themselves known? In poetry? Through usage?

Notes

1. We all know what principle marks we use today to delineate meaning in a text: the comma, the semi-colon, the period, the colon, the asterisk, the exclamation point, and the question mark. The rules that govern these marks were formalized in the twentieth century, and they govern most, if not all, writing from high school English to most professional writers. That each particular mark has its own history would surprise many composition teachers; each mark was introduced at different times and each has its own historical development and background. Thus, for example, the semi-colon, in 1494, made its "very public appearance in the humanist circle surrounding Aldus Manutius the Elder" (Parkes 1993: 49). It came into being as a combination of the colon and the comma, "deriving the high point from the one and the semi-circle [the comma] from the other" (49).
2. Parkes cites the growth of grammar and the punctuation in the eighteenth century, much of it coming under the influence of John Locke: "Numerous prescriptive grammars of the English language were produced and inevitably in such a context the role of punctuation came under closer security: it was felt increasingly that a consensus should be observed in its application" (Parkes 1993: 91).
3. It is remarkable that one of the most flagrant errors in English is the comma splice, and yet we find few instances of this error in the early novel. Is it because modern-day editors have inserted periods where originally there were commas? Here, however, is a comma splice from Dickens, an error that all freshmen are exhorted to avoid at all costs:

I could scarcely lay claim to the name, I was so disturbed by the conviction that the letter came from Agnes.
(Dickens n.d.: 383)

4. If one picks up nearly any novel of a late-twentieth century author, Updike or Gordimer, Gass or Barth, what one finds is the remarkable uniformity in punctuation. It goes without saying that most contemporary punctuation is done by the novelists themselves or by editors who take a manuscript and, with varying degree of influence, mark it up and repunctuate it or, at least, at the very minimum, correct the more egregious errors that might well violate the sensibilities of contemporary readers. That most novelists know the rules of punctuation also goes without saying, but that so much of modern novels look alike in regards to punctuation suggests that someone has paved this road, taken out the bumps and inclines, transposed once grainy streets into smooth paved highways.
5. It should be noted that rules in regards to punctuation today, as in antiquity, also imply a need for pauses. We are, for example, instructed to place a comma after introductory clauses, but not necessarily after prepositional phrases. But the rules for comma, in regards to comma splices, run-on sentences and semi-colons, in regards to fragments, are not arbitrary but grammatical, and they have nothing to do with pauses *per se*. One would be hard pressed to find any composition teacher discussing these rules today in classrooms in light of a theory of pauses. It is grammar that is at issue here.
6. We are not speaking about the wildly punctuated poetry of, say, an Allen Ginsberg (commas generally used only to slow the headlong pace) or a Michael Palmer (no punctuation at all other than a few periods

here and there) or any other such poetry, but we refer to poetry that, at least, on some level, is interested in punctuation—an interest which, of course, doesn't make it any more or less poetic than Ginsberg or Palmer's poetry.

7. We are not interested here in discussing just how such poems work—punctuation seems to be done through line breaks as well as stanza breaks that indicate pauses for the reader, both grammatical and rhetorical. The absence of punctuation is common enough in contemporary North American poetry, and no one, for example, is more expert in the writing of a poem, absent punctuation, than W.S. Merwin. Here is one such example—a complete poem “Do Not Die” from Merwin's *The Carrier of Ladders*:

In each world they may put us
farther apart
do not die
as this world is made I might
live forever

And here is a portion of a poem from Susan Howe, whose poetry resists both meaning and punctuation:

Shouting an offering
Fleet messengers falter
Obedient children elder and ever
Lawless center
Scaffold places to sweep
Unfocused future
Migratory path to massacre
Sharpshooters in history's apple-dark.

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