

The Adelphi

VOL. I. NO. 11.

APRIL, 1924

ABOUT PUNCTUATION

By Dorothy Richardson

ONLY to patient reading will come forth the charm concealed in ancient manuscripts. Deep interest there must be, or sheer necessity, to keep eye and brain at their task of scanning a text that moves along unbroken, save by an occasional full-stop. But the reader who persists finds presently that his task is growing easier. He is winning familiarity with the writer's style, and is able to punctuate unconsciously as he goes. . . . It is at this point that he begins to be aware of the charm that has been sacrificed by the systematic separation of phrases. He finds himself *listening*. Reading through the ear as well as through the eye. And while in any way of reading the ear plays its part, unless it is most cunningly attacked it co-operates, in our modern way, scarcely at all. It is left behind. For as light is swifter than sound so is the eye swifter than the ear. But in the slow, attentive reading demanded by unpunctuated texts, the faculty of hearing has its chance, is enhanced until the text *speaks* itself. And it is of this enhancement that the strange lost charm is born. Quite modest matter, read thus, can arouse and fuse the faculties of mind and heart.

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: About Punctuation

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Dorothy M. Richardson (1873-1957)

Date first posted: July 14, 2018

Date last updated: July 14, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180778

This eBook was produced by: Jens Sadowski & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Adelphi

VOL. I. NO. II.

APRIL, 1924

ABOUT PUNCTUATION

By Dorothy Richardson

Only to patient reading will come forth the charm concealed in ancient manuscripts. Deep interest there must be, or sheer necessity, to keep eye and brain at their task of scanning a text that moves along unbroken, save by an occasional full-stop. But the reader who persists finds presently that his task is growing easier. He is winning familiarity with the writer's style, and is able to punctuate unconsciously as he goes.... It is at this point that he begins to be aware of the charm that has been sacrificed by the systematic separation of phrases. He finds himself *listening*. Reading through the ear as well as through the eye. And while in any way of reading the ear plays its part, unless it is most cunningly attacked it co-operates, in our modern way, scarcely at all. It is left behind. For as light is swifter than sound so is the eye swifter than the ear. But in the slow, attentive reading demanded by unpunctuated texts, the faculty of hearing has its chance, is enhanced until the text

speaks itself. And it is of this enhancement that the strange lost charm is born. Quite modest matter, read thus, can arouse and fuse the faculties of mind and heart.

Only the rarest of modern prose can thus arouse and affect. Only now and again, to-day, is there any strict and vital relationship between the reader and what he reads. Most of our reading is a superficial swift gathering, as we loll on the borderland between inertia and attention, of the matter of a text. An easy-going collaboration, with the reader's share reduced to the minimum. So much the better, it may be said. Few books, ancient or modern, are worth a whole self. Very few can call us forth to yield all we are and suffer change. Yet it is not to be denied that the machinery of punctuation and type, while lifting burdens from reader and writer alike and perfectly serving the purposes of current exchange, have also, on the whole, devitalized the act of reading; have tended to make it less organic, more mechanical.

There is no discourtesy, since punctuation has come to be regarded as invariable, in calling it part of the machinery of book production. An invisible part. For so long as it conforms to rule punctuation is invisible. After the school years it is invisible; its use, for most people, as unconscious as the act of breathing. Most of us were taught punctuation exactly as we were taught rule of three. Even if we were given some sense of the time-value of the stop and its subdivisions, the thing that came first and last, the fun of the game, was the invariability of the rules. And so charming is convention, so exhilarating a deliberate conformity to tradition, that it is easy to forget that the sole aim of law is liberty; in this case, liberty to express.

It is not very long since an English gentleman's punctuation was as romantic as his spelling. The formal law was strictly observed only by scholars. Not until lately have infringements,

by the ordinary, been regarded as signs of ill-breeding. And in high places there have always been those who have honoured the rules in the breach, without rebuke. Sterne, for example, joyously broke them all, and it has been accounted unto him for righteousness. Beside him stands Rabelais, wielding form as Pantaloon wields his bladder. Were they perhaps castigated for their liberties by the forgotten orthodox of the period? Or is it that the stickler for stereotyped punctuation makes his first appearance in our own time? Why, in either case, have Mr. Wells's experiments, never going further than a reinforcement of the full-stop and a free use of the dash, been dragged into the market-place and lynched, while the wholesale depredations of Sterne and Rabelais are merely affectionately hugged? Is it because their rows and rows of dots, their stars, and their paragraphs built of a single word are so very often a libidinous digging of the reader's ribs? Because their stars wink? It is noteworthy that so long as his dots were laughter Mr. Wells was not called over the coals for mannerism. There was no trouble until those signs were used to italicize an idea or drive home a point; until they became pauses for reflection, by the reader. From that time onwards there have been, amongst his opponents, those who take refuge in attack on his method. Scorn of the dot and the dash has come forward to play its part in the business of answering Mr. Wells. Sterne and Rabelais and the earlier Wells, genially aware of the reader and with nothing to fear from him, offer open hospitality on their pages, space, while their wit detonates, for the responsive beat of the reader's own consciousness. The later Wells, usually the prey of dismay, anger or despair, handles the resources of the printed page almost exclusively as missiles, aimed full at the intelligence alone.

Of the value of punctuation and, particularly, of its value as

pace-maker for the reader's creative consciousness, no one has had a keener sense than Mr. Henry James. No one has more sternly, or more cunningly, secured the collaboration of the reader. Along his prose not even the most casual can succeed in going at top-speed. Short of the casting off of burdens, the deep breath, the headlong plunge, the sustained steady swimming, James gives nothing at all. To complete renunciation he offers the recreative repose that is the result of open-eyed concentration. As aesthetic exercise, with its peculiar joys and edifications, the prose of James keeps its power, even for those in utmost revolt against his vision, indefinitely. It is a spiritual Swedish Drill. Gently, painlessly, without shock or weariness, as he carries us unhasting, unresting, over his vast tracts of statement, we learn to stretch attention to the utmost. And to the utmost James tested, suspending from the one his wide loops, and from the other his deep-hung garlands of expression, the strength of the comma and the semi-colon. He never broke a rule. With him, punctuation, neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding directly from its original source in life, stands exactly where it was at its first discovery. His text, for one familiar with it, might be reduced, without increase of the attention it demands, to the state of the unpunctuated scripts of old time. So rich and splendid is the fabric of sound he weaves upon the appointed loom, that his prose, chanted to his punctuation, in an unknown tongue, would serve as well as a mass—in D minor.

Yet even James, finding within bonds all the freedom he desired, did not quite escape the police. Down upon almost his last written words came the iron hand of Mr. Crosland, sternly, albeit most respectfully, recommending a strait-jacket in the shape of full-stops to be borrowed—from Mr. Bart Kennedy.

Whose stops are shouts. A pleasant jest. Relieving no doubt a long felt desire for the presence in Mr. James of a little ginger. But Crosland is austere. Sternly, with no intervals for laughter, he drags us headlong, breathless, belaboured, from jest to jest with never a smile or pause. It is his essential compactness that makes him a so masterly sonneteer. His sonnets gleam, now like metallised ships, now like jewels. Prose, in his sense, might be written like a sonnet. First the form, a well-balanced distribution of stops for each paragraph, and then the text. An interesting experiment.

As interesting as that now on trial in a prose that is a conscious protest against everything that has been done to date by the hand of talent at work upon inspiration. But the dadaists, in so far as they are paying to law the loud tribute of anarchy, are the counterparts of the strictly orthodox.

Meanwhile, for those who stand between purists and rebels, the rules of punctuation are neither sacred, nor execrable, nor quite absolute. No waving of the tablets of the law has been able to arrest organic adaptation. The test of irregularities is their effectiveness. Verbless phrases flanked by full-stops, the use of *and* at the beginning of a sentence, and kindred effective irregularities, are safe servants, for good, in the cause of the written word. And always there has been a certain variability in the use of the comma. As the shortest breath of punctuation it is allowed, without controversy, to wander a little.

Yet the importance of the comma cannot be exaggerated. It is the angel, or the devil, amongst the stops. In prose, everything turns upon its use. Misplaced, it destroys sense more readily than either of its fellows. For while their wanderings are heavy-footed, either at once obvious, or easily traceable, the comma plays its pranks unobtrusively. Used discreetly, it clears meaning and sets both tone and pace. And

it possesses a charm denied to other stops. Innocence, punctuating at the bidding of a prompting from within, has the comma for its darling. Spontaneous commas are as delightful in their way as spontaneous spelling; as delightful as the sharp breath drawn by a singing child in the middle of a word.

Experiment with the comma, as distinct from recourse to its recognised variability, is to be found, since the stereotyping of the rules, only here and there and takes one form: its exclusion from sequences of adjectives. This exclusion suggests an awareness of the power of the comma as a holder-up, a desire to allow adjectives to converge, in the mind of the reader, as swiftly as possible upon their object. But one would expect to find, together with such awareness, discrimination. And, so far as I know, the exclusion of the comma when it is practised at all, is unvarying; the possibilities are missed as surely here, as they are in conformity to the letter of the law.

The use of the comma, whether between phrases or in sequences of adjectives, is best regulated by the consideration of its time-value. If, for example, we read:—

“Tom went singing at the top of his voice up the stairs at a run that ended suddenly on the landing in a collision with the sweep,”

we are brought sensibly nearer to sharing the incident than if we read:—

“Tom went, singing at the top of his voice, up the stairs, at a run that ended, suddenly, on the landing, in a collision with the sweep.”

Conversely, if we read:—

“Tom stupid with fatigue fearing the worst staggered without word or sign of greeting into the room,”

we are further off than in reading:—

“Tom, stupid with fatigue, fearing the worst, staggered, without word or sign of greeting, into the room.”

Even more obvious is the time-value of the comma in sequences of adjectives:—

“Suave low-toned question-begging excuses”

bears the same meaning as:—

“Suave, low-toned, question-begging excuses.”

But the second is preferable.

“Huge soft bright pink roses.”

may be written:—

“Huge, soft, bright, pink roses.”

But the first wins.

It is a good plan, in the handling of phrases, to beware of pauses when appealing mainly to the eye, and to cherish them when appealing to reflection. With sequences of single words, and particularly of adjectives, when the values are concrete, reinforcing each other, accumulating without modification or contradiction upon a single object of sight, the comma is an obstruction. When the values are abstract, qualifying each other and appealing to reflection, or to vision, or to both vision and reflection at once, the comma is essential. If there is a margin of uncertainty, any possibility of ambiguity or misapprehension, it is best, no matter what is sacrificed of elasticity or of swiftness, to load up with commas. Or the reader may pay tax. And it is dangerous in these days of hurried readings to ask for the re-scanning even of a single phrase.

But there is woe in store, unless he be a prince of proof-readers, for the writer who varies his punctuation. The kindly hands that regulate his spelling will regulate also his use of stops; and, since hands are human, they will regulate irregularly. The result, when the author has altered the alterations, also irregularly, sometimes reading punctuation on to the page when it is not there—is chaos.

Transcriber's Notes

Published originally in *Adelphi*, 1 (Apr. 1924): 990-996.

[The end of *About Punctuation* by Dorothy M. Richardson]