YOU HAVE A POINT THERE

A GUIDE TO PUNCTUATION AND ITS ALLIES

Eric Partridge

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BY

ERIC PARTRIDGE

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JOHN W. CLARK

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For

HAMISH HAMILTON

who doesn't need it

FOREWORD

SOME DAY a doctorate will justly be awarded to a scholar brave enough to write a history of the theory and practice of British and American punctuation, from the time when there certainly was none until the time when there will perhaps be none.

I have aimed at something much less ambitious. Eschewing all but the most recent history – except, here and there, for the sake of an example – I deal only with the theory and especially the practice of punctuation as we know it today and knew it yesterday; and with such allies or accessories as capitals, italics, quotation marks, hyphens, paragraphs.

Acquainted with 'the literature of the subject', I recognize the merits, both of such books as that of T. F. and M. F. A. Husband, that of Mr G. V. Carey and that of Mr Reginald Skelton, and of the chapters or entries in such works as the Fowler brothers' *The King's English*, H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* and G. H. Vallins's *Good English*. This recognition and that knowledge strongly confirm me in a determination (publicly stated in the article on punctuation in *Usage and Abusage*, 1942 in U.S.A., 1947 in Britain) to write a comprehensive guide to punctuation and its concomitants. Such a guide is very badly needed, especially in what I have called 'orchestration': and orchestration forms the subject of the quite painfully practical Book III.

Except for those persons who already know something useful about punctuation, all the works I have examined (nor are they few) exhibit at least one very grave fault. Whether they start with the full stop, as logically they should, or, as most of them do, despite the inescapable presence of a full stop, with the comma, they adduce examples containing either one or more stops of which the learner presumably knows nothing at this stage. There is only one logical, only one sensible, only one practical, only one easy way in which a beginner can learn punctuation: and that is, progressively. The examples in the opening chapter, The Full Stop, will contain only the full stop. The ensuing chapter, The Comma, has examples in which only full stops and commas are used. If the next chapter is The Semicolon, the examples will or may contain also the full stop and the comma. The next would then be The Colon, and here the examples can exhibit all the four main stops: full stop, comma, semi-

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colon, colon. The two minor stops (dash and parentheses) can then be treated; but if we begin with the dash, the relevant chapter or section should, in its examples, contain no parentheses, although they will, or may, contain the four main stops. Having disposed of all six true stops (full stop, comma, semicolon, colon, dash, parentheses), we can pass to the two signs, ? and !, which, so far from being stops, are mere indications of tone: or, as we say, 'marks' – the question mark and the exclamation mark. Such subtleties as the relationship of stops and marks to either parentheses or quotation marks, or indeed both, cannot safely be treated until the ground has been entirely cleared.

Book IV deals with some differences in American practice, a chapter generously contributed, with some valuable comments, by a former collaborator, John W. Clark of the University of Minnesota. The emphasis rests upon 'differences', for, in general, American practice is identical with British. It would be absurd for either Professor Clark or myself to catalogue the identities, which outnumber the differences by at least ten to one, British and American opinion being in entire accord on literally all major, and on very nearly all minor, topics.

E. P.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTORY

§ 1: A Few Opinions

ALL THE parts of Syntaxe have already beene declared. There resteth one generall affection of the whole, disposed thorow every member thereof, as the bloud is thorow the body; and consisteth in the breathing, when we pronounce any *Sentence*; For, whereas our breath is by nature so short, that we cannot continue without a stay to speake long together; it was thought necessarie, as well for the speakers ease, as for the plainer deliverance of the things spoken, to invent this meanes, whereby men, pausing a pretty while, the whole speech might never the worse be understood.

The English Grammar made by Ben Jonson, written ca. 1617, published in 1640

POINTS, serving for the better Understanding of Words, are either *Primary*, or *Secundary*.

Primary Points, which shew their Tone, Sound and Pauses, are eight: four simple and more common; Period, [.] Colon, [:] Semicolon, [;] Comma, [,] and four mixt and less frequent.....

The mixt Points, are *Erotesis* [?] *Ecphonesis*; [!] *Parenthesis*, ( ) *Parathesis*: [ ] which have always some simple Point, exprest or understood, in them.....

Secundary Points, now shewing Tone, Sound, or Pause, are *four*: Apostrophus, ['] Eclipsis, [—] or [- —] Dieresis, [. .] and Hyphen, [-] or [″].

CHARLES BUTLER, *The English Grammar*, 1633

Great care ought to be had in writing, for the due observing of points: for, the neglect thereof will pervert the sence.

RICHARD HODGES, *The English Primrose*, 1644

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Pointing is the disposal of speech into certain members for more articulate and distinct reading and circumstantiating of writs and papers. It rests wholly and solely on concordance, and necessitates a knowledge of grammar.

ROBERT MONTEITH, *The True and Genuine Art of Pointing*, 1704

I know, there are some *Persons* who affect to *despise* it, and treat this whole Subject with the utmost *Contempt*, as a Trifle far below their Notice, and a Formality unworthy of *their* Regard: They do not hold it difficult, but *despicable*; and neglect it, as being *above* it.

Yet many learned Men have been highly sensible of its Use; and some ingenious and elegant Writers have condescended to point their Works with Care; and very eminent Scholars have not disdained to teach the Method of doing it with Propriety.

JAMES BURROW, *An Essay on the Use of Pointing*, 1771

The pauses which mark the sense, and for this reason are denominated *sentential*, are the same in verse as in prose. They are marked by the usual stops, a comma, a semicolon, a colon, or a period, as the sense requires.

NOAH WEBSTER, *Dissertations on the English Language*, 1789

Punctuation is the art of dividing a written composition into sentences, or parts of sentences, by points or stops, for the purpose of marking the different pauses which the sense, and an accurate pronunciation require.

LINDLEY MURRAY, *English Grammar*, 1794

The sense, or meaning, of the words is very much dependent upon the points which are used along with the words.

WILLIAM COBBETT, *A Grammar of the English Language*, 1819

It has already been frequently shown by writers on the subject that our punctuation-marks do not indicate the most suitable places for pauses in reading aloud; the voice of an intelligent reader ignores some of the textual pointing and introduces breaks at places other than those where there are points. The pointing of matter 'to be sung or said' is, in fact, a subject apart. With regard to constructional pointing it may be urged that in reality it rests on sense and meaning,

since grammar is the analysis of the forms in which rational expression is made. We think, however, that all the complexities and divergences and confusions of grammatical pointing arose just because it was not in constant and direct touch with meaning.

A PRACTICAL PRINTER, *A Manual of Punctuation*, 1859

Of all the subjects which engage the attention of the compositor, none proves a greater stumbling-block, or is so much a matter of uncertainty and doubt, especially to the mere tyro, as the Art of Punctuation. This arises partly from the necessarily somewhat inexact nature of the art itself, but far more from ignorance of the principles on which its rules ought to be founded, and the illogical construction of the sentences with which the printer has sometimes to deal.

HENRY BEADNELL (some forty years a Printer's Reader), *Spelling and Punctuation*, 1880

Modern printers make an effort to be guided by logic or grammar alone; it is impossible for them to succeed entirely; but any one who will look at an Elizabethan book with the original stopping will see how far they have moved: the old stopping was frankly to guide the voice in reading aloud, while the modern is mainly to guide the mind in seeing through the grammatical construction.

A perfect system of punctuation, then, that would be exact and uniform, would require separate rhetorical and logical notations . . . Such a system is not to be desired.

H. W. & F. G. FOWLER, *The King's English*, 1906

When punctuation was first employed, it was in the role of the handmaid of prose; later the handmaid was transformed by the pedants into a harsh-faced chaperone, pervertedly ingenious in the contriving of stiff regulations and starched rules of decorum; now, happily, she is content to act as an auxiliary to the writer and as a guide to the reader.

HAROLD HERD, *Everybody's Guide to Punctuation*, 1925

Intellectually, stops matter a great deal. If you are getting your commas, semi-colons, and full stops wrong, it means that you are not getting your thoughts right, and your mind is muddled.

WILLIAM TEMPLE, Archbishop of York, as reported in *The Observer*, 23 October 1938

We ought to deplore the growing tendency to use only full stops and commas. Punctuation is an invaluable aid to clear writing, and I suggest that far too little importance is attached to it by many journalists.

FRANK WHITAKER, in an address to the Institute of Journalists: reproduced in *The J.I.J*, January 1939

Mr Partridge's account of punctuation shows by its wealth of possible effects that punctuation can be made a part of the art of writing – instead of the simple, almost mechanical routine that American schools recommend.

W. CABELL GREET, in his gloss at 'Punctuation' in *Usage and Abusage*, American edition, 1942

We indicate time by means of stops known as punctuation marks. These marks also help to make the sense clear, to show the expression, and to avoid confusion in reading.

L. A. G. STRONG, *An Informal English Grammar*, 1943

§ 2: Clearing the Deck

A thoughtful reading of § 1 will have shown that already in the 17th Century the principal points were being used. It will not have shown that they arose late in the 16th Century and that we owe them to the ingenuity of Aldus Manutius, the distinguished Italian printer (Aldo Manuzio: 1450–1515) whose 'Aldine' Press operated at Venice.

Before him, punctuation had been virtually confined to the period or full stop and, in several countries, to the question mark. Before that, punctuation was unknown. But, as we are not concerned with the history of the subject, I refer the curious to T. F. and M. F. A. Husband's *Punctuation*, 1905, or to the briefer, yet adequate, treatment in Reginald Skelton's *Modern English Punctuation*, revised edition, 1949.

As § 1 shows, there have been two systems of punctuation: the rhetorical or dramatic or elocutionary, seen at its height in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, but after the 17th Century very rarely used; and the grammatical or constructional or logical, which has always predominated in prose and has predominated in verse since ca. 1660. On the subject of dramatic punctuation, the standard work is Percy Simpson's *Shakespearean Punctuation*, 1911.

But to insist upon the dichotomy *dramatic-grammatical* would be both pedantic and inept. For much of the time, as is inevitable, the two coincide: a speaker tends to pause wherever either logic or grammar makes a pause; and even the most 'logical' or 'grammatical' of punctuators tends, when he is writing dialogue, to point what is clearly an elocutionary or dramatic pause, as in 'He speaks often of freedom. But, he takes good care to avoid going to prison for the cause of freedom', where the comma represents a dramatic pause. (In dialogue, however, the sensible way to indicate that pause would be to italicize 'But', not to punctuate it with a comma.)

The elocutionary element occurs again in the second of these two sentences: 'He intended to finish the task, but then he fell ill' and 'He fell ill; but then, he was always falling ill' and 'He fell ill, but *then* he was always falling ill'. In the first sentence, *then* means 'at that point of time'; in the third, *then* means 'at, or during, that period'; in the second, however, *then* has no temporal meaning. 'He fell ill; but then, he was always falling ill' could have been written '. . .; but he was *always* falling ill'. With *then*, the sentence is much more colloquial and idiomatic; here, *then* is hardly less interjectional than *alas* is in 'He fell ill; but *alas!* he was always falling ill'. However elocutionary *then* may be, the comma is demanded by logic: the omission of this comma would not only create ambiguity, it would positively falsify the intended meaning.

In short, English – or, if you prefer, British and American – punctuation is predominantly constructional or grammatical or logical, yet it has what is in some ways a non-logical, non-grammatical element, necessitated by the part played in speech by intonation and pause and in writing (or printing) by emphasis.

Even that modification slightly exaggerates the importance of logic and the power of grammar. In punctuation, grammar represents parliament, or whatever the elected body happens to be called: logic represents King or President: but the greatest power of all is vested in the people or, rather, in the more intelligent people – in good sense rather than in mere commonsense. Commonsense can and often does produce a humdrum, barely adequate, wholly unimaginative punctuation: good sense (another name for wisdom) can and sometimes does produce a punctuation that is much superior to the barely adequate.

One could write a monograph upon the psychological principles of punctuation. That monograph would form an exercise in psychology and occupy an honourable place on the shelves of a psychologist's library; it would hardly benefit the writer, the journalist, the student;

and to the pupil, as to the ordinary person who rarely writes anything other than a frequent cheque or an infrequent letter, it would, so far from being a help, be a hindrance.

The most abysmal low-brow, like the dizziest high-brow, needs punctuation in order to make his meaning clear. The good journalist and the conscientious writer (whether of essays at school or of larger works elsewhere) will find, if he has not already found, that punctuation forms an integral part of composition and an invaluable assistance to both the public expression and perhaps even the private formulation of lucid thinking.

Punctuation too often ranks as an adjunct. In the fact, it should rank as a component. It is not something that one applies as an ornament, for it is part of the structure; so much a part that, without it, the structure would be meaningless – except after an exhausting examination.

Chapter 2

PERIOD OR FULL STOP

THE STOP that comes at the end of a sentence or of any other complete statement has been called *point*, elliptical for *full* (or *perfect*) *point*; *full* (or *complete*) *pause*; *full stop*; *period*. The second is obsolete; the first, obsolescent. Of the other two, *period* and *full stop*, the former is preferred by most scholars and printers, the latter by most other people. Nobody will go to heaven for using *period*, nor to hell for using *full stop*.

A *period* is so named because it comes at the end of a period, strictly of a periodic sentence, but now loosely apprehended as any sentence, even if it consists of only one word, e.g. 'Yes', elliptical for 'Yes, that is so', 'Yes, I will', etc. Compare the modern catchword 'Period': indicating the end, not only of a statement, a telegram, a letter, but also of a holiday, an indulgence, a permission, and so forth. Compare also Chaucer's 'And there a point, for ended is my tale'.

Full stop virtually explains itself: a full stop, like a full or perfect point, is obviously not an imperfect point or stop, whether as brief as a comma or as clear-cut as a semicolon or as disruptive as a dash or as smooth as a pair of parentheses or as culturedly poised as a colon: here ends the statement, here ends the sentence. The etymology of *period* is helpful, as etymology so often is. *Period*, French *période*, Latin *periodus*, Greek *periodos* (*peri*, around + *hodos*, a way, a road), means literally a going round, hence a rounding off, especially as applied to time, more especially still the time represented by a breathing. At the end of a breathing, a sentence, a statement, one pauses to take breath, either because one must or because it is convenient to do so. This explains why the elocutionary term *pause* and, for the full stop, *full pause* were formerly used as synonymous with (*full*) *point* or (*full*) *stop*.

The one indispensable stop is the full stop. In most simple sentences – those containing one verb – this stop suffices. In the following examples, only an over-punctuator would increase the punctuation:

He went home early that day.
He could hardly have done anything else.

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