

# punctuation marks

BY THEODOR W. ADORNO

TRANSLATED BY SHIERRY WEBER NICHOLSEN

**T**he less punctuation marks, taken in isolation, convey meaning or expression and the more they constitute the opposite pole in language to names, the more each of them acquires a definitive physiognomic status of its own, an expression of its own, which cannot be separated from its syntactic function but is by no means exhausted by it. When the hero of Gottfried Keller's novel *Der grüne Heinrich* was asked about the German capital letter *P*, he exclaimed, "That's Pumpernickel!" That experience is certainly true of the figures of punctuation. An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like a flashing light or the blink of an eye. A colon, says Karl Kraus, opens its mouth wide: woe to the writer who does not fill it with something nourishing. Visually, the semicolon looks like a drooping moustache; I am even more aware of its gamey taste. With self-satisfied peasant cunning, German quotation marks (« ») lick their lips.

All of them are traffic signals; in the last analysis, traffic signals were modeled on them. Exclamation points are red, colons green, dashes call a halt. But the [Stefan] George Circle was wrong in mistaking them for marks of communication because of this. On the contrary, they are marks of oral delivery; instead of diligently serving the interplay between language and the reader, they serve, hieroglyphically, an interplay that takes place in the interior of language, along its own pathways. Hence it is superfluous to omit them as being superfluous: then they simply hide. Every text, even the most densely woven, cites them of its own accord—friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language.

There is no element in which language resembles music more than in the punctuation marks. The comma and the period correspond to the half-cadence and the authentic cadence. Exclamation points are

like silent cymbal clashes, question marks like musical upbeats, colons dominant seventh chords; and only a person who can perceive the different weights of strong and weak phrasings in musical form can really feel the distinction between the comma and the semicolon. But perhaps the idiosyncratic opposition to punctuation marks that arose in the early part of this century, an opposition from which no observant person can completely dissociate himself, is not so much a revolt against an ornamental element as it is the expression of how sharply music and language diverge from one another. But it can hardly be considered an accident that music's contact with the punctuation marks in language was bound up with the schema of tonality, which has since disintegrated, and that the efforts of modern music could easily be described as an attempt to create punctuation marks without tonality. But if music is forced to preserve the image of its resemblance to language in punctuation marks, then language may give in to its resemblance to music by distrusting them.

The distinction between the Greek semicolon [·], a raised point whose aim is to keep the voice from being lowered, and the German one, which accomplishes the lowering with its period and its hanging lower part and yet keeps the voice suspended by incorporating the comma—truly a dialectical image—seems to reproduce the distinction between classical antiquity and the Christian era, finitude refracted through the infinite, although it may be the case that the Greek sign currently in use was invented by the sixteenth-century humanists. History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation. One is almost, therefore, tempted to consider authentic only the punctuation marks in German Gothic type, or *Fraktur*, where the graphic images retain allegorical features, and to regard those of Roman type as mere secularized imitations.

The historical character of punctuation marks can be seen in the fact that what becomes outdated in them is precisely what was once modern in them. Exclamation points, gestures of authority with which the writer tries to impose an emphasis external to the matter itself, have become intolerable, while the *sforzato*, the musical counterpart of the exclamation point, is as indispensable today as it was in Beethoven's time, when it marked the incursion of the subjective will into the musical fabric. Exclamation points, however, have degenerated into usurpers of authority, assertions of importance. It was excla-

mation points, incidentally, that gave German Expressionism its graphic form. Their proliferation was both a protest against convention and a symptom of the inability to alter the structure of language from within; language was attacked from the outside instead. Exclamation points survive as tokens of the disjunction between idea and realization in that period, and their impotent evocation redeems them in memory: a desperate written gesture that yearns in vain to transcend language. Expressionism was consumed in the flames of that gesture; it used exclamation points to vouch for its effect, and it went up in smoke along with them. Seen in German Expressionist texts today, they look like the multiple zeros on the banknotes printed during the German inflation.

Literary dilettantes can be recognized by their desire to connect everything. Their products hook sentences together with logical connectives even though the logical relationship asserted by those connectives does not hold. To the person who cannot truly conceive anything as a unit, anything that suggests disintegration or discontinuity is unbearable; only a person who can grasp totality can understand caesuras. But the dash provides instruction in them. In the dash, thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character. It is no accident that in the era of the progressive degeneration of language, this mark of punctuation is neglected precisely insofar as it fulfills its function: when it separates things that feign a connection. All the dash claims to do now is to prepare us in a foolish way for surprises that by that very token are no longer surprising.

The serious dash: its unsurpassed master in nineteenth-century German literature was Theodor Storm. Rarely have punctuation marks been so deeply allied with content as the dashes in his novellas, mute lines into the past, wrinkles on the brow of his text. With them the narrator's voice falls into an uneasy silence: the span of time they insert between two sentences is that of a burdensome heritage; set bald and naked between the events they draw together, they have something of the fatefulness of the natural context and something of a prudish hesitancy to make reference to it. So discreetly does myth conceal itself in the nineteenth century, it seeks refuge in typography.

Among the losses that are punctuation's share in the decay of language is the slash mark as used, for instance, to separate lines of a stanza of verse quoted in a piece of prose. Set as a stanza, the lines would rip the fabric of the language apart; printed simply as prose, the effect of verse is ridiculous, because the meter and the rhyme seem

like unintended wordplay. The modern dash, however, is too crude to accomplish what it should in such cases. But the capacity to perceive such differences physiognomically is a prerequisite for the proper use of punctuation marks.

The ellipsis, a favorite way of leaving sentences meaningfully open during the period when Impressionism became a commercialized mood, suggests an infinitude of thoughts and associations, something the hack journalist does not have; he must depend on typography to simulate them. But to reduce the three dots borrowed from the repeating decimal fractions of arithmetic to two, as the George Circle did, is to imagine that one can continue with impunity to lay claim to that fictive infinitude by costuming as exact something whose inherent intention is to be inexact. The punctuation of the brazen hack is no better than that of the modest hack.

Quotation marks should be used only when something is quoted and if need be when the text wants to distance itself from a word it is referring to. They are to be rejected as an ironic device. For they exempt the writer from the spirit whose claim is inherent in irony, and they violate the very concept of irony by separating it from the matter at hand and presenting a predetermined judgment on the subject. The abundant ironic quotation marks in Marx and Engels are the shadows that totalitarian methods cast in advance upon their writings, whose intention was the opposite: the seed from which eventually came what Karl Kraus called *Moskauerwelsch* [Moscow double-talk, from *Moskau*, Moscow, and *Kauderwelsch*, gibberish or double-talk]. The indifference to linguistic expression shown in the mechanical delegation of intention to a typographic cliché arouses the suspicion that the very dialectic that constitutes the theory's content has been brought to a standstill and the object assimilated to it from above, without negotiation. Where there is something that needs to be said, indifference to literary form always indicates dogmatization of the content. The blind verdict of ironic quotation marks is its graphic gesture.

Theodor Haecker was rightfully alarmed by the fact that the semicolon is dying out; this told him that no one can write a period [sentence containing several balanced clauses] any more. Part of this incapacity is the fear of page-long paragraphs, a fear created by the marketplace — by the consumer who does not want to tax himself and to whom first editors and then writers accommodated for the sake of their incomes, until finally they invented ideologies for their own accommodation like lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision. Language

and subject matter cannot be kept separate in this process. The sacrifice of the period leaves the idea short of breath. Prose is reduced to the "protocol sentence," the darling of the logical positivists, to a mere recording of facts, and when syntax and punctuation relinquish the right to articulate and shape the facts, to critique them, language is getting ready to capitulate to what merely exists, even before thought has time to perform this capitulation eagerly on its own for the second time. It starts with the loss of the semicolon; it ends with the ratification of imbecility by a reasonableness purged of all admixtures.

The test of a writer's sensitivity in punctuating is the way he handles parenthetical material. The cautious writer will tend to place that material between dashes and not in round brackets [i.e., what is commonly called parentheses, ( )], for brackets take the parenthesis completely out of the sentence, creating enclaves, as it were, whereas nothing in good prose should be unnecessary to the overall structure. By admitting such superfluousness, brackets implicitly renounce the claim to the integrity of the linguistic form and capitulate to pedantic philistinism. Dashes, in contrast, which block off the parenthetical material from the flow of the sentence without shutting it up in a prison, capture both connection and detachment. But just as blind trust in their power to do so would be illusory, in that it would expect of a mere device something that only language and subject matter can accomplish, so the choice between dashes and brackets helps us to see how inadequate abstract norms of punctuation are. Proust, whom no one can lightly call a philistine and whose pedantry is but one aspect of his wonderful micrological power, did not hesitate to use brackets, presumably because in the extended periods of his sentences the parenthetical material became so long that its sheer length would have nullified the dashes. The parentheses need more solid dams if they are not to flood the whole period and promote the chaos from which each of these periods was wrested, breathlessly. But the justification for Proust's use of punctuation marks lies solely in the approach of his whole novelistic *oeuvre*: the illusion of the continuity of the narrative is disrupted and the asocial narrator is ready to climb in through all the openings in order to illuminate the obscure *temps durée* with the bull's eye lantern of a memory that is by no means all so involuntary. Proust's bracketed parentheses, which interrupt both the graphic image and the narrative, are memorials to the moments when the author, weary of aesthetic illusion and distrustful of the self-contained quality of events which he is after all only making up, openly takes the reins.

The writer is in a permanent predicament when it comes to punctuation marks; if one were fully aware while writing, one would sense the impossibility of ever using a mark of punctuation correctly and would give up writing altogether. For the requirements of the rules of punctuation and those of the subjective need for logic and expression are not compatible: in punctuation marks the check the writer draws on language is refused payment. The writer cannot trust in the rules, which are often rigid and crude; nor can he ignore them without indulging in a kind of eccentricity and doing harm to their nature by calling attention to what is inconspicuous—and inconspicuousness is what punctuation lives by. But if, on the other hand, he is serious, he may not sacrifice any part of his aim to the universal, for no writer today can completely identify with anything universal; he does so only at the price of affecting the archaic. The conflict must be endured each time, and one needs either a lot of strength or a lot of stupidity not to lose heart. At best one can advise that punctuation marks be handled the way musicians handle forbidden chord progressions and incorrect voice-leading. In every act of punctuation, as in every such musical cadence, one can tell whether there is an intention or whether it is pure sloppiness. To put it more subtly, one can sense the difference between a subjective will that brutally demolishes the rules and a tactful sensitivity that allows the rules to echo in the background even where it suspends them. This is especially evident with the most inconspicuous marks, the commas, whose mobility readily adapts to the will to expression, only, however, to develop the perfidiousness of the object, *die Tücke des Objekts*, in such close proximity to the subject and become especially touchy, making claims one would hardly expect of them. Today, certainly, one will do best to adhere to the rule “better too few than too many.” For through their logical-semantic autonomy punctuation marks, which articulate language and thereby bring writing closer to the voice, have become separate from both voice and writing, and they come into conflict with their own mimetic nature. An ascetic use of punctuation marks attempts to compensate for some of that. In every punctuation mark thoughtfully avoided, writing pays homage to the sound it suppresses.