

# Breath of the Text

by Jeremiah Cassar Scalia

“Breath of the Text” (excerpted from *Periods Are Tiny Black Holes*.) includes a half dozen novel punctuation marks or “punctoforms” which serve to color and qualify the meaning of the text. They are part of a series from Avant Punc., a language art project evocative of a niche typographic design tradition from a bygone era of arts and letters. The project plays on the boundary between text and image, and has designs on expanding and nuancing meaning in written communication via the enhanced play of punctuation.

‡ **Affection Point** – references love, affection, emotional warmth (hat tip: to writer Herve Bazin who created the *point d’amour* in 1966 [1]).

✓ **Affirmation Point (Checkpoint)** – indicates hearty yet measured enthusiasm, composed favor; warmer than a period, cooler than an exclamation point.

‡ **Flash Point** – references a sudden moment of insight; a fresh, new idea.

● **Hyperperiod (Portail Noir)** – indicates that an utterance is bold, unabashed, final or non-negotiable. May also be used to emphasize the period as a portal to a hidden world within the written word.

§ **Sesquipedal** – indicates that an utterance may be grandiloquent, long-winded, uses indulgent or excessively fancy language. Also may positively connote ornate writing.

‡ **Wryleaf** – indicates irony, wry humor; paradoxical play of words (hat tip: to poet Alcanter de Brahm who in 1899 proposed a novel punctuation mark which he called *point d’ironie* [2]).

Avant Punc. typographic design by Jeremiah Cassar Scalia and Charles Mattern Jr. © 2023

\*\*\*

At the halfway mark of the 20th century a German philosopher by the name of Theodor Adorno penned a rather peculiar essay pointedly titled “Punctuation Marks” (3) in which he traces a kind of rhythmic, animating force to punctuation in text. Within the blackletter world of graphemes he ascribes to these special markings an almost phenomenological vitality, drawn up in a poetical kind of *graphenomenology*. In a playfully simple yet enigmatic passage Adorno writes:

*Punctuation marks [...] 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 [...] cites them of its own accord—friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language.*

Adorno goes on to say that punctuation, more than any other element of text, resembles music. “Exclamation points are like silent cymbal clashes, question marks like musical upbeats, colons dominant seventh chords.” He descriptively

doubles back over these characters, pointing to their “physiognomic” complexion: “Visually, the semicolon looks like a drooping mustache...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.” The more punctuation marks constitute “the opposite pole in language to names,” he explains, “the more each of them acquires a definitive physiognomic status of its own.” Adorno presents, with a wink that is as metaphoric as it is metalinguistic, the punctuation mark as the rhythmic beating heart, the twitching flesh and blood, of an otherwise static textual world.

My curiosity was piqued by this notion of punctuation’s musical, physiognomic status as a subversive counter to linguistic nomination (nameability) so dominant in writing. There was something in Adorno’s poetical punctuation mark that seemed to oddly resonate with Roland Barthes’ (4) rather more theoretical notion of “punctum” (the poignant sensorial effect which a photograph can have on the viewer)—something more than merely the fact of their common etymological root, the Latin *punctus* meaning “to have a sharp point.”

The punctuation mark —the alphabetic character-type which is nonetheless standard to the alphabetic hegemony that is the lettered world (that world in which orthodoxy is quite literally orthography)— has always done its work on the edge of the text. At that edge, we tend to think of it as textual, as graphically embodied; which it is of course. It is a standardized orthographic and typographic sign-vehicle. Though, not positively in every instance. One need only think of the absential mark of punctuation that is indentation.

Still, even positively-inked punctuation marks are in another sense *bodiless*, insofar as they are not voiced in the course of reading. They are read of course; but unlike the words they are not uttered, not even whispered by the silent voice in the reader’s mind. They are then, ever so subtly *read*, and *said* not at all! Thus the “reading” of these ubiquitous micro-markings proceeds in the very subtlest sense. It is a reading so finespun that we could say punctuation marks are not so much ‘logically deduced’ as points of syntactic order, but rather are *absorbed* as a semantic vapor which permeates the text; for punctuation is not simply a tool of grammar but always also a nutrient of meaning. It does tonal, rhythmic work, shading and edging, gently shepherding the letters and words of the text.

The way in which punctuation is *read but not said* is a subtle and somewhat ironic affirmation of the deeper integrity between writing and speech. In tracing the evolution of punctuation one finds that it emerged not from the text, not out of the orthographic rows of letters which form the words of sentences, paragraphs, pages and ultimately manuscripts and books. Rather, its true site of emergence can be traced to the gaps and margins of the text; latent in the flyleaves at the beginning and end of books, the interval spaces within manuscripts, between chapters, paragraphs, sentences, words, letters, even the micro-indentive negative space within the zone of a single letter. And what drew punctuation out of these negative space intervals was not the silent reading so much as the public speaking of the written word.

It is to the “incunabula” (early printed books) of the Middle Ages that we can trace the roots of modern punctuation, with marks emerging in biblical scriptures as signals and guideposts for the express purpose of reading the text aloud (5). As tools of oration, these early marks of punctuation served to break up the otherwise breathless textual density into digestible, utterable chunks with an array of cues as to stress, emphasis, pause, inflection. These new marks allowed the text, and the orator, to breathe. We find, then, the breath of speech as much as punctuation in writing to be equally charged with *nourishing the body of language*, revealing the threshold between writing and speech to be rather more porous than we might have expected?

We need only look beyond the blackletter text to find punctuation’s true fountainhead; looking not to the stylus but to the parchment, the canvas, the screen—the air and atmosphere of the written word. Here we find the para-text, the textual *in-between* and *just-beyond* where these curious characters have always lurked invisibly, (negatively) there and yet (positively) not there — *simply hiding*, as Adorno observed. Thus can we understand punctuation to be born of the negative space that permeates and delimits the body of the text, born in the textual gaps, breaks and openings which mirror the pulmonary pit stops and pregnant pauses, the oxygenated hollows that vivify speech. In this sense, we may think of punctuation’s air of absence much as the emptiness inside a clay vessel which allows it be filled, or the wheel’s hub which allows the wheel to turn; each of these, as described in the Daoist philosophy of Laozi (Lao Tzu), references the way in which what is absent is integral to the meaning of what is present. “Though we can only work with what is there,” Laozi reminds us, “usefulness comes from what is not there” (6).

Each mark of punctuation points paradoxically to the threshold between the text and the para-text, that which is negatively embodied in the *figura absentia* of modern indentation. In other words, integral to the meaning we draw from the written word is a kind of “constitutive indentation” which we find essentially everywhere on the page that the graphemic ink isn’t... *friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language*.

## §

Adorno’s elaboration of the ethereal “friendly spirit” of punctuation seems a radical poetics, a kind of textual mysticism even; for it attempts to bring punctuation’s *marginal-by-nature* status to center stage, spotlighting what is habitually passed over without a thought and yet intuitively felt through the course of reading. In this sense Adorno’s punctuation mark—not unlike Barthes’ punctum—is as unnameable as it is meaningful; ever abiding at the margin of what is named, ever so faintly reflecting to the reader not simply negative space, but a negative *shapeliness* which very precisely hems each turn of phrase, aerating and

striating, indeed clarifying, the positively marked blackletter messages that march across the page.

The implications of this poetics throw the greater enterprise of Writing *writ-large* into a strange new light! Along these odd lines of poetical thought I'd begun to reimagine Writing—affectively as much as textually—winding its way through the senses, traveling from the margins of feeling and memory to crest, finally, in a novel linguistic expression.

Here is a writing which carries through sensuous bursts of inspiration and insight, spirits passing from affective sensation to graphemic translation. Two experiential lines—the memory that inspires the writing, and the creativity of the writing itself in the act of being written—merge in a delicate sensorial-imaginal rush that powers its own textual recording, its final representation satisfied in handwriting or typeface.

The writer's glossarian palate—tasting, savoring, relishing the play of words—draws ever deeper on writing's myriad of subtle affects, circulating from cardiological to semiological palpability and back again; the pulse riding the causeway of meaning — from its rhythmic point of origin in the heart (!) to the language-conjuring labyrinth in the head, passing through its byzantine network of pathways, coursing its way down through the nerves of the arm, out toward the writer's pen there suspended in a finely molded grip of prehensile muscle and bone! The pulsation of meaning is exfoliated at last, dispatched to writing's distant, desiccated meridian of ink and paper. Here, the final stage is realized in the tracing of static lines, skeletons of ink or graphite laid to rest on the page. The fossils lie dormant, waiting to be stumbled upon by an inquiring reader of late who may, along with them, become meaningfully (re)awakened. Such an awakening may be experienced as a euphoric opening—or perhaps only a gentle quiver—in time.

Until then though, we would have to take for granted that the written word, having been laid to rest, is itself utterly inanimate. Beneath the book's covers the narrative body of the text goes flat. It returns to an inert lifelessness, “friendly spirits” and all, as it is closed up and filed away in a drawer, or stowed back on the shelf—for days, years, centuries even. Thus we come back down to earth, where visions of a *graphenomenological* cosmos are reduced to merely figurative flights of fancy and textual and living worlds become irreconcilable, as the boundless experience of the imaginary does not live *really* in the paper and print of a book. As any sensible reader can tell you, however inclined to such flights of fancy they may be, a book that transports you to another world is merely a *literary*—and by no means a *literal*—portal.

Yes, I'd long taken for granted the merit of such a sober judgment; never saw any reason to doubt it... that is, until one fateful March evening when in a fatigued moment of page-gazing I found myself inexplicably transmuting the *literality* of the page!

It happened in the course of reading a scholarly text, a simple paperback volume—nothing too old or clothbound or anything arcane like that. I was reading more or less in the manner I always do when I inadvertently stumbled across something quite unbelievable—something which I experienced as piercingly real that previously I could have taken only as metaphor. I'm speaking of the entrance to a hidden world interior to the written word! The entry point into this textual netherworld was in fact so plainly accessible as to be rendered virtually invisible, a veritable *bodiless presence* reminiscent of Adorno's poetical musings.

In truth, the entrance—which quite literally opened before me as a portal—was never to be found along the well-trod path of deep reading nor clever writerly thinking; for if it were, I've no doubt it would have been discovered a long time ago indeed. In point of fact, it was hiding in plain sight—a small paginal perforation at the edge of the blackletter text. The hyper-excursive details of this experience are recounted just beyond the fleuronic little black smoker's pipe a few centimeters south of this sentence.



**Works Cited:**

1. Hervé, B. A. Z. I. N. "Plumons l'oiseau." *Paris, Grasset éd* (1966).
2. Brahm, Alcanter de. "L'ostensoir des Ironies." *Paris: Bibliothèque d'art de «La Critique* (1899).
3. Adorno, Theodor W. "8. Punctuation Marks." *Notes to Literature*. Columbia University Press, 2019. 106-111.
4. Barthes, Roland. *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. Macmillan, 1981.
5. Parkes, Malcolm Beckwith. *Pause and effect: An introduction to the history of punctuation in the West*. Routledge, 2016.
6. Laozi. *Tao Te Ching*, New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

