

Points of Contention: Rethinking the Past, Present, and Future of Punctuation

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“The semicolon has become so hateful to me,” confessed Paul Robinson in a 2002 essay, “that I feel almost morally compromised when I use it.” When Robinson, a humanities professor at Stanford University, sees a dot balanced over a comma, he is filled with hate and “exasperation.”¹ Robinson is perhaps the semicolon’s most devoted foe, but he is hardly its only modern detractor. A host of novelists, from George Orwell to Donald Barthelme, have discoursed on its ugliness, or irrelevance, or both.² Kurt Vonnegut was unequivocal in his last book, advising writers, “Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college.”³ Nor is Robinson the only member of the academy to spurn the semicolon; it was an academic who congratulated Umberto Eco for using no semicolons whatsoever in *The Name of the Rose*.⁴ Yet it was the scholarly community—the humanists in particular—that brought the mark to life in the fifteenth century. They conceived of the semicolon as an aid to clarity, not, as Robinson now

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1. Paul Robinson, “On the Philosophy of Punctuation,” www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/721833.html; hereafter abbreviated “PP.”

2. See Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (New York, 2003), p. 108.

3. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country*, ed. Daniel Simon (New York, 2005), p. 23.

4. See Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, p. 108.

characterizes it, a “pretentious” point used chiefly to “gloss over an imprecise thought” (“PP”). In the late 1800s, the mark was downright trendy, its frequency of use far outstripping that of one of its relatives, the colon. How did the semicolon, once regarded with admiration, come to seem so offensive, so unwieldy, to so many?

To ask such a question might seem to put too fine a point on points: What profit can there be in mulling over punctuation, and in particular its history, when we have copyeditors and stylebooks to set straight our misplaced colons and commas? We have *rules* for this sort of thing, after all. Rule-based punctuation guides, however, are a relatively recent invention. Prior to the 1800s, the majority of grammarians and scholars advocated taste and judgment as a guide to pointing a text. As George Campbell put it in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), “language is purely a species of fashion. . . . It is not the business of grammar, as some critics seem preposterously to imagine, to give law to the fashions which regulate our speech.”⁵ But what Campbell and most of his contemporaries thought was a “preposterous” criticism soon became a commonplace principle; as the eighteenth century drew to a close, new grammar books began to espouse systems of rules that were purportedly derived from logic. In these new books, grammarians did not hesitate to impugn the grammar of writers traditionally considered great stylists: John Milton and William Shakespeare were chastised for “gross mistakes” and subjected to correction.⁶

The rule books, though they claimed to heed only the call of logic, were nonetheless bound by their historical context: punctuation guidelines have been heavily indebted to intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic trends. No matter what analytical authority rule books claimed, their codifications had at least as much to do with their historical context as with syntax. When punctuation is properly contextualized, it can yield insight into problems that transcend disciplinary boundaries: it asks us to consider how we communicate within the disciplines and beyond them and how

5. George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 2 vols. (London, 1776), 1:340.

6. Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes* (London, 1762), p. xii.

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disciplines create and maintain interpretive norms. It is this account of punctuation that I begin to develop here.

I want to track the much-maligned semicolon and its fellow punctuation marks as rules for their usage were established and evolved. I consider the consequences of the nineteenth-century explosion of systems of grammar rules by way of the story of a semicolon in a statute that deprived Bostonians of late-night liquor from 1900–1906. The “Semicolon Law,” as it came to be known, exemplifies problems of interpretation still live in legal theory. I contrast the demands of legal formalism with the expectations of close reading in the humanities and social sciences. I conclude by attending to the inheritance left to us by nineteenth-century grammarians’ impassioned attempts to bring order to English: *The Chicago Manual of Style*. I raise some critical questions about our attitudes towards rules, and consider how those attitudes influence our approach to punctuation and our passions about semicolons.

From Humanist Invention to Point of Contention

In punctuation’s past, there was a time before rules. The Italian humanists, who invented the semicolon and the parenthesis, believed that each writer should work out his punctuation for himself rather than employ a predetermined set of rules.⁷ The new punctuation marks the humanists developed were to be used by writers and readers to distinguish the elements of their sentences more precisely. The semicolon, for instance, which first appeared in print in Pietro Bembo’s *De aetna* (1494), was the result of humanists’ desire for a finer shade of distinction than the full stop or comma could provide.⁸ It was meant to highlight the logic of a sentence and contribute to the cadence of prose, and writers could judge for themselves where to put their points. This idea of punctuation as a matter of individual taste outlived the humanists. It stretched beyond Latin and crossed borders and oceans, surviving well into the eighteenth century,

7. See M. B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 48. *Pause and Effect* is the most comprehensive history of punctuation currently available, but, despite Parkes’s paleographical skill, as a history the book has limitations. Parkes claims that punctuation marks and the rules that guide them resolve ambiguities in texts, and on his timeline punctuation usage has grown more and more precise as “conventions of written language were gradually augmented and refined” (ibid., p. 1). This is entirely too whiggish a tale; perhaps punctuation marks can resolve ambiguities as Parkes says, but most certainly they can create ambiguity as well, as their past and present shows clearly. While Parkes portrays punctuation marks as discoveries generated and refined by an ever-increasing comprehension of the logic of language, I want to consider them instead as technologies that are deeply imbedded in the contexts in which they were developed, and thus subject to trend and taste.

8. See ibid., p. 52.

when changes in the availability and methods of education created a demand for grammar presented in textbook form.

This demand was particularly high at fledgling public schools and upstart colleges in the newly independent United States, and grammarians endeavored to supply it. By the middle of the nineteenth century, English grammars were so many in number that when grammarian Goold Brown published his survey *The Grammar of English Grammars* (1851) his selected sources for the 1,028-page tome comprised 548 books.⁹ After the publication of Brown's mid-century metagrammar, still more English grammars "fearfully accumulated,"¹⁰ expounding a "diversity of systems and no-systems of punctuation."¹¹

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Though the grammarian's bread and butter was the textbook, the audience these books addressed went well beyond elementary school students; the preface of each volume was the pulpit from which the grammarian addressed novices, nonbelievers, and the leaders of competing sects. These books thus offer a view into professional and public opinions on grammar; and in the grammarians' attempts to respond to those opinions, we can see them grapple with fundamental problems with rule-based grammar systems. As I will show here, over the course of the nineteenth century, the English grammar books distributed in American schools modeled their contents more and more on the ideals of natural science.

The push towards a more scientific model of grammar altered the shape of grammar systems, including punctuation rules; and grammarians coaxed their sections on punctuation from a few vague guidelines into long lists of minutiae. Punctuation usage transformed from a question of taste to a matter of logic, and the establishment of a natural science model of grammar, which I chart over the next pages, helps account historically for this shift. As grammarians became increasingly interested in a rationalized, systematized, and highly specified way of talking about grammar, they had to find new ways to describe punctuation usage, and they were forced to reconsider pointing's proper place in grammatical systems. A survey of the most influential and successful grammarians shows both the

9. See Goold Brown, *The Grammar of English Grammars* (1851; New York, 1878); hereafter abbreviated *GEG*.

10. Anon., "Grammar Reforms," review of *The True English Grammar; Being an Attempt to Form a Grammar of the English Language, Not Modelled upon Those of the Latin, and Greek, and Other Foreign Languages*, by William B. Fowle, *North American Review* 25 (1827): 451.

11. Anon., review of *Exercises on Words: Designed as a Course of Practice on the Rudiments of Grammar and Rhetoric* by William Russell, and *The Elements of Punctuation; with Rules on the Use of Capital Letters. Being an Abridgment of the "Treatise on English Punctuation."* Prepared for Schools by John Wilson, *North American Review* 83 (Oct. 1856): 555. www.jstor.org/stable/25104789

shift towards a natural science model and the quandaries over punctuation's role, which eventually came to redefine the semicolon.¹²

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Towards a Science of Grammar

The first English grammar book to achieve lasting influence and popularity by legislating usage was Robert Lowth's 1758 *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*. The aim of the book was to "lay down rules" for grammar, and to illustrate violations of those rules Lowth presented examples of false syntax culled from the writings of Shakespeare, John Donne, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Milton. Though he did not hesitate to correct the stylings of authors most readers would have considered great, Lowth reserved a place for individual discretion, particularly when it came to punctuation. For punctuation "few precise rules can be given, which will hold without exception in all cases; but much must be left to the judgment and taste of the writer."¹³ The marks of punctuation were analogous to the rests in a piece of music, and were to be applied as individual circumstances and preferences dictated. The comma thus was a pause shorter than the semicolon, and the semicolon was a pause shorter than the colon.¹⁴

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Lindley Murray's 1795 *English Grammar* adapted Lowth's, increasing its structural precision and rigidity by dividing it into sections and numbering its rules. Murray's book was reprinted in twenty-four editions by sixteen American printers between 1797 and 1870,¹⁵ and the success of *English Grammar* helped make Murray "the best-selling producer of books in the world" between 1801 and 1840.¹⁶ Samuel Kirkham's 1823 grammar, modeled on Murray's, gradually displaced its archetype by presenting a new system of parsing and perpetuating Lowth's and Murray's criticisms of false syntax in historical English.¹⁷ At least 110 editions of the book were published.¹⁸ Kirkham's first edition left out punctuation entirely, on the grounds that it was part of prosody. After this omission garnered criticism,

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12. In analyzing these books, I will primarily refer to the volumes that circulated most widely and were accordingly most often read and cited by other grammarians. For an overview of publishing patterns for grammar books, and some discussion of the grammarians whose books were most popular, see John A. Nietz, "Old Secondary School Grammar Textbooks," *English Journal* 54 (Sept. 1965): 541–46, www.jstor.org/stable/811408

13. Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, pp. xiii, 169.

14. See *ibid.*, p. 172.

15. See Nietz, "Old Secondary School Grammar Textbooks," p. 542.

16. Charles Monaghan, *The Murrays of Murray Hill* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1998), p. 95.

17. F. A. Barbour, "The History of English Grammar Teaching," *Educational Review* 12 (Dec. 1896): 492, 497.

18. See Alma Blount and Clark Sutherland Northup, *An English Grammar, for Use in High and Normal Schools and in Colleges* (New York, 1914), p. 336.

subsequent editions covered punctuation, but only briefly (see *GEG*, p. 47), and only in terms of pauses made in the service of syntax.¹⁹

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The “laws” laid down by Lowth, Murray, and Kirkham evinced their shared belief that grammar was to be viewed as a coherent system of knowledge, an idea that Lowth captured in his definition of grammar as a science. This conception of grammar as science took on a new meaning in the mid-nineteenth century, when grammarians began to claim that grammar was not just science as in a *system* but a science analogous to the *natural* sciences in its method and application. These claims were likely grammarians’ attempts to respond to complaints by parents and school officials that grammar was boring and ineffectual and that pupils’ time would be better spent studying the natural sciences, which were exciting and taught real skills.²⁰ These complaints surfaced as early as 1827,²¹ came to a boil by 1850,²² and persisted through the remainder of the century.²³ Increasingly, grammarians combated these “slighting remarks” with the proposal that grammar be used as a method of teaching students how to observe scientifically without recourse to apparatus.²⁴ In service of this goal, grammarians applied two strategies: they proposed careful observation of English as a means of using a scientific approach to refine grammar; and they imported into their grammars conventions of natural science textbooks, such as diagrams.

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Isaiah J. Morris advocated the first approach, careful observation, in his 1858 *Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language*. Grammar embodied nothing more than basic “laws of the language”;²⁵ but grammarians who relied on Greek and Latin conventions—as Lowth, Murray, and Kirkham did—had littered the laws of English with “errors” and “absurdities,” which Morris felt obligated to “expose and explode”

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19. See Samuel Kirkham, *English Grammar in Familiar Lectures* (Rochester, N.Y., 1835), p. 209.

20. See, for instance, the objections of parents in A. M. Leonard, “The Teaching of Grammar: Meeting at the Educational Room,” *Massachusetts Teacher* (1867): 243, and the state of Connecticut’s rejection of grammar recounted in Barbour, “History of English Grammar Teaching,” p. 500.

21. See “Philosophical Essays-8,” *Masonic Mirror and Mechanics’ Intelligencer*, 24 Feb. 1827, p. 66.

22. See Barbour, “History of English Grammar Teaching,” p. 498.

23. See *ibid.*, p. 500, and Charles H. Watson, “Shifts in Educational Methods,” *The Watchman*, 10 May 1900, p. 14.

24. Quoted in W. M. Baskerville and J. W. Sewell, *An English Grammar for the Use of High School, Academy, and College Classes* (New York, 1895), p. 8. See also G. R. Carpenter, *Principles of English Grammar* (New York, 1902).

25. I. J. Morris, *Morris’s Grammar: A Philosophical and Practical Grammar of the English Language, Dialogically and Progressively Arranged; in Which Every Word Is Parsed According to Its Use* (New York, 1858), p. iii; hereafter abbreviated *MG*.

(*MO*, p. vi).²⁶ “Shall we roll sin under our tongues as a sweet morsel?” he demanded. “It must be sin to teach what we know to be error” (*MG*, p. vi). Accordingly, Morris devoted his preface to eviscerating the precepts of Lowth, Murray, and Kirkham, an exercise he realized would shock his readers: “if the truth is disagreeable,” he warned, “I choose to be offensive” (*MG*, p. xv).²⁷ Morris’s verve and reform-mindedness notwithstanding, his remedy for the “prolix” musings of his predecessors was to make more rules (*MG*, p. xv), although in his book he gave only the first sixteen of some eighty lessons on grammar, and if he had prepared lessons on punctuation they did not make the cut for the small volume.²⁸

Morris’s book exemplified one type of response to the criticism that grammar was inferior to natural science: he advocated observing English (not beginning from Greek or Latin as did the first generation of grammarians) and making rules based on these observations.²⁹ Since these rules would stem directly from scrutiny of the English language in action, they could be assured of apprehending the truth; and the enterprise as a whole thus mirrored the virtues of the natural sciences championed in the press, where commentators argued that students were naturally inclined towards the observation and study of natural phenomena.³⁰

26. New grammarians like Morris left Pope and Milton alone, but they felt free to amend the errors of their predecessors. In one such case, the elocutionist Alfred Ayres saw value in William Cobbett’s grammar, which was “probably the most readable grammar ever written” (Alfred Ayres, “Editor’s Note,” in William Cobbett, *The English Grammar of William Cobbett*, ed. Ayres [New York, 1893], p. 5). However, in the fifty years since it had first emerged, some of Cobbett’s language had become grammatically incorrect, and Ayres was intent on repairing these defects. Thus he inserted bracketed corrections, often destroying the “readability” he had praised: “And that it was this which [that] made that false which [that] would otherwise have been, and which [that] was intended to be, true!” (Cobbett, *The English Grammar of William Cobbett*, p. 85).

27. Morris was correct that his book would cause a stir; for an example of the sort of debate it generated, see J. W. Pratt, “The Uses and Abuses of English Grammar,” *Wisconsin Journal of Education* 4 (Sept. 1859): 76. For a rebuttal of Pratt’s critique of Morris, see D. B. Dudley, “Justice to Authorship,” *Alabama Educational Journal* 1 (Dec. 1858): 80–83. (Pratt’s article was originally an oral address to educators, written up and printed after Dudley had already published his reply.)

28. See Dudley, “Justice to Authorship,” p. 80.

29. Lowth and his ilk have traditionally been described as prescriptivists and grammarians like Morris as descriptivists. I have chosen not to use these terms here because I think they give the impression that Lowth and his followers laid down the law without recognizing the role of *taste*, and that Morris et al. described usage without giving *laws*. The truth is considerably more complicated, and grammarians’ negotiations of the dual demands of rules and taste much more nuanced.

30. See G. Dallas Lind, “Natural Science in Common Schools,” *Massachusetts Teacher* 26 (Aug. 1873): 274. Another critic argued that grammar was important as a science but that only prior study in natural science would enable students subsequently to investigate the fundamentals of English. See C. A. Cole, “The Natural and Physical Sciences in Our Grammar

A second strategy advanced against critics was inaugurated by Stephen W. Clark in *A Practical Grammar*, first published in 1847. Clark was the first grammarian to introduce diagramming into textbooks, which he justified by presenting grammar as analogous to disciplines that were either conceived of as natural sciences or as points of entry into the natural sciences.³¹ His system of diagrams was to relate to the “Science of Language” as maps to geography, and figures to geometry or arithmetic. These diagrams supplemented a set of rules for English grammar in which Clark mimicked the outline form of his contemporary Peter Bullions. Bullions employed the outline in order to show the reader “leading principles, definitions, and rules”; these rules were to be displayed “in larger type” to emphasize their importance, with special rules and exceptions in ever smaller print.³²

In the sizes of Bullions’s fonts we can glimpse a fundamental tension that surfaced in every grammar: the conflicting demands of rules and taste. In Bullions’s grammar, the purpose of punctuation was “to convey to the reader the exact sense, and assist him in the proper delivery.” He warned, however, in font size two points smaller, that “the duration of the pauses must be left to the taste of the reader or speaker.” Nonetheless, he then provided twenty-five rules and exceptions for the comma. These rules were followed by yet another disclaimer in even tinier font than the first: “The foregoing rules will, it is hoped, be found comprehensive; yet there may be some cases in which the student must rely on his own judgment.”³³

Here was the grammarian’s debacle: how was it possible to give useful rules for punctuation, while acknowledging the plain fact that those rules did not describe every valid approach? Whether a grammarian wanted to police English with the laws of Latin and Greek, or instead to derive his

and High Schools: A Paper Read before the Middlesex County Teachers’ Association by C. A. Cole,” *Massachusetts Teacher* 27 (June 1874): 244.

31. On the trajectory of the discipline of geometry in the nineteenth century, and Moritz Pasch’s claims for its status as a natural science, see Roberto Torretti, “Nineteenth Century Geometry,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/geometry-19th/. On nineteenth-century geography as a nexus for the natural sciences, see Jerome Fellmann, Arthur Getis, and Judith Getis, *Human Geography: Landscapes of Human Activities* (Madison, Wisc., 1997), p. 3. While not everyone agreed that geography and geology were natural sciences, they were viewed as essential to the study of the natural sciences and philosophy. See “Subjects and Means of Instruction,” *American Journal of Education* 10 (Mar. 1861): 141. The mathematical sciences, unlike grammar, were “perfect” and “useful” (anon., “Teachers, and Teachers’ Seminaries,” *American Annals of Education* 7 [Feb. 1837]: 49).

32. Peter Bullions, *The Principles of English Grammar; Comprising the Substance of the Most Approved English Grammars Extant; with Copious Exercises in Parsing and Syntax; a New Edition, Revised, Re-Arranged and Improved for the Use of Schools* (New York, 1859), p.viii.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 152, 155.

principles from examination of English in action, he could not escape the tension between the rigidity of rules and the flexibility of usage. Even if usage were taken into account and described in the rules, once laid down the rules could not shift, while usage inevitably did. The grammarian was necessarily torn between trying (and inevitably failing) to anticipate every kind of usage, as in Bullions's twenty-five comma rules, or giving rules so general they were scarcely rules, as with Lowth's specifications of punctuation marks as successively longer pauses. When grammarians tried to fix punctuation marks with rules, they inevitably slipped their restraints, no matter whether they were shackled with a few broad rules or many narrow ones.

The Rise and Fall of the Semicolon

The tension between rules and usage complicated the public image of grammar, as I will shortly discuss; but it also made grammarians keen observers of the punctuation whims of writers. The semicolon gained ground during the 1800s, when first parentheses and then colons lost favor (see *GEG*, p. 773). Parentheses fell out of fashion in the 1810s and 1820s, inspiring Churchill's 1823 grammar to announce, "the parenthesis is now generally exploded as a deformity."³⁴ Three years later Nutting's *Practical Grammar* and Frazee's *Improved Grammar* deemed parentheses "nearly obsolete."³⁵ By the mid-1800s the colon was also roundly snubbed: "The COLON is now so seldom used by good writers, that rules for its use are unnecessary," read Felton's 1843 *Concise Manual of English Grammar*.³⁶ Echoing this sentiment in 1850, *The Common School Journal* proclaimed that when it came to colons, "we should not let children use them" and "should advise advanced scholars seldom to use them."³⁷

The mark that writers substituted for the unstylish colon was the semicolon, which enjoyed a period of great popularity, usurping the roles of

34. T. Churchill, *A New Grammar of the English Language* (London, 1823), p. 362; quoted in *GEG*, p. 773.

35. Rufus Nutting, *A Practical Grammar of the English Language: Accompanied with Notes, Critical and Explanatory* (Montpelier, N.H., 1826), p. 126; quoted in *GEG*, p. 773. See also Bradford Frazee, *An Improved Grammar of the English Language, on the Inductive System, with Elementary and Progressive Lessons in Composition Are Combined* (Philadelphia, 1844).

36. Oliver C. Felton, *A Concise Manual of English Grammar: Arranged on the Principle of Analysis: Containing the First Principles and Rules, Fully Illustrated by Examples; Directions for Constructing, Analyzing, and Transforming Sentences; a System of Parsing, in Some Respects New and Attractive; Alternative Exercises in Correct and False Syntax, Arranged under Most of the Rules of Syntax; and a Series of Parsing Lessons in Regular Gradation from the Simplest to the Most Abstruse* (Salem, Mass., 1843), p. 138; quoted in *GEG*, p. 773.

37. Anon., "Punctuation III," *The Common School Journal*, 1 Feb. 1850, p. 42.

both colons and commas.³⁸ It was so fashionable by the 1840s that Brown leveraged its appeal to implore writers to reconsider the now-neglected colon: “But who cannot perceive,” plead Brown, “that without the colon, the semicolon becomes an absurdity? It can no longer be a *semicolon*, unless the half can remain when the whole is taken away!” Brown pointed out that there was nothing really wrong with the colon, anyway; after all, he argued, colons were “once very fashionable” (*GEG*, p. 773).³⁹ Brown himself was not, however, immune to the lure of the semicolon; the first sentence of his grammar compendium contained seven of them (see *GEG*, p. iii). Fn38

Goold appealed to fashion in his plea for the colon, but his argument also offered a glimpse into the future of punctuation, where logic would reign. By the time H. W. Fowler published *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* in 1926, Goold’s halves and wholes and absurdities had been pressed by Fowler into language reminiscent of a mathematical *reductio* proof, a spare formulation in which neither fashion, nor taste, nor prosody figured.⁴⁰ The semicolon had been transformed. Before the 1800s, it had been a pause. By the early 1800s, grammarians like Murray and Kirkham began to describe these pauses as means to delineate clauses properly, such that punctuation served syntax, with its prosodic features secondary. By the mid-1800s, guided by Clark and Morris, grammar was moving towards a natural science model, deriving its rules from observation of English and teaching them to students through exercises in induction. Faced with this shift, midcentury grammarians waffled on the proper place of punctuation. Was punctuation part of orthography, prosody, or syntax? The ques- Fn40

38. It even appeared on men’s faces, according to a writer for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* who catalogued the facial hair fashions he encountered on a walk through the city: “Forty-three wore the moustache with a fancy tuft upon the chin, but with smooth cheeks; looking as if a semicolon was the best representation of their idea of facial adornment” (“Beards, Smooth Faces, and So On,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 Mar. 1857, p. 2).

39. There is, of course, a complex relationship between rules and usage, which grammarians knew. Their comments about punctuation trends were naturally limited by which texts they chose to observe. In the future, we might be better able to make our own observations of usage with technology that allows us a satellite view of the textual landscape nineteenth-century grammarians inhabited. Google’s new Ngram tool may become very useful indeed in mapping trends in punctuation usage. The Ngram site generates graphs showing how frequently a word—or in this case, a punctuation mark—is used over a time period the user designates. The search can be limited to certain categories like British or American English, or fiction—but greater ability to manipulate these categories will be required before its graphs can be offered as proof in this case. Nonetheless, the reader might find it interesting to use the site to plot the trajectory of certain punctuation marks, and watch colon use arc precipitously upwards in the late 1900s while semicolon use plummets. See Ngram.googlelabs.com, and Jean-Baptiste Michel, et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” *Science*, 14 Jan. 2011, www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6014/176.full

40. See H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Hertfordshire, 1994), p. 568.

tion sparked vigorous debate. If it were prosody, how could it be taught inductively— was it possible to derive rules for the rich and subtle rhythms punctuation could create in texts? Some grammarians resolved to leave out punctuation entirely, uncertain of its classification (and unable to make rules that would encompass its varied applications) in an observation-based, natural science of language.⁴¹

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Where punctuation was included, however, writers were allowed ample opportunity for semicolon use. In George Payne Quackenbos's 1862 *An English Grammar*, four possibilities for semicolon usage were given, and students were instructed to use a semicolon (not a colon, as we might) to introduce a list of items.⁴² Most grammarians considered it still perfectly acceptable to use a semicolon to link together an independent and dependent clause.⁴³ As the push towards logic, natural science, and induction continued, however, punctuation became decoupled from prosody and personal preference. By the 1880s, grammarians distinguished between *rhetorical* pauses, which were akin to pauses in speaking and were not to be marked by punctuation, and *grammatical* pauses, which required punctuation in order to make the structural attributes of the sentence clear.⁴⁴ A few holdouts, like William Chauncey Fowler, advocated applying punctuation marks to signal rhetorical pauses, and in his 1881 grammar it was still permissible to use a semicolon between an independent and dependent clause.⁴⁵ Fowler was, by his own admission, the exception rather than the rule, however; and, in the 1880s, grammarians generally prescribed semicolons only between independent clauses or to separate items in a list that were long enough to be subdivided with commas.⁴⁶ An 1888 report on punctuation by the State Board of California called attention to the fact that there was "but one use of the semicolon" in its lessons, its function restricted to separating independent clauses that contained commas.⁴⁷ In the 130 years that had passed between Lowth's grammar and the California report, the function of the semicolon had been narrowed as grammar became ever more specified and logical. Grammar books were part of

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41. Brown gives a detailed treatment of the various opinions on punctuation's place; see *GEG*, pp. 770–71.

42. George Payne Quackenbos, *An English Grammar* (New York, 1863), p. 264.

43. See, for instance, *GEG*, p. 771: "Of the different kinds of verse, or 'the structure of Poetical Composition,' some of the old prosodists took little or no notice; because they thought it their chief business, to treat of syllables, and determine the orthoëpy of words."

44. See William Chauncey Fowler, *English Grammar* (New York, 1881), p. 743.

45. See *ibid.*, p. 749.

46. See F. A. White, *English Grammar* (London, 1882), p. 212.

47. California State Board of Education, *English Grammar* (Sacramento, Calif., 1888), p. 265.

larger cultural and aesthetic trends, and in responding to those pressures their authors altered the rules of punctuation.

Where had a century of rules, of “true” and “real” and “improved” grammars, of grammar sidling up to natural science—where had all this gotten the generations of Americans who had learned from books devoted to these principles? Into *trouble*, that’s where, according to commentators. “Where is the man that can tell why a comma is inserted instead of a semicolon; a semicolon, instead of a period; a colon, instead of a period?” asked an 1899 editorial. “And yet, the science of punctuation is almost as definite as the science of mathematics, and, with few exceptions, a reason can be given for every mark inserted.” The rules were definitive, and yet their application varied wildly.⁴⁸ Another commentator concurred; citing four specific instances in which the semicolon had “made trouble in the laws” by creating ambiguity in statutes, the author ascribed this trouble to “inability to fix the function of the semicolon.” Old grammar books had given the rules of punctuation in terms of pauses, and “if those who have been writing rules for punctuating compositions had stopped there, we would not have had all this trouble, but these teachers have been going on making new rules for years until no one can undertake to follow them, but each punctuates according to his pleasure, rather than his familiarity with rules.” Finding the rules unhelpful, the public had run screaming in the opposite direction, punctuating willy-nilly. Therefore (the author of the newspaper commentary opined) either the court should write a legal treatise to define punctuation marks once and for all, or it should simply ignore them altogether in its rulings.⁴⁹ But in Massachusetts, the Supreme Court had already tried ignoring punctuation marks, saying that points had no part in statutes.⁵⁰ This attempt to assert that Justice ought to be more than usually blind with regard to punctuation was overly optimistic, and did not obviate the complications of interpretation with which the law had to contend, and with which it is still at present contending. These complications, and some of the anxieties engendered by the explosion of grammar rules, can be clearly seen through examining a case in which a semicolon in a statute went on to cause six years of controversy.

48. John van Ness Standish, “Too Much Teaching by Rote: Schools and Colleges Criticised for Failing to Give Practice,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 24 Dec. 1899, p. 16.

49. “A Semicolon before a Supreme Court: A Legal Treatise on Punctuation or a Changed Method Needed,” *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 1895, n.p.

50. See *David Cushing and Another v. Paul B. Worrick*, 75 Mass. 382; 1857 Mass. LEXIS 356; 9 Gray 382.

No More Cakes and Ale

In late November of 1900, a spat broke out in Fall River, Massachusetts. “It was an unimportant, picayune sort of a personal quarrel,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported, “but it has had results of the greatest and most wide-spread importance.”⁵¹ The events were as follows: a resident of Fall River, Massachusetts walked into a hotel at 11:10 PM and ordered a drink. The hotel owner, aware that the man had been patronizing a rival hotel, decided to spite him by refusing him his drink, even though other patrons were being served. Thus denied, the man threatened to sue for discrimination; and on the following day he made good on his promise, retaining the services of a lawyer, who looked up the statute on liquor sales, which read:

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“That no sale of spirituous or intoxicating liquor shall be made between the hours of 11 at night and 6 in the morning; nor during the Lord’s day, except that if the licensee is also licensed as an Innholder he may supply such liquor to guests who have resorted to his house for food and lodging.” [“SSS,” p. 50]

Based on this statute, the lawyer filed an injunction against the Fall River hotel owner, to prevent him from selling to *anyone* between 11 PM and 6 AM. A local judge granted the injunction, whereupon the hotel owner appealed the decision to the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

Before the supreme court justices, the hotel owner’s attorney argued that the semicolon “was meant to be and should be construed, as a matter of fact, of being a comma” (“SSS,” p. 50). In support of this claim, he noted that the law as originally passed in 1875 had contained a comma where the semicolon now intervened. The comma in the 1875 law was changed to a semicolon during “consolidation” of Massachusetts statutes in 1880. These consolidated statutes were presented to the legislature in 1881 and enacted with the semicolon in place. But because the 1875 parchment original of the law showed a comma, the whole debacle was an error of transcription, claimed the innkeeper’s attorney.⁵²

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The Massachusetts Supreme Court of 1900, before whom the Fall River case was now argued, determined that the 1875 Legislature did indeed publish the statute with a comma in it, and they acknowledged that this created ambiguity. But the legislature had since reenacted the semicoloned version of the law several times, and the latest published version of the statutes gave

51. “Saloons Shut by Semicolon,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 Dec. 1900, p. 50; hereafter abbreviated “SSS.”

52. See “A Semicolon,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 6 Dec. 1900, p. 5.

the law the title “An Act to prohibit the sale of spirituous or intoxicating liquors between the hours of eleven at night and six in the morning.” In the court’s view, the title of the statute was consistent with the meaning produced by the apocryphal semicolon; and in the case that punctuation could “throw light” on the meaning of the law, the court had precedent for invoking it.⁵³ The court thus upheld the injunction against the Fall River innkeeper. Fn53

Once the ruling came down, Boston police were ordered to begin enforcing the law strictly, and so they did, to the financial detriment of innkeepers. The innkeepers, along with everyone else with an interest in liquor sales, began organizing themselves in order to appeal to the state legislature on the first day of its session (see “SSS,” p.50). Accordingly, a bill to amend what was now called the Semicolon Law came before the Massachusetts senate in April 1901, where members argued over the original intent of the legislature. After vigorous debate, a vote was taken, and the amended bill failed 21 to 10.⁵⁴ Fn54

The law continued to attract national attention and stir debate. In the *Washington Post*, Willard Holcomb wrote about the social ramifications of the dispute, which was now “well known throughout the country, owing to the great wailing and gnashing of teeth from this Commonwealth.” Bostonians were not going to let “misfit commas and semicolons” hold them down, however, and they quickly found means by which to evade the law: if liquor was not to be sold after 11 o’clock, they would simply order all they could before the cutoff, and then go on enjoying it afterwards at their leisure. This turned drinking into a kind of competitive sport: Bostonians would show up early at restaurants, stake out tables, and “order up the whole wine list.” Those unfortunates who decided to go to the theater before dinner thus found it nearly impossible to find a seat in a restaurant afterwards; and if, against the odds, a seat *could* be found, its occupant would have to settle for “temperance drinks,” since by that point, all the alcohol was sold out and making its way down the throats of people at neighboring tables. “The life of the latter-day Puritan,” Holcomb concluded, “is not entirely devoid of alcoholic glee.”⁵⁵ But this glee was not quite Bacchanalian enough for opponents of the Semicolon Law; and for advocates of the law, it only served as a reminder of the depths to which Bostonians might sink if given full and free access to alcohol. The battle between the two camps roared vigorously on. As Holcomb noted, this was Fn55

53. *Commonwealth v. George H. Kelley; Same v. James Sutcliffe*, [No Number in Original], 177 Mass. 221; 1900 Mass. LEXIS 1038.

54. “Semicolon Stays,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 11 Apr. 1901, p. 1.

55. Willard Holcomb, “Latter-Day Puritans: Boston Not Entirely Devoid of Alcoholic Glee,” *Washington Post*, 2 June 1901, p. 19.

good news for another punctuation mark, the exclamation point, since the Semicolon Law was “the greatest provoker of profanity yet invented.”⁵⁶ Fn56

The profane exclamations of constituents spurred the Massachusetts legislature to form a Liquor Law Committee to consider the Semicolon Law, and over the next three years repeated hearings were given to the “friends and foes of the semicolon.”⁵⁷ During a 1904 hearing to repeal the law, Representative Davis of Salem maintained that “if every member of this house would vote as he drank, [the bill to repeal] would be adopted by a large majority.”⁵⁸ Still the repeal failed; and when it surfaced again in 1905, passions were still high: a Baptist minister, Reverend Herbert Johnson, said that he had been persuaded that granting one more hour to the “liquor dealers” would “cause the downfall of dozens, scores, yes, even hundreds of young women in an increased degree.” The reverend came by his opinion from visits to second-class hotels and dance halls—visits that he hastened to add were occasioned by interest from “a humanitarian standpoint.” Fn57

The “liquor dealers,” on the other hand, tried to shift the conversation away from the Semicolon Law: “We don’t want the semicolon law abolished, and I hope the word ‘semicolon’ won’t be mentioned during the hearing. We’re not petitioning for any change in punctuation. We simply want one hour more.”⁵⁹ This time, the legislature passed the partial repeal, which was then subjected to a popular vote on 11 December 1906.⁶⁰ The people of Boston approved,⁶¹ and Massachusetts hotel owners had cause to celebrate at their November 1909 banquet: former Senator W. A. Morse of Cape Cod said that when he last attended the banquet, “members of the association were suffering from some errors of grammar in the laws of the state, but now they were not worried by either commas or semicolons.”⁶² Fn59

The liquor association might have been liberated from the burden of commas and semicolons, but courts and legislatures have had to go on struggling with the questions of interpretation that arose in the debates surrounding the Semicolon Law. What is the significance of punctuation marks? Do they have a set meaning, and can that meaning be determined historically? And if so, by what methods? How much does their meaning within a sentence depend on text that lies beyond it? Does it matter who Fn60

56. Ibid.

57. “Liquor Hours: Closing and Present Law Considered,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 8 Feb. 1905, p. 4.

58. “Semicolon Law Stays on Books,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 7 Apr. 1904, p. 1.

59. “Liquor Hours,” p. 4.

60. See “Plain, Common Sense,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 28 Nov. 1906, p. 6.

61. See “Hotel Owners Getting in Line,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 13 Dec. 1906, p. 6.

62. “Hotel Men at Banquet Board,” *Boston Daily Globe*, 12 Nov. 1909, p. 11.

put the punctuation there: a legislator, a printer, a transcriptionist? Practitioners and theorists of the law must still contend with these questions, and punctuation is taken very seriously by advocates of formalism who “accord primacy to the text, structure, and history of the document in ascertaining the meaning of its provisions and then applying that meaning in a rigorous, logically formal way.” These formalists, despite their high tolerance for the “cumbersomeness” of their enterprise, do reach a limit beyond which they do not historicize further: they are willing to assume that rules and definitions accurately reflect usage and that everyone involved in writing and publishing laws obeyed popular rule systems.⁶³

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Not all disciplines that contend with historical texts can bear the demands of the formalists’ approach, and when the historical material in question *predates* standardized rules, there is no question of resorting to such records to establish meaning. To show what tricky situations punctuation can engender when modern readers do not bear in mind that punctuation rules are not eternal constants, I will examine an instance of problematic close reading in a book that has been influential and controversial in critical perspectives on the sciences.⁶⁴

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Witnesses, Virtual and Real-Time

In their history of the dialogue between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer argue that Robert Boyle attempted to draft “virtual” witnesses by describing his experimental procedures. In other words, Boyle wanted anyone who read his published records of his air-pump experiments to feel that

63. Vasan Kesavan and Michael Stokes Paulsen, “Is West Virginia Unconstitutional?” *California Law Review* 90 (Mar. 2002): 396. Kesavan and Paulsen apply a formalist reading to Article 4, Section 3 of the Constitution, which contains a semicolon that could be interpreted to mean West Virginia, Kentucky, and Maine are unconstitutional. See *ibid.*, p. 341 n. 161, where Kesavan and Paulsen write that it is necessary to consult treatises on punctuation written during the time the law was composed. They come to the rather curious conclusion that “the meaning of the semicolon has not changed appreciably in the past 213 years”—which might come as a surprise to readers accustomed to looking at rules of usage from that era. See also Justice Antonin Scalia’s dissent in *Tennessee, Petitioner v. George Lane et al.*, 541 U.S. 509 (2004) for a characteristic example of Scalia’s use of historical dictionaries to justify an interpretation of the law.

64. I use the term here to include History and Philosophy of Science (HPS), Science and Technology Studies (STS), and work from other disciplines that critically engages science. *Science studies* is no longer a good general term for these areas, since it is often used as a shorthand for STS, and STS and HPS are not quite decided on their territories; see Lorraine Daston, “Science Studies and the History of Science,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 798–813, and Peter Dear and Sheila Jasanoff, “Dismantling Boundaries in Science and Technology Studies,” *Isis* 101 (Dec. 2010): 759–74. No matter how much one might feel allegiance to one ideal of inquiry into the sciences over another, it is certainly the case that scholars in these areas have some interests still common enough that a nonpoliticized umbrella term would be useful.

reading about them was equivalent to having been present at the experiments, thus enabling Boyle's readers to "testify" to the experiments' accuracy. To establish in their introduction that Boyle wanted to create virtual witnesses with his book, Shapin and Schaffer leverage a single quotation from Boyle's *New Experiments*:

"These narratives [are to be] as standing records in our new pneumatics, and [readers] need not reiterate themselves an experiment *to have as distinct an idea of it*, as may suffice them to ground their reflexions and speculations upon."⁶⁵

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Because the sentence from which this passage is excerpted is lengthy, Shapin and Schaffer have added the bracketed words above, to make Boyle's meaning clearer. In addition, they add italics to the phrase "to have as distinct an idea of it" in order to show their readers what is, to their minds, Boyle's essential clause. Shapin and Schaffer, then, believe that Boyle meant for his experiments to offer "the possibility of virtual witnessing." By "virtual witnessing," they mean that "it would be as if that reader had been present at the proceedings. He would be recruited as a witness and be put in a position where he could validate experimental phenomena as matters of fact."⁶⁶

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Shapin and Schaffer's "virtual witnessing" reading only holds, however, if we read Boyle with modern grammatical standards in mind. That is, we must assume that the final clause of Boyle's sentence is distinct from, and subordinate to, the clause that Shapin and Schaffer have italicized. If we approach the sentence from the perspective of twenty-first-century punctuators, we would be inclined to read that last clause as a kind of aside, a digression, rather than an essential qualification that completes the comparison ("as distinct as") begun in the clause preceding it. Shapin and Schaffer read Boyle something like this: These narratives are to be as standing records in our new pneumatics, and readers need not reiterate themselves an experiment to have as distinct an idea of it as a direct observer would (which will also be enough for them to ground their reflections and speculations on).

But Boyle wrote this sentence over three hundred years ago. We do not use commas in the same way (or as often) as was the fashion when Boyle wrote, and we present-day writers probably would omit Boyle's last comma. The difference is subtle, but essential: Boyle does *not* say, as Sha-

65. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), p. 62.

66. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

pin and Schaffer argue, that reading this written record would be as good as actually having seen the experiment in person. Rather, he says that he intends for his records to be clear enough for the reader to imagine and conceptualize the experiments. Boyle seems to mean quite simply that his reports will give readers a good enough idea of what happened in the laboratory that they could reflect and speculate using the reports. Reflection and speculation are a long way from publicly accepting and endorsing an experiment as fact in the manner of one who had been there in person.⁶⁷ Fn67

It is, of course, possible that Boyle used the comma unconventionally here or that it is a printer's insertion rather than Boyle's. Did Shapin and Schaffer need to adopt the mode of the legal formalist and consider those possibilities as well? No: "Boyle" here is used to represent not only the man but also his published writings, and this sort of synecdoche is not unconventional in critical perspectives on the sciences. For the purposes to which they put the quotation, what Shapin and Schaffer needed to contend with was the text as it was printed. Since they advance an interpretation of the passage that runs counter to the conventions of Boyle's time, other evidence would be required to transform the *possibility* this passage flouted those conventions into the *probability* that it does. Over the course of the book they deploy more evidence to argue their case,⁶⁸ but their interpretation of this quotation, placed prominently in the introduction, confronts the reader with an immediate stumbling block. We readers, presented with textual evidence, are not "virtual witnesses," but *real* ones, able to judge quotations from Boyle with our own eyes; we can see the same facsimile copy of Boyle that Shapin and Schaffer saw, and whether we agree or disagree with their interpretation can determine whether we are filled with trust or skepticism.⁶⁹ Fn68

Even when we recognize multiple factors in interpretation, in critical Fn69

67. I have tried to be careful throughout this essay to avoid suggesting that logic and punctuation *have nothing to do with one another*; the logic of Boyle's sentence, I have argued, rests in large measure on his punctuation. But Boyle's punctuation choices reflect the *fashions* of his time rather than syntactical necessity. A modern person could, and would, punctuate the same sentence differently. Nothing in the *nature of language* demanded that he use commas where he did. That is, neither commas nor any other punctuation marks have an *inherent* logical meaning that can provide exact rules for their use or demand their deployment. And nothing in our modern punctuation suggests that it is superior to Boyle's; it is no more sensible, no more refined than his, no better at conveying meaning. It is simply different, and we cannot read Boyle by its standards.

68. Reviewers and readers have differed over whether the evidence is *persuasive*, but certainly Shapin and Schaffer do give evidence.

69. I do not wish to downplay the fact that Shapin and Schaffer have done their readers a service by presenting the text in this way; they could have given their interpretation with just a footnoted citation. In historically informed writing, it is not always possible to do this, given the masses of sources the author is often compelled to analyze; given those constraints, it is nice

perspectives on the sciences, as in the law, commas and semicolons count. Understanding how to read and explain those punctuation marks depends on our understanding grammar rules not as fixed elements of language but as shifting standards that have varied historically. But our ability to perceive the contingent nature of rules has become more and more restricted as grammar guides have moved even further towards a rationalist conception of language. This shift, and its influence on the now-maligned semicolon, can be traced through the century-long evolution of one of our most successful modern rulebooks, *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Persuasion and Pretention

What has been the fate of the semicolon, breaker of Bostonian spirits, and the rules that aimed to bring it to heel? In the same year the Semicolon Law was repealed, 1906, the University of Chicago Press published a 203-page style guide called *Manual of Style*. Unlike the grammar textbooks of the nineteenth century, this book was not for schoolchildren, but for authors, editors, and proofreaders. Shift in audience notwithstanding, the *Manual* inherited both the nineteenth-century's predilection for rules and its worries about trends. As the *Manual* put it, "rules and regulations such as these, in the nature of the case, cannot be endowed with the fixity of rock-ribbed law. They are meant for the average case, and must be applied with a certain degree of elasticity."⁷⁰ The manual presented its rules in numbered form, with nineteen regulations given for the most commonly used punctuation mark, the comma.⁷¹

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The disclaimer about "elasticity" is still being repeated in the current iteration of the *Manual*, the sixteenth. It has "become a maxim," and it is enshrined in the preface of every edition of the *Manual*. But the rest of the book has changed considerably since it was first printed, with its major revisions pushing it farther and farther along the course first plotted by those nineteenth-century rule-setters. In the thirteenth edition, published in 1982, *A Manual of Style* became *The Chicago Manual of Style*, which was "what everybody else calls it" and an apt reflection of the authority the book had achieved by dominating the market for stylebooks. With the definite article came a shift towards greater definitiveness all around; this was "much more a 'how-to' book for authors and editors than was its

to see Shapin and Schaffer avail themselves of the opportunity to do a close reading and let their readers assess the results.

70. *Manual of Style, Being a Compilation of the Typographical Rules in Force at the University Of Chicago Press, to Which Are Appended Specimens of Types in Use* (Chicago, 1906), p. v.

71. See *ibid.*, pp. 45–52.

predecessor.” Still, the *Manual* at least paid some lip service to taste: “Punctuation should be governed by its function, which is to make the author’s meaning clear, to promote ease of reading, and in varying degrees to contribute to the author’s style.” There was no indication of *how* punctuation might contribute to style, and writers were warned that rules should be followed to regulate the presence of “the subjective element.”⁷² Fn72

The latest edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (1026 pages, 38 comma rules) carries these principles still farther away from that “subjective element”: the preface announces that the book will “recommend a single rule for a given stylistic matter rather than presenting multiple options.”⁷³ Exceptions were eliminated where possible. This was what the *Manual’s* users wanted, though it is unclear whether firmer and more numerous rules have really reduced uncertainty, if the *Chicago Manual of Style’s* popular “Chicago Style Q&A” web page is any indication. On the site, anyone can write in with questions about how the rules are to be applied and learn that if the *Manual* hasn’t got the exact construction they are looking for, they can “extrapolate” from the rules that are given.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, in the pages of the *Manual* itself, authorial “style” has disappeared entirely from the punctuation section, and instead, “punctuation should be governed by its function, which in ordinary text is to promote ease of reading by clarifying relationships within and between sentences.”⁷⁵ Has the *Manual of Style* lost its style? Fn73
Fn74
Fn75

Certainly it lacks the sense of enthusiasm and passion that filled the prefaces of nineteenth-century grammarians, and in comparison with those volumes, the *Manual’s* precepts seem safe and sterile. The muse of fire that animated earlier grammarians has fled its pages, and even the flame-orange jacket the *Manual* once wore has turned placid blue. Confronted as the contemporary writer is with such thick tomes of authoritative rules, Robinson, the semicolon-hater I quoted at the very beginning of this essay, has articulated an important principle in his “Philosophy of Punctuation”: it is more difficult to learn something when one’s teacher (be that teacher a book or a person) lacks visible enthusiasm for the subject.

Rules are important, no question about it. But by themselves they are insufficient. Unless one has an emotional investment, rules are too easily forgotten. What we must instill, I’m convinced, is an attitude toward punctuation, a set of feelings about both the process in gen-

72. *The Chicago Manual of Style: For Authors, Editors, and Copywriters* (Chicago, 1982), pp. vii, 132.

73. Russell David Harper, preface to *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Chicago, 2010), p. xii.

74. “Chicago Style Q&A,” *The Chicago Manual of Style Online*, www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/CMS_FAQ/new/new_questions01.html

75. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, p. 306.

eral and the individual marks of punctuation. That set of feelings might be called a philosophy of punctuation. ["PP"]

This broader agenda for punctuation—a call for rules and passion—results in Robinson's allergic reaction to semicolons, which often conceal absent or faulty logic: "They place two clauses in some kind of relation to one another but relieve the writer of saying exactly what that relation is," he writes ("PP").

It is true that the semicolon can be used in the manner Robinson describes, but that scarcely seems to be a problem inherent in, or exclusive to, that particular punctuation mark. Nonetheless, these glossings-over that often accompany the semicolons Robinson encounters (he refers in particular to student papers) generate a sense of repulsion in him, and he himself eschews the mark wherever possible. Semicolons, Robinson maintains, are "pretentious" marks used by writers who wish to give their texts a scholarly veneer ("PP"). These allegations of pretentiousness on the part of the semicolon have grown increasingly common in the last few decades, but they date back at least to the late nineteenth century, when one commentator *celebrated* the "elitist" character of the semicolon that disgusts Robinson:

It seems paradoxical to assert that the simplest method of isolating the masters of modern English literature is carefully to observe the frequency and propriety of their semicolons; and yet, like the Oxford college where the fellows were chosen by the grace with which they were able to dispose of the stones from the plum tart, the semicolon test may prove the final one to determine the author's fitness to rank with august society.⁷⁶

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I would no more argue for measuring the intelligence of a person with semicolons than with finessing stones from tarts; but neither do I hold with obliterating the semicolon, any more than I would refuse to eat a slice of plum tart. There is no need to hate semicolons without let, or love commas unequivocally: one can react passionately towards individual instances of their usage without having to swear allegiance to, or vendettas against, the marks themselves. The problem, then, is not Robinson's call for emotional investment; rather, it is the direction in which he claims we should channel those emotions.

If the semicolon has sometimes been invested with elitism, it has also been drafted in the fight for equality. Seven semicolons are instrumental in a central sentence from Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

76. E. H. Mullin, "A Plea for the Semicolon," *The Chap-Book*, 1 Feb. 1898, p. 247.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Fun-town is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.⁷⁷

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As King was waiting, frustrated, for change, so must the reader wait a full page, held in suspension by those semicolons, while King lists agony after agony before he alights on his final clause, delivered emphatically with an em dash. The experience of reading the sentence is one of waiting breathless and uncomfortable, which amplifies the force of King's description of the misery of waiting for change. And this experience of waiting could only be created with the semicolons, which are doing much more here than just separating items in a list. There is no glossing over logic or hiding meaning:

77. Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf

the semicolon is used to open a window on the lived experience of blacks, not to lacquer it over with scholarly veneer.

It will be clear from my comments on King that my feelings about the value of the semicolon are quite different from Robinson's; and I differ with him even more strongly on his assertion that we should direct emotional investment in punctuation towards remembering *rules*, the importance of which he considers beyond question. The history of punctuation shows that rules cannot be taken for granted as necessary elements of language. For a start, when we consider rules, we should ask, *whose* rules? Exactly which collection of them are we supposed to rely upon and remember, when the fortunes of these systems have depended on their contradicting each other? If there is some true principle of gravity that holds these points in fixed orbits, no Newton of grammar has yet identified it. For over two centuries, grammar books have preached the gospel of rules, and now, when I talk to students and fellow academics about grammar, they lower their voices confidentially, as though confessing a sin: *I just don't ever use the semicolon because I'm afraid I'll do it wrong. I sometimes want to use two colons in a single sentence, but I'm not allowed. I am very confused about the Oxford comma.* Even if we do decide on some set of rules to follow, we will not be relieved of our anxieties about punctuation. We must still worry about whether we know the rules and have applied the rules correctly. We must worry about situations for which we cannot find an applicable rule, and hope that the authorities on the *Chicago Manual's* question-and-answer page address the oversight *tout de suite*. And if we are very good at remembering the rules and applying even their less well-known precepts, we must wonder if our assiduous application of these details will strike the average reader as *mistakes* rather than the markers of precision we hope them to be. If rules are not natural features of language, then they depend upon their being shared knowledge in order to bestow on our writing the clarity and precision they promise. Rules have not historically, and are not now, freeing us from the challenges of interpreting other authors' texts and the anxieties of writing our own.

Yet the bromide that *we need to know rules* is constant even among punctuation reformists like Robinson, and so deeply entrenched that grammar writers rarely (if ever) attempt to justify it.⁷⁸ Even Adorno, whose essay "Punctuation Marks" beautifully recovered and built upon the hu-

78. In *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, Truss refers to the art of punctuating but then goes on to give the artist strict rules; and Roy Peter Clark, who gives a sophisticated and energetic account of the power of grammar, nonetheless encourages the reader to "master the rules" in order to break them (Roy Peter Clark, *The Glamour of Grammar: A Guide to the Magic and Mystery of Practical English* [New York, 2010], p. 5).

manist ideal of punctuation as musical, advised that the rules must “echo in the background” even in moments where the author “suspends” them.⁷⁹ Perhaps this unwillingness to give up these admonishments stems from an assumption that we perceive writing in terms of rules. That is, in the conventional wisdom about grammar, there is always an explicit or implicit claim that we process writing as conformity to, or conflict with, rules. If that were true, it would be strange that we can read Shakespeare without our sensibilities being constantly assaulted by “false syntax.” Perhaps the experience of reading is less a matter of hearing *rules* and *not-rules* than of immersing ourselves in *norms* that vary with the individual, the time period, the genre, the culture. On this understanding of the experience of reading, there may be in the reader’s consciousness something like a regression line jetting diagonally upwards through the individual instances of usage scattered around it, the line getting as near the variables as possible without confining them. Such an experience is considerably more complex than a binary assessment of rules versus violations.

If rules do not do what they set out to do—if they are idealizations of language that neither succeed in regulating our writing nor describe how texts work—does this mean that rules are worthless? Not necessarily. In fact, once we can see past rules as the *only* framework in which we might understand and learn to use language, we can begin to see what purpose rules might *really* serve. That is, we can peel away the naturalistic justification that “rules are *really in* language” and free ourselves to ask instead, what *good* might rules be, even if they aren’t strictly *necessary* or *sufficient*? Rules, considered as frameworks within which to work rather than specifications of the outer limits of rhetorical possibility, might spur creativity, as a poet might choose to work within the strictures of the sonnet.

Even if they are not the basis by which we read and write, grammar rules cannot be unthought as though they never existed. We could not (and perhaps we would not want to) transport ourselves to a time before there were rules. But perhaps we can think *beyond* them. At least by considering the history of the points that dot our texts, we can acquire some of the perspective necessary to evaluate rules. It is, after all, impossible to negotiate assumptions we just cannot see.

79. Theodor W. Adorno, “Punctuation Marks,” trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen, *Antioch Review* 48 (Summer 1990): 305.