

VARIETY

THE PASSING OF PUNCTUATION

By J. P. Bowles

RECENTLY I wrote to a typewriter-manufacturer requesting the name and orthodox use of the double cross and the diagonal line (# and /). In reply, the company's correspondent referred to them as the "number sign" and the "diagonal line". He regretted that he could not advise regarding the "orthodox" uses but he obligingly reproduced the entire keyboard of the Hebrew typewriter!

Since this number symbol has no name it may be a recent acquisition from script. The "and" symbol is easily traceable from the Latin "et" just as our longhand retains a modified "t".

But the diagonal line has lived a thousand years without a name. It was first used to mark off sentences and clauses. It appeared also in the form of the Arabic numeral "7". It finally dwindled into a little curlicued tail and merged its identity with the Greek comma. The ancient "7" is still found in use by proofreaders who use its vertical shaft to separate words, adding to its lower extremity a short line running to the right.

In classical Latin punctuation was unnecessary. A verb marked the end of the sentence. "Que" did for commas. "Sic" or "ita" would now be colons. Questions were introduced with unmistakable words of inquiry and the subjunctive was used for exclamation.

When Latin degenerated meanings became ambiguous. Garbled words had to be separated. The diagonal line came in use to separate grammatical entities. For several hundred years grammar struggled along with makeshift indicators till in the 16th century a Venetian printer, Aldus Manutius, introduced Greek punctuation and used it with some semblance of consistency.

Manutius apparently did not know the

scope of the problem and therefore failed to see it in perspective. In an alphabet language, letters allocate parts of the mouth whence a sound issues. As there are more sounds than letters, punctuation serves to multiply the functions of a single letter. When a letter or its compounds forms a distinctly pronounceable sound, the resulting syllable is used to signify a thing, as when a child says "moo" for cow. Syllables or their compounds, words, when placed in relation are called phrases (ideas). Phrases or/and words in relation become sentences (thoughts). And so in the recording of mental processes come paragraphs, sections, chapters and books. The punctuation of books is their bindings, of chapters their headings, of sections and paragraphs the S-astride-an-S and the reversed P with the double shaft, respectively.

Manutius was concerned chiefly with the grammatical and rhetorical punctuation of the sentence. Instead of the ungainly diagonal he used the Greek colon. To mark subordinate parts he used the Greek period, probably because it looked like a half colon.

Presently the Greek period came to be known as the full-stop or stop, as in telegrams today. The colon found a peculiar use within the sentence as the fulcrum of a balanced thought or as a taking-off place for a group of subordinate, kindred thoughts. Period is Greek for "circuit". And ever since the discovery of electricity, college professors have expressed alarm over dangling participles.

The diagonal line next is found, shrunken into the Greek comma, at the most critical points, the ends of grammatical entities. The semicolon (which was the Greek question mark) becomes a master comma.

Turned upside down, the Greek question

mark, our semicolon, suggests our own question mark (:). One guesses that the printers, finding that the inverted semicolon broke the alignment of the type, substituted an upright comma (or apostrophe) over a period and so created the question mark (:). Others say, however, that manuscript writers put a small Roman capital Q over the period and then learned to make the Q in a single stroke (?). Today in Spanish the question mark is inverted at the beginning of a sentence and upright at the end.

Printers found that the Greek question mark, our semicolon, used in the Spanish way, made useful quotation marks (;). Although quotes have come to be known as inverted commas (whereas they should be known as apostrophes), they never have been anything but a printer's expedient. The real origin of quotes seems to be the German use of parallel pairs of marks like elongated accents. Now these marks closely resemble the marks used to indicate a passage to be clipped. Clipped for what? For quoting! And there you are — maybe.

Another style of quotation marks resembles two pairs of capitals V, pointing West and East respectively (<>). They are now recommended by the Government Printing Office for use as inside parentheses. The pair of semicolons (;), once used as quotes, may be the antecedents of regular parentheses.

The Greek question mark, our semicolon, inverted, is also looked upon as the embryo exclamation-point. But the early appearance of V-shaped check marks over periods indicates that the exclamation-point is merely an accented period. According to another version, however, it is the exclamation Oh! or O!, later written as an accented o (ó), of which the period is now the vestigial letter. The pictorial value of this mark, suggesting the arrow approaching a bulls-eye, is so great that exclamation-points have outgrown their use and are now used, particularly in advertising, to attract attention.

There is no telling all that printers have done to language through punctuation or otherwise. But the "ye" which labels the like of antiqued coffee shops was once a printer's device for plain t-h-e. Some printer with a Teuton leaning probably re-

garded "th" inadequate to represent the sound we make with tongue between teeth. So he used the Greek letter for that sound. And, running out of the Greek letter, used the nearest thing to it, our "y". So there is no reason for pronouncing the "y" in "ye" as in "yes". Those who say "thou" for "you" are probably right after all.

All this punctuating, designed to make the grammar clear, has tended to make the writer careless. It facilitates the piling up of idea upon idea, all in one sentence. Ruskin and Macauley did this skillfully. Others use commas like hairpins. Dressing long sentences almost requires a beauty specialist. Bobbing them helps you get down to work on time.

Comma is Greek for "a piece cut off". The suggestion of "tail" is irresistible. So I looked up "comet" in Webster. It is derived from the Greek for "tail". And the word "coma", meaning "hair" refers to the streamers of a comet.

Little tail-like marks on the wing give a name to the comma butterfly. In zoölogy the arrangement of marks is known as punctuation. A tiny germ with a curling tail is known as the comma bacillus. And finally the disease of using too many commas is known as commatism. The word is in Webster. So, you long haired, long sentence writers, you are commatists! All this from the mediaeval diagonal line.

The number of commas on a page is in inverse proportion to the number of periods. But comma germs give an untidy look and make one feel that the page ought to be sent to the dry cleaners to have the spots removed. Not many years ago Arthur Brisbane showed in an editorial how easily we could do away with periods.

In fact, while an encyclopedia can be written about punctuation, we could throw the whole business off the dock tomorrow. In this age we cannot afford to be hampered with long skirts or long sentences. Both impede our faster movement. One must write so that those who drive automobiles may read. Advertisers find that sentences of more than twenty-five words do not catch on. Commas trip you up. And those who still maintain that commas should be used

rhetorically to mark pauses in speech must now surrender. We have no time to pause. By the way, remember the pin that dropped during a pause and was heard because it was so quiet? Well, that pin was a comma.

Punctuation is a nuisance in a day when stenographers transcribe on electrically driven typewriters. The shorthand machine will probably reappear. Maybe we will learn how to read shorthand electrically typed. Radio promises an international language, to be written phonetically perhaps. Association with the Orient may lead to a complete

reorganization of the system of logic behind our language. Soon we may be talking picture language into machines which transcribe readable voice waves before our eyes. And with wireless — my word.

At any rate language is a cumbersome instrument. And while we await a great inventor we can not afford to put much effort on patching and punctuating. For the present we hope for the best that the new stenographer will not put all the commas before the ands and hyphenate the words in the middle of syllables.



JOSEPHUS

By Elizabeth Hallowell

FOR years Josephus sat on the lowest shelf of our bookcase. He was a large, stolid, leather volume bound in heavy calf, a real tome, an out-size book. He sat between the dictionaries and Cooper's "Virgil", and towered head and shoulders above even Liddell's "Greek Lexicon". His full name was "Flavius Josephus — Antiquities and Wars of the Jews". All the aunts and the uncle venerated Josephus; he was an heirloom, of noble rank among the family Lares and Penates. Yet, though Josephus was revered by them all, I don't remember that any one of them ever opened him. But there he sat on our bottom shelf and took up room. And in a home where bookshelves were always too few, and books too many, that was a serious matter. I say Josephus sat. Occasionally he was sat upon, when the presence of youthful visitors necessitated an improvised high chair. At such times Josephus was really useful. And occasionally, too, he came out to sit upon our herbaria. But for the most part, calm like Buddha, he sat upon his shelf. Other books might come and go, have their day and cease to be, but there on his shelf, in the bookcase, Josephus sat.

Now our practical-minded mother had little patience with Josephus. She complained that no one read him; that he simply sat on his shelf, and took up room, and had to be dusted. Not being a Hallowell born, she could not be expected to honor all the Hallowell traditions.

My brother and I, of the next generation, even though Hallowell born, openly jeered at Josephus. We thought him smug and self-righteous sitting there on the shelf in his worn calf binding, and crowding out our favorite volumes. We had looked into him, and found him a wordy individual with a rather too serious outlook on life. Josephus might be a family tradition, but we had no intention of reading him. So at Thanksgiving reunions and other family conclaves, the question of Josephus's future usually came up. Our mother began the discussions. She always started something when she suggested that Josephus give up his seat to books in more frequent use. At once there rose a horrified chorus. Part with Josephus! Sell Josephus to the old-book man! Give Josephus to the Morgan Memorial! Send Josephus to the public library! Not to be thought of. Why, Josephus was a classic! Josephus was a valuable book! Josephus had cost a lot of money in his day! Josephus was a reference book of parts! You could get all sorts of useful information from Josephus! The aunts and the uncle said that they had always been fond of Josephus; they had read him as children; they would like nothing better than to read him again; read him anew each year, they implied. To each in turn our mother offered Josephus as a gift. Had they been differently situated, how gladly would they have accepted the offer! But, alas, their