Introduction: observing the ellipsis

> You can't fool the critics for long. They can tell a dot from a dash
> a mile off...
>
> <div align="right">Harold Pinter</div>

This is a book about . . . . It is a history of hesitations, interruptions and omissions in literary texts. More specifically, it is about the marks that make manifest literature's lapses into silence. Silence has been defined as the non-symbolic.[1] This book demonstrates nonetheless writers' persistent need for routine symbols that express communicative dependence on the non-verbal.

The subject of this book is the evolution of these symbols. It traces the emergence of a punctuation that displays linguistic curtailment and imprecision. Or to look at it another way, it examines how authors have used such signs to reach towards greater precision in the recording of speech and experience on the page. Bound up with the representation of speech is the representation of person, and ellipsis marks have long served as a means of promoting access to emotional or psychological states. More generally, these seemingly insignificant marks, in their variant graphic forms, in their waxing and waning and in their accruing and diminishing connotations, reflect trends and philosophies that have shaped literary practice.

'Ellipsis marks' as a term covers a range of symbols that have served comparable purposes and in many respects have been used interchangeably. These are dots, dashes, series of hyphens and asterisks. This study begins in the late sixteenth century when interruptions begin to develop a specific notation in dramatic texts and it culminates in the first half of the twentieth century with the standardization of dot, dot, dot. While we distinguish today between the trailing away of these ellipsis points . . . and the more abrupt interruption signalled by a dash, such specific tonal and durational cues have emerged slowly. This book seeks to trace the ways in which associations of this sort develop over time and to investigate, as far as is possible, the thinking behind elliptical markings.

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It is the case with every punctuation mark that its usage depends not only upon the stylistic choices of individuals, but also, less consciously, upon prevailing fashions and orthodoxies. This is as much the case for the semicolon as it is for the dash.[2] In 1948, the psychologist E. L. Thorndike used punctuation as a case-study for examining the ways in which customs develop and for observing the relations between prescription, habit and impulse as prompts for behaviour. In the course of his research, he was struck by the 'remarkable' rise of . . . in literature of the early twentieth century, a phenomenon he had not previously been alert to.[3] So while his essay described latent forces that determine our punctuation choices, it also testified to punctuation's continuing latency on the page, often remaining invisible even to the most observant readers. Thorndike admitted that though he was often in the company of . . . as a reader of George Meredith, Edith Wharton and others, 'Not until I found it abounding in my counts of punctuation, did I ever think anything about it.'[4]

Theodor Adorno's sense that 'inconspicuousness is what punctuation lives by' is borne out by Thorndike's astonishment at the contemporary proliferation of ellipses.[5] Furthermore, . . . was present in the works of authors writing long before George Meredith, and even in the wake of scholarly analysis such as Thorndike's ellipsis could be neglected in critical books addressing the subject of literary punctuation.[6] As I shall describe in greater detail, this has much to do with the perceived unorthodoxy of ellipsis marks in contrast to other marks of punctuation. In consequence, responses are often hostile when ellipses do come into view.

Punctuation becomes conspicuous mainly through aberrant practice. Innovation and overuse, as much as error, can contravene norms of grammatical correctness or stylistic propriety. But rules of grammatical and stylistic correctness also evolve and change over time. In the eighteenth century, unlike today, the placing of an apostrophe was generally a relaxed affair. Yet, since its origins, the fundamental purpose of punctuation has been disambiguation. St Augustine's explanation of the opening of St John's Gospel reveals what can be at stake in the placing of a pause. Punctuation may make evident God's self-revelation in scripture when a pause follows *Verbum*, '[. . .] *et Deus erat Verbum*' (and the Word was God), or it denies this heretically if the pause is placed elsewhere, '[. . .] *et Deus erat. Verbum* [. . .]' (and God was. The Word [. . .]). The need to transmit scripture unambiguously was a major contributing influence in the development of a standardized system of punctuation marks.[7]

Punctuation serves both syntactic and elocutionary roles. It articulates the connections between parts of a sentence, grouping together words and

phrases, and in doing so helps a reader correctly deliver its meaning. The emphasis placed on one or other of these roles has varied over time, but both prioritize clear explication of meaning. Ellipsis marks also serve the principle of disambiguation, making lapses in connectivity explicit for a reader. Yet, in so doing, they can seem to flaunt the vacuous. This is the common satirical view of ellipsis points that can be traced through the twentieth century. In 1919, George Summey in his book *Modern Punctuation: Its Utilities and Conventions* quoted Don Marquis in the New York *Evening Sun* describing the popularity of 'three little dots' in contemporary verse and in journalism:

> it means that the writer . . . is trying to suggest something rather . . . well, elusive, if you get what we mean . . . and the reason he suggests it instead of expressing it . . . is . . . very often . . . because it is an almost idea . . . instead of a real idea.[8]

Roughly fifty years later, in 1967, the British theatre critic Kenneth Tynan included 'The Three Dots' in his guide to 'Punctuation as an Aid to Loose Thinking'.[9] Several decades on, in 1994 Umberto Eco described 'the ghastliness of these dots' complaining of their use mid-sentence when a writer lacks self-confidence.[10]

In these and in many other similar accounts, ellipsis is repeatedly associated with popular and often debased forms of writing. It is as much a sin as a sign of omission. The ellipsis is a form of mechanical mood-setting, an evasion adopted by the hasty and inadequate author or a genre-based cliché. While E. L. Thorndike might have encountered . . . first in Meredith's highbrow prose, he concludes that *Superman* comics use it with the greatest frequency. Adorno sees the three dots as a product of mass cultural consumption. They emerged when 'Impressionism became a commercialized mood' to suggest 'an infinitude of thoughts and associations, something the hack journalist does not have; he must depend on typography to simulate them'.[11]

The dash and ellipsis points . . . were originally equivalent versions of the same mark. The closeness of their relationship is evident when we see how the dash has caused near-identical anxieties about literary debasement. In the radical transformation of writing into a commercialized activity that occurred in the early eighteenth century, the dash likewise was seen as the signature of the 'hack journalist'. In 1733 Jonathan Swift, like Don Marquis two centuries later, characterizes the modern versifier by his punctuation, rhyming the dash with printed trash.[12] Henry Fielding even personifies a grub-street writer in his play *The Author's Farce* as 'Dash' and Dash's job,

as his colleague Quibble tells him, is 'to promise more than you perform'.[13] Ellipsis marks trade on the value of innuendo, scandal and sensation. Fielding's Dash specializes in tales of ghosts and murders, but he is also responsible for advertising, stringing 'a set of terrible words together on the title page' to be displayed in the bookseller's window. In the twentieth century . . . similarly enticed consumers from newspapers, magazines and billboards.

But such concerns are only one side of the story. George Summey's 1919 *Modern Punctuation: Its Utilities and Conventions* counteracted the strongly prescriptive tradition relating to punctuation use. Summey sought to observe punctuation as it was being used, rather than to rehearse its rules in the usual manner of grammar books and printers' guides. He too identified the burgeoning popularity of . . . but remained neutral as to its literary value. On the one hand, writes Summey, there are 'many good writers who do not use suspension periods under any circumstances', while on the other 'since suspension periods are used by many writers of high standing, they are not subject to any general condemnation'.[14] What was invigorating about Summey's approach was his insistence that punctuation should be viewed as an art rather than simply a matter of mechanical correctness. Punctuation, he argued, is fundamental to an author's self-expression and therefore must be governed by factors other than the rule-book and grammatical ideals. He entertains the possibility that absolute clarity of meaning, articulated through punctuation, may not always be an author's purpose.

Ellipsis in speech

Over centuries, writers have tried hard to capture linguistic failure better. T. S. Eliot described how 'Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself as, a return to common speech'[15] and certainly the literary history of the ellipsis shows a recurring intensification of endeavours towards capturing speech as it is spoken.

In contrast to written language's propensity to high levels of preplanning and editing, speech is usually produced in a more provisional and contingent way. It is usually interactive and strongly context dependent, and it relies on prosodic or suprasegmental features. In other words, meaning is conveyed by elements other than word-choice and grammar, such as intonation, volume, tempo, gesture and pausing. Speech is also subject to what in one sense may be understood as lapses in performance. These include false starts, sudden changes of mind, errors and attempts at repair, hesitation, inaudibility and interruption.

Ellipsis marks have developed in literary dialogue as a means of getting closer to the sounds of spoken language, to its interactivity and to the interferences that inhibit its production. But ellipses can only act as a shorthand to these features as it is next to impossible to transcribe exactly the acoustics and the infelicities of speech, and in a literary context at least such transcription would be far from interesting. Ellipses intimate rather than delineate the paralinguistic, though as we shall see many attempts have been made to refine their accuracy.

In the broadest sense then, they are used to suggest the tempo and rhythm of speech by marking extended pauses between words, and in doing so they can suggest varying intonation. Ellipses can signal emotions or thoughts accompanying speech and they commonly provide spaces to convey gesture or other types of non-linguistic activity. In all these respects speech is marked as suspended in an apprehensible way, even if only momentarily.

But ellipsis marks are most commonly used to punctuate the unfinished, where speech peters out or another speaker interjects. Ford Madox Ford's description of his collaboration with Joseph Conrad is only one account of writers wanting to depict speech's incompleteness. They aimed to capture 'the sort of indefiniteness that is characteristic of all human conversations, and particularly of all English conversations that are almost always conducted entirely by means of allusions and unfinished sentences'.[16] Over four hundred instances of ellipsis points occur in their relatively short novel, *The Inheritors*.

We think about our speech in terms of a grammatical ideal of completeness. That we even identify an utterance as 'unfinished' means that we judge it against one that is finished, and yet in the course of conversing we can barely notice the pervasive fragmentation that Ford identifies. In contrast to speech, writing more commonly adheres to grammatical norms, which is another reason for critical disapproval of ellipsis marks (and critics of *The Inheritors* did disapprove).[17] Of course speakers as much as authors can be judged as lazy or too prone to unintelligibility, but especially in informal conversations, unfinished sentences can work productively as a force for social cohesion, rather than standing out as semantic failures. The unfinished sentence can promote intimacy between speakers or show deference towards an interlocutor. It can also have a strong illocutionary force. We can make propositions and give them extra emotional force by failing to deliver them fully. Not saying something often says it better.

This has been a truism since antiquity. The sentiment was repeated in classical rhetoric and was associated particularly with the rhetorical figure

of aposiopesis. Aposiopesis means to maintain silence and refers to a speaker breaking off mid-utterance in order to make a point more force-fully. Far from being a sign of linguistic slovenliness then, the unfinished sentence is a sign of exemplary linguistic accomplishment. An early account of aposiopesis occurs in Demetrius' *De Elocutione*, written prob-ably in the first century AD and this is the first example we shall meet of the perennial challenges to stylistic ideals of perspicuity. Aristotle in the *Ars Rhetoricae*, for instance, held that a speech failed if it did not make its meaning clear. Demetrius argued instead for the power of obscurity (*asapheia*) in delivery, though he acknowledged how odd this proposition must sound. But Demosthenes' oratorical skill provided strong proof:

> Brevity in fact is so useful in this style that a sudden lapse into silence often adds to the forcefulness, as in Demosthenes, 'I certainly could – but I do not wish to say anything offensive, and the prosecutor has the advantage in accusing me'. His silence here is almost more effective than anything anyone could have said.[18]

The unfinished sentence can be judged from two extremes then, as a sign of linguistic failure and linguistic artistry. But it also is a sign of basic linguistic competence. We demonstrate our facility in a language by being able to produce and interpret sentence-fragments.[19] As has already been suggested, this occurs in rapid exchanges of dialogue. But linguistic com-petence depends on our use of ellipsis in the grammatical sense. 'Ellipsis' in grammar means the *unmarked* omission of words. Our sentences are constantly subject to elisions so that they are more direct and economical. The elided elements do not have to be intimated in any way, not even brought to mind, for the purposes of comprehension. This is so pervasive to our language use that ellipsis occurs invisibly in the most common exchanges, in formal and informal language and in written and spoken forms. This last sentence shows ellipsis facilitating more efficient listing by minimizing repetition ('that ellipsis occurs in formal [language] and infor-mal language [and that ellipsis occurs] in written [forms] and spoken forms'). The simple rejoinder 'yes' is understood grammatically as eliding a subject and predicate ('Yes, I will do that').

Ellipsis in this sense was also first defined in classical oratory. The word, as translated from the Greek, means to fall short. Quintilian in the *Institutio Oratoria* describes ellipsis as the omission of words that can be recovered verbatim by means of contextual information.[20] As with other figures, he warns about its overuse, describing it as a blemish or defect (*vitium*) that if used only occasionally will give speech a certain charm.[21]

Quintilian points out that the ellipsis and the aposiopesis, as figures of omission, are similar and often confused.[22] But if the omitted words can be supplied *exactly* from the context, the omission is an ellipsis. If the omission is only paraphrasable or is uncertain it is an aposiopesis. It is also possible to infer a performative contrast between the aposiopesis and the ellipsis in Quintilian's writing as he elaborates on how the aposiopesis is a vehicle for the emotions of a speaker ('passion or anger', 'anxiety or scruple').[23]

Quintilian recognized that ellipsis could serve a more common grammatical function than the aposiopesis,[24] but nevertheless preferred to class it as a figure[25] and thus an artful choice of language that departs from normal language use.[26] Such a privileging of the ornamental value of ellipsis changed in time. Apollonius Dyscolus in the second century AD defined the syntactical function of the ellipsis for future generations by stressing the importance of such compression to ordinary speech.[27] But the everyday, spoken quality of grammatical ellipses would later occasion anxiety as to their appropriateness for written style. Poetry is a form of writing that relies on compression, but in other genres ellipses can seem too conversational. Efforts were made in eighteenth-century grammars, for instance, to discourage the overuse of ellipsis, in both the grammatical and typographical sense. Ellipsis marks, in all their typographical range, are rarely used for the sole purpose of marking out grammatical ellipses, yet as we shall see, later attitudes towards both often run in parallel.

In fact, the mark of parenthesis is perhaps better associated with grammatical ellipsis. The first recorded reference in English to ellipsis in its grammatical sense is in the Prologue to Coverdale's 1538 New Testament in which 'eclipsis' is signalled by 'thys mark [ ]'.[28] Because of the greater prevalence of grammatical ellipses in Latin than in English, Coverdale filled many of them in to help his reader. But these elaborations had to be marked by brackets so that the accuracy of the text could not be disputed.

Editorial ellipses

Ellipsis marks as I have been describing them have a significant role in orthographic development as a marker of informal and conversational language. These are expressive ellipses. They mark a departure from words that in some way is performed or can be understood as performable. But they have an identical twin who has generally caused much less trouble. In E. L. Thorndike's description, the troublesome . . . exists also in an 'orthodox' form.[29]

This orthodox form is the editorial ellipsis. These are the marks with which we mark omissions from citations. Their orthodoxy lies in their precisely determined function and, like Coverdale's brackets, their role is to minimize ambiguity. Omissions marked editorially by ellipses can be supplied exactly. We are informed by them that there is a previous version of the text from which any absences can be recovered. Akin to the footnote as described by Anthony Grafton, editorial ellipses become prevalent in newly rigorous systems of historical documentation that emerge in early modern print culture. Ellipsis marks in their editorial sense are acknowledged by grammars long before their emotional and tonally expressive counterpart.

Today we are most likely to choose points . . . to mark omissions in quotations. But before the nineteenth century, the asterisk and often the dash were commonly chosen to mark the omission of words from a phrase or letters from a word. The asterisk gives us further insights into the long history of the ellipsis. A late eighth-century fragment, the *Anecdoton Parisinum*, most probably following Suetonius, records how critical signs or *notae* originated in Alexandria in the second century BC and how they were then introduced to Rome. These critical signs were placed in the margins to mark places of textual difficulty.[30] According to the *Anecdoton*, one mark that was particularly associated with the Roman grammarian Marcus Valerius Probus was the *asteriscus*, by which he identified verses that were out of place.[31]

Yet the asterisk seems to have been used relatively infrequently in Latin manuscripts. The usual way to mark omitted material in Latin texts was by abbreviated phrases, one placed in the text and one in the margin. From the fourth century, hd and hs, among other abbreviations, were commonly used, and they have been variously interpreted, with the more likely expansions being 'hic deest' ('this is absent') and in early manuscripts 'hic deorsum' (downwards) and 'hic sursum' (upwards).[32] The latter two terms followed the Greek practice of arrows accompanied by the terms anō and katō to signal whether an insertion was above or below.[33] The choice of abbreviation could vary according to local practice and problems could ensue when medieval scribes failed to understand what they were transcribing and expanded abbreviations in confusing or nonsensical ways.[34] Irish scribes, unlike their English counterparts, preferred *signes de renvoi*, including the asterisk, to mark omissions.[35] Such visual signs were certainly less prone to misinterpretation. In the late medieval period, a means of marking omission was to leave blank spaces within the text so that gaps could later be completed if scholars had access to the missing material.[36]
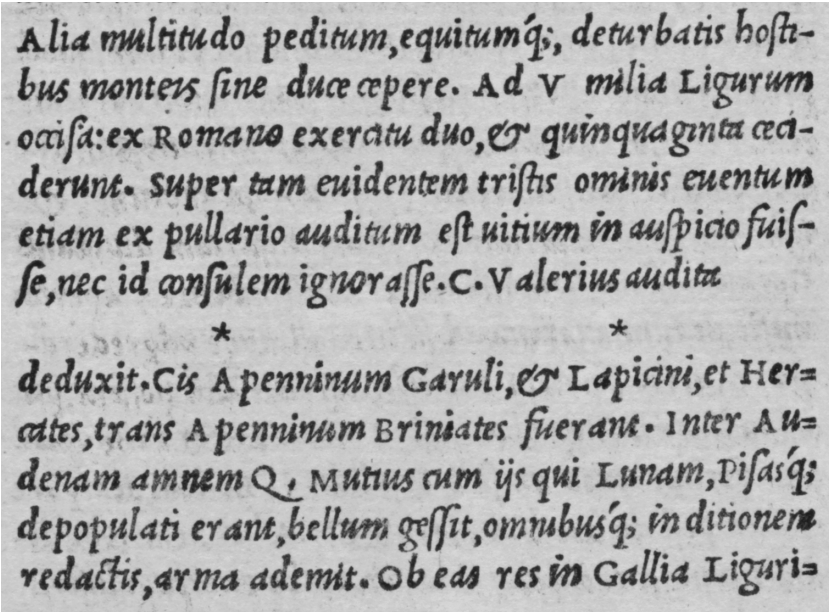
Figure 1: Livy, *Historia* (Venice: in aed. Aldi, et Andreae soceri, 1518–33), vol. v, p. 13ᵛ. With permission of Cambridge University Library. Shelfmark: F151.d.2.41.

With the faster dissemination of printed books throughout the learned world, scholars became more certain of the extant editions of any particular work, and when a work was without reasonable doubt fragmented, the fragmentation could be printed into it. The asterisk transmuted from manuscript culture to print culture with ease and the variant manuscript forms of the mark were quickly standardized in metal type. Livy's *Roman History* was one of the first works to be printed *en masse* across the continent. In early printed editions the irreparable damage to the forty-first book was marked conservatively with a small number of asterisks (see Figure 1).[37] But later, as in the 1600 translation reproduced in Figure 2, a greater sense of confidence in delivering textual fragmentation is conveyed by the proliferating asterisks and other editorial machinery (see Figure 2).[38]

Isidore of Seville, writing in the seventh century, reflected on the graphic appropriateness of the asterisk as 'what seems to be omitted may shine forth. For in the greek language a star is called ἀστήρ, from which asteriscus is derived.'[39] Many writers have exploited the graphic power of the asterisk. Laurence Sterne in the eighteenth century notoriously made
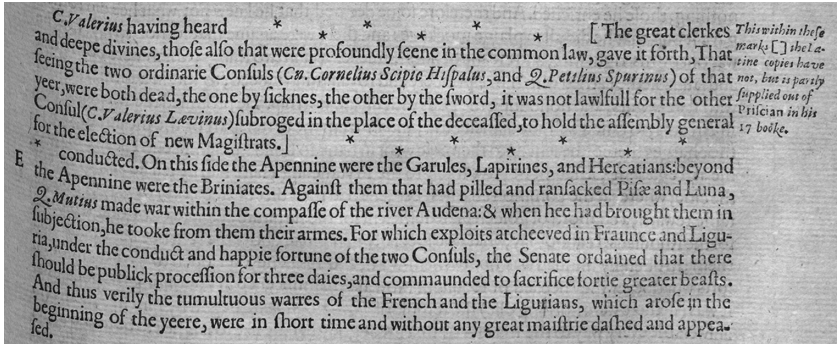
Figure 2:   Livy, *The Romane Historie*, trans. P. Holland (London: by Adam Islip, 1600),
p. 1107. With permission of Cambridge University Library. Shelfmark: Q.8.9.

much of the many 'stars' that punctuated his work. But his narrator
Tristram loses his way in spite of these lights, conscious of their significance
as signs of obscurity and loss as much as illumination, in a way that is typical
of this book.[40] But even punctuation marks that do not have such vivid
pictographic qualities as the asterisk can have surprising visual force.

The visual dimension of the ellipsis

Punctuation marks can have a pictorial quality when looked at outside
their verbal contexts. Erasmus saw in round brackets the crescent moon
and named them *lunulae* or little moons.[41] Adorno thought that the
semicolon resembled a drooping moustache and German quotation marks
($>>$ $<<$) a peasant licking his lips.[42] The visual dimension of punctu-
ation can help a thought take shape, as when Christopher Ricks describes
the prurient separateness of brackets as a *cordon sanitaire*, a metaphor that
emerges out of the parentheses' lines.[43] Or a thought can give punctuation
a particular shape, when Geoffrey Hill looks sceptically at the title of his
own essay, 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', and sees in its quota-
tion marks raised eyebrows.[44] When A. P. Rossiter imagines comic
moments in a serious play 'like a row of grinning dots in an interrupted
(not broken) tragic sentence', the association of interruption with its visual
analogue in punctuation gives a critical argument about tragi-comedy a
strikingly menacing face.[45]

   Most commonly, it is the associative nature of reading that brings
punctuation's graphic dimensions to life. We cannot say that Keats