OF STIGMATOLOGY
Punctuation as Experience

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I have never been a big fan of boxing movies, even if I have always admired, for example, Robert De Niro’s portrayal of the boxer Jake La Motta in Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980). The director has placed the camera in the ring, and we are spared nothing: We see the blows and their immediate repercussions, the spatterings of the beads of sweat, the spurts of blood bursting from the broken arch of the eyebrows.

**POW!**

Boxing in general bores me, but I can watch Scorsese’s hypnotic images in a continuous loop, images that masterfully make the impact of a fist on a face coincide with the glare of the lights unleashed by the photographers covering the match, who immediately capture and record every gesture. This is especially the case during Jake’s final fight, against Sugar Ray Robinson in 1951. The scene is almost unbearable: Jake’s face is now nothing but a bleeding fountain from which new showers spurt continuously while countless flashbulbs explode around the ring, light up, take shot after shot from all around the boxer, who can barely stand, decomposing his slow collapse into a discrete series of stroboscopic images.

What, then, fascinates me in these sequences? And why evoke them thus as an epigraph, as if they could put us on the path to what we will be sketching out: a *treatise of general punctuation*?

To be sure, there is the violence of blows filmed so close up that we might believe we are seeing them through a microscope that, paradoxically, sometimes transfigures the cruelty of combat into an almost abstract choreography. Naming this violence here, at the threshold, summoning
it at the outset, is a way of stating from the beginning the horizon toward which the pages that follow will tend: the exercise of power that is always inherent in every punctuating gesture. For punctuation is never merely a matter of style or rhetoric in the common sense: It is force; it is power; it is political decision.

But beyond the possible pleasure or disgust felt at the magnified spectacle of repeated blows, there is something, in the instantaneous echo between the punches and their capture by flash photography, that also seems to point toward the very structure of feeling—of seeing, of hearing, of perceiving in general. The matches staged by Scorsese in the film are indeed like a figure for experience. Not only and banally because, as the director put it, “The ring becomes an allegory of whatever you do in life” (you can see it coming: To be alive is to battle; life is a constant struggle). But also and above all because what strikes me, the blows, the shocks, that affect and solicit me, in short, everything that takes place only really happens to me as an aftereffect [après-coup], however immediate, of the flashing.

The sensations, the events, that strike or dot me must be marked, punctuated, for me to have lived them. And this redoubling is the very condition for me—a self [soi], whatever it be [soit]—to be the theater (I don’t dare say the ring) of an experience.

Of course, ordinarily we don’t even think about this; we aren’t conscious of it. The echo of flash photography that accompanies everything that happens to us like its shadow is generally so minute or fleeting that we could rightly compare it to a subliminal image, to an insert between two frames that doesn’t last long enough to make itself seen.

Imagine: Every second, every instant, a sort of double comes to insert itself between you and what happens to you, which it redoubles with its punctuation so that it happens to you. A bit like in Fight Club, the film directed by David Fincher in 1999, in which the narrator (Edward Norton, without noticing, keeps crossing paths with this strange character named Tyler (Brad Pitt), who soon will haunt him until he understands that he is no doubt a projection of himself. If, at first, he doesn’t even notice him—nor do we—it is for the good and simple reason that Tyler appears in furtive and intercalated forms, in what theorists of comic strips would call inter-images. One thus has to replay the film in slow motion to see clearly Tyler’s first ghostly flash appearance while the narrator, suffering from serious trouble sleeping, is making photocopies at the office he works at in a state of fatigue that seems close to hypnosis. The camera is behind the raised cover of the machine, and we hear the voice-over nar-
narrator fighting an astonishing boxing match with himself throughout the film, a fight that, seen from the outside, seems almost Chaplinesque in its absurdity: At the end, on the surveillance screens of a parking lot, we see a guy in the process of beating himself up. But we know, you and I, that the narrator punches himself above all to try to coincide with what he is living. To nail himself to sensation, to pin himself to what is lived, to try to be the subject who could say: I feel, I am.

And this is what we will have to think, therefore: Punctuation as the doubling blow, as the singular flash or clap that, remarking what happens, allows us to have and to inscribe an experience of it.

It will be argued that, taken so broadly, punctuation no longer has much to do with the manuals that teach us to place the divisions, the breaths, and the scansion of a sentence or speech. But are we so sure of this? It could be, on the contrary, that there is much more of a vague analogy between a comma and a left jab, between quotation marks and a photographic flash. It is their structural affinity that I will attempt to lay out in terms of their *punctuation*.

To such a thinking of punctuation I will give the name *stigmatology*. Why this old, this rare word, that one comes upon only in the dusty pages of ancient volumes more or less forgotten today?

Because we hear in it, on the one hand, the ancient Greek names designating the punctuating mark of the grammarians, equivalents of the Latin *punctum: stigma* or *stigmē*, derived from the verb *stizōn*. But, on the other hand, because we must listen as well to all the other senses of this verb, which means to sting, to tattoo, to mark with an imprint, and even to cause contusions or to cover with bruises. Thus, like Jake La Motta or the narrator of *Fight Club*, Xanthias, in line 1296 of Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, complains of being covered in bruises (*stizōmenos*) after having been beaten with a club.

The field of stigmatology thus turns out to be immense. Infinite and heterogeneous, one might say worriedly, since any attempt to map it seems destined to produce an inventory that would take the form of a Borgesian list, like the one that made Michel Foucault laugh in the preface to *The Order of Things*.

Let us try nonetheless to get an overview.

Under the title of stigmatology, we will thus of course study the repertoire of punctuation marks in all their arrangements and combinations, including the most complex or contradictory ones, and even in their so-called pure or absolute usages, that is to say, isolated, without either words or phrases that carry them (as when Victor Hugo is said to have asked his editor about the sales of *Les Misérables* by telegraphing him a “!” by way of response). Very quickly we will no doubt see that this first area—supposedly that of punctuation in the so-called strict sense of the term—is impossible to circumscribe rigorously: Besides the punctuation of sentences, there is what literary theorists call the punctuation of the page or work. The concept of punctuation thus overflows itself in all directions, since it ends up including blank spaces as well as chapter breaks or the luxuriant outgrowth of an illumination, going so far as to take over, in a poet such as Edward Estlin Cummings, the internal space of a word.5

That is why it will be difficult to decide where punctuation properly speaking ends and where its analogic or metaphoric use begins. The great eighteenth-century landscape artist Lancelot “Capability” Brown, like the musicians who—we will return to this—think of melody according to a model of the phrase or phrasing, spoke of the art of gardens in terms of periods and commas. The practice of medical auscultation, which, we will see, Nietzsche generalizes into a paradigm for thinking, is conceived by Laennec, its inventor, in terms of punctuating or dotted percussion. And Walter Murch, best known as Francis Ford Coppola’s editor for films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Conversation*, for his part describes the exercise of looking as a rhythmic, phrasing scansion by the blinking of the eye: “We blink to separate and punctuate,” he notes, before concluding that “we must render visual reality discontinuous, otherwise perceived reality would resemble an almost incomprehensible string of letters without word separation or punctuation.”6 From page to landscape, from musical bar to the batting of an eyelid, stigmatology will not merely notice and accept as a stopgap this oscillation, this indefiniteness that affects the concept of punctuation and allows its seemingly limitless extension into such diverse domains. It will be, quite precisely, at once its name and what is at play in it.

Stigmatology will thus be concerned with all kinds of punctuating effects and with all the figures of experience as punctuation. It will describe the “physiognomy” of the different types of marks, like Adorno, who compared the exclamation point to an “index finger raised in warning,” the question mark to a “blink of an eye,” or the semicolon to a “drooping mustache” whose “gamey taste” he said he enjoyed. It will be interested in all the reappropriations and reinventions of punctuation, in comedians such as Victor Borge or Gad Elmaleh, as well as in the practice of
emoticons, in which typographic signs are constantly recombined in a changing repertory: The now classic smiley and frowny, which put the smile :-) and unhappiness :( in a binary opposition, have proliferated into a range of affects that go from the state of shock :-o to hysterical laughter :-D passing by way of tears :'( or cruelty >:-) and giving rise to countless variants like the Japanese wink (‘‘,’’ or the indication of deference by kneeling (imagine yourself on all fours, Orz or Orz2, your round head followed by your arms and folded legs).

When taken to the point of composing a businessman wearing a tie :-) </i/1/v> or a vampire’s pointy incisors &,...,; punctuation becomes pictography. As in Tristram Shandy, the Laurence Sterne novel that we will deal with at length, it becomes drawing, it crystallizes, it erects and monumentalizes itself into an image.

“A fiery comma flew like a meteor through the cluster of dark, smiling clouds. . . . It was followed by a second and a third, and then the endless dark background unfolding before his imagination was covered with dense clusters of flying commas.”

Thus begins Perekladin’s nightmare in Chekhov’s brief short story titled “The Exclamation Mark.”

On Christmas Eve, after having been the object of criticism and mockery because of the basic level of his education and his empirical use of punctuation marks, Efim Perekladin, collegiate secretary, went to bed feeling wounded. “When you insert a comma, you have to know why” (3), a young man told him, not respecting his forty years of service and experience as a civil servant.

Pondering these vexing remarks while quietly relaxing in bed, Perekladin thus first dreams about commas. Large numbers of them appear, and this irruption gives him a chance at consolation: He tells himself that he is indeed capable of “find[ing] a place for each one of them,” that he can place them “consciously,” knowingly and without making a mistake (4). Commas then disappear from his dream and are replaced by “fiery periods” (4). Here again, Perekladin congratulates himself on knowing how to use them, so much so that the periods, now mixing with the returning commas, form a “whole host of semicolons and colons” (5), for which the secretary again finds the correct uses. The review, the dream examination, continues successfully as the question marks start to “do the con-can” before nodd[ing] their hooks approvingly and “stretch[ing] out into exclamation marks as if under command” (5).

It is here that the real troubles begin, here that the sweet torpor of the dream is transformed into a nightmare that will continue even upon wak-

ing. Perekladin, who has never used it in the administrative documents he composes, does not know what to do with this last punctuation mark. Exclamation points wait, they smile—but it’s a “hypocritical,” even threatening, smile—and all end up melting “into one huge exclamation mark” (6). Perekladin opens his eyes and sits up in his bed. He has a headache, breaks out in a cold sweat. “The exclamation mark no longer stood before his closed eyes, but in front of him, in the room . . . and it was winking slyly at him” (7). The punctuation mark has become embodied in the real, it has become a tangible hallucination.

This delirious vision torments him all night, and even daylight seems unable to make it go away. When he decides to go out, it is actually an exclamation point that has taken the place of the driver of the cab he hails. And when he arrives at his director’s house and goes to “sign the guest book because it’s a holiday”—the porter is nothing other than an exclamation point, just like the pen case and pen Perekladin takes hold of. It is thus the punctuation mark itself that he picks up and dips in ink in order to sign with it:

“Collegiate Secretary Efim Perekladin!!!”

And as he inserted those three exclamation marks he experienced exultation, indignation, joy and burning rage.

“Take this! Take this!” he muttered, pressing hard with his pen.

The exclamation mark was satisfied and vanished. (7)

So ends the story.

Why have I followed this singular “Christmas tale” through the twists and turns of its details? Why tell it here almost verbatim (or rather point by point, punctum)?

Even if it is generally classified under the rubric of comic tales, “The Exclamation Mark” has never made me laugh. I cannot stop myself from taking it very seriously—to the letter even, or to the point [au point]. For what is at stake, in this apparently light and fantastical little story, is nothing less than the question of the subject: “I.”
Who punctuates whom—or what—in this allegory-like tale? Common sense would suggest that it is of course Perekladin who punctuates sentences, official documents, even his signature. But is this indeed the case?

The impertinent young man who doubts the competence of the respectable civil servant is perhaps not wrong after all, when he says to Perekladin, "Your unconscious... spelling... well it's not even worth a kopeck. It's just like being on a mechanical production line" (3). The problem is not, as one might believe from a first, quick reading, knowing whether or not the collegiate secretary is "conscious" of the rules of punctuation, if he punctuates knowingly or "willy-nilly" (4), that is, out of habit. Indeed, if Perekladin's punctuation can be called "unconscious," it is because it operates unbeknown to him, especially when he is dreaming. We cannot consider Perekladin to be punctuating, then, since it is, rather, the marks that decide in him and about him, despite him: The question marks nod their heads "approvingly"; they turn into exclamation points, just as periods and commas had previously combined into semicolons and colons, without their dreamer having a word to say about it. These are punctuation marks that work together, following their own laws, the poor civil servant having no control or mastery over them; on the contrary, they dictate his actions to him, his sleeping or waking, going so far as to transfigure the real for and in spite of him.

No, Perekladin does not punctuate, then. It is he who is punctuated. And he is perhaps nothing other than an effect of those punctuations that traverse him, constitute him, make him act? That push him, for example, to sign furiously, pressing angrily on the point of his punctuating pen—there! yes!, take that!—hammering and nailing his name all the more frenetically since he has to reappropriate it in order to say, in the fiction of adhering to himself: "I, Efim Perekladin, I sign!"

In fact, one punctuation is not enough. It takes three to come to the end of the haunting of the exclamation point, to be sure it is "satisfied" and to make it disappear—apparently—in favor of his signature.

Look at them, these three marks planted, riveted one after and on top of the other:

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