

# The Uses of Punctuation

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A totally black night, in which the car travels smoothly, sails smoothly with the gentle bumping, rising and falling of a boat upon waves. The metal nose of the car is caught in the bright fan of the headlights; a pin-point of light nosing through the darkness. The boat image recurs : pointed prow bobbing high over black water. Sitting in the car, my friend and I seem to be following the pioneer light as if it were not part of the car, as if it did not obey the directions given to it by my friend's hands on the steering-wheel. We hang on to our metallic star (a feline beast, actually, the Peugeot emblem), we watch it carving a space out of the darkness and we follow silently. A room, a tunnel is prepared for us; the light makes a ground beneath us, a ceiling above us, walls around us; it allows us to move, even though the itinerary seems as arbitrary as if we moved over unmarked water. There is a road, which we generate as we go along.

The bright expanse slides forward, ahead of us, as we swing out of the darkness, out of the long night that ejects us. We proceed, pushed and pushing.

The asphalt road glistens, the trees are caught in the box of light, framed haphazardly, some of them whole, some with their tops cut off; on the right and left, the cut is vertical. A brilliant fixed square. The stage is set.

So far so good. I've been handling this like an egg, taking one small step at a time. But I knew from the start that when I reached this point I would have to stop. Change gear? Drop the egg and start all over again? It won't help. A change of

paragraph doesn't help. Saying that it doesn't help doesn't help. Besides, I dislike this urge, this insistence on recounting a gruesome event and saying what had best be left unsaid. But it is irresistible. I am not at all sure that it is only the old appeal of the forbidden. I'm more inclined to think it is a kind of fatality : what exists must be spoken. Now I've talked myself away from the still bright stage and I must creep back again, encircle it.

The stage is set, then, and there is a thing on it.

A very long pause here. I have to interrupt the writing, for several hours, for a whole day perhaps, I don't know yet. After this second postponement, I begin to doubt whether I shall ever be able to pick up the thread again. The ditch I have dug may well prove unsurmountable. How long can I put off naming the thing on the brightly-lit stage?

All I've managed to do is make the attempt infinitely more difficult. That is as it should be; paying the penalty of speech.

Six hours later; I couldn't wait a whole day. There's no way of switching off the word-engine once it's started. In spite of the cold dread, in spite of the dryness of disaster in my mouth, the blood thumping in my chest, I prepare for the high jump across the ditch. Quick, steal the page while it's still fresh, occupy its dwindling blankness, be quiet, to let the thing through.

The thing, the creature we saw before us, caught in the headlights, on the road, in the middle of the night, was shapeless. The lines were blurred and the colours messed up; but red was predominant, the red of blood, or raw flesh. What added to the confusion was the peculiar movement that possessed it. It had a quality of timelessness. The shapeless thing on the stage moved up and down, slowly, as in slow motion. This was perhaps the reason for its unreality; I suppose it is connected in my mind with the cinema's use of the slow-motion technique to illustrate dreams, memories or obsessions, scenes that unfold in a vacuum, outside the mainstream of the story. The thing was caught in its endless heaving - slow motion turned into perpetual motion; it rose and fell, the rising caused it to fall and the fall sent it rising again, slowly, almost elastically, and it seemed to stretch as it rose, but not enough to disperse, at the peak of the rising curve it became engulfed in its own distended gash, reabsorbed, red yawning mouth swallowing itself, scream perpetually unscreamed; for the thing was silent, it heaved in endless silence as it tried to leap into death. Long elastic curves almost escaping out of the exposure of the illuminated square, pain is this exposure, severe total exposure, groping again and again for the blackness around and above, but it could not reach it, the thing could not die, it collapsed back into the light again, pain was stronger than death, pain is and is and is, it is time gone mad, and the passage into death impossible because of this supremacy, which is the only eternity we know.

The silence keeps pulling me back to the intersection of those two roads where the event refused to resolve itself. There should have been some sound, some sort of blunt repetitive thud marking the thing's perpetual effort to break out of the square. But there was this interstellar silence enclosing it all, and now I remember of course that slow-motion scenes are nearly always filmed in silence. Perhaps it only seemed like silence at the time, perhaps it was deafened by the scream that could not be screamed since there was no mouth left from which it could issue, only the raw mangled mouthless flesh of the creature that had been run over by a car probably just preceding ours. The creature was not human, it was too small for that, about two feet tall at the point where it stretched to its full height (reaching for death), so it must have been a cat or a dog or a hare, but I cannot put a face to it or a body even, flesh has no face and death had not yet come to order it into place, to bully it into its final shape, the monument of itself. Raw live flesh is red and

slippery and names bounce off it as it stretches under our skins from body to body in enormous anonymity.

If the creature had been human, would it have been different, would it have been worse, of course it would, except that there would have been action, crowds, police, ambulance, a stepping into the world again; necessity. This other business was solitary and silent, undiluted. I re-read this sentence and already there is a taste of epilogue in it, this is already after -the-event, the writing comes more easily, almost comfortably, nothing to stop it now, the pen glides along the page at a rhythmical pace, spawning large rounded letters, yet all the time I know I haven't really leapt across the ditch, there I still am, cringing on the brink, encumbered with words, wallowing in the descriptive slush while the scream remains unscreamed and death out of reach, because my friend abruptly swings the steering-wheel to the left and the car lurches into a side-street, in a minute the thing is out of sight, gone, dream, memory, obsession that must now heave perpetually in my mind, because we did not go back, though I cried, I think I cried: 'Go back, we must kill it', but my friend said 'I can't' and she was right, the thing was untouchable, the journey irreversible, 'anyway it must be over now, it couldn't possibly last', she said as the car swerved violently along the side-street, away from the end we never saw, which is why this had to be written, to make some kind of end, however botched, a punctuation mark that is purely functional, a full stop to force the words to let go.