

PUNCTUATION'S ERADICATION

Free verse is refreshing, when flowing clear,
articulated with as much painstaking skill
as polished pens render metered rhyme.
Who cares if tight constraints are set aside,
as long as word-craft paints its portraits well?

But, laxity creeps in, exalted as authentic style,
expressive down-sizing, fresh unconventionality.
This modern shift gradually slipped beyond
older verbal efforts at mind-embodiment.
Past poets, free-verse pioneers and masters—
Whitman, Dickenson, Sandburg, Eliot, Pound—
labored long to transmit their hidden thoughts,
palpable pictures, worthy wants and warnings.
Skilled with everything available in the toolbox
of our written-language legacy, they wrote
with one poetic goal: communication.

Deeming innovation equal to improvement,
relaxation synonymous with freedom,
some promise this dispensing with punctuation
has intensified the quality, the purity of poetry:
“Unneeded husks. . . eliminate them altogether!
They’re out of place, antique, passé, confusing,
environmentally cluttering a poem’s word-beauty.”

Yes, in exactly the same way goal posts, flags,
boundary lines, bells and distractive rules
ruin sports events, spoil each player’s enjoyment.
How would emancipation from these play out?
Feet running, balls sailing; no fouls, no score?
Are we pretending to be having fun yet, folks,
with lines stretching out amalgamated vocabulary,
regardless of winning or losing the word game?
Then resounds a blown whistle, and modern poets,
shrugging in confusion or sneering in contempt,
fail to recognize or recall what such noise means.

Punctuation evolved and fittingly survived
to dissect verbal blobs into edible portions,
to lay iron tracks for long trains of thoughts,
circumventing unintentional ambiguity—
a liability often mistaken as a virtue in verse.

Banning those tools in the name of liberty
set up a new standard for modern conformity
and begged the avoided but inevitable question:
Have we reached forward or rolled backward,
shifting clarity's burden from poet-shoulders
to reader's ability to decipher unpunctuated
mental streamlines of consciousness?

Weary of this new legalism, I ask the wary,
Is this game played better unmarked, unpaced?
Examine what's been avoided or tossed
to see if the one tool left ("start a new line")
has sold us gemmed progress or jaded regression.

Reactionary counter-revolutionary, I still use
commas to pause or segregate concepts;
question marks to indicate queries or rhetoric;
parentheses to echo parallel ideas or feelings,
and *em-dashes* before stating them differently;
ellipses to allude to trailing or further thoughts;
apostrophes to clarify what's owned or missing;
colons before explanatory words and phrases;
semi-colons to merge concept-related series;
periods to decide and announce conclusion.

To punctuate or not to punctuate: it's a question
seriously unasked and mindfully unanswered now,
and spacesbetweenwordsmaynextbelaidto rest.
Will modern conformists rebel at realizing
they've championed liberation by substituting
the boring repetition of new-line redundancy
for a richly diverse and long-trusted armory
tested in the trenches of meaning's refinement,
or keep sacrificing the old work of clarification
on this impoverishing altar of popular minimalism?

— *David L. Hatton, 4/27/2016*