ERRANT COMMAS AND STRAY PARENTHESES

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Abstract: Joyce early on took control over his punctuation; that is, the rhythm, the pauses and the structure of his prose. The focus of this essay is, first, on Joyce’s idiomatic and not necessarily consistent use of commas that were at times subject to officious editorial amendments. Such efforts reveal what Joyce might have done, following conventions, but for manifold reasons departed from. Then parentheses are examined, in their rare but potential use in the interior monologue and their different applications mainly in the parodic, “written”, episodes, as in the orchestration of “Sirens”, or in catalogues with internal comments in various and intricate relations between outside and inside. All in all, as comparison with translations show, Joyce uses punctuation sparingly but judiciously and seems to have relied on his readers’ sense for nuances.

1 Introduction
A sketch on Joyce’s punctuation might as well set off with a passage where the focus is on it, the description of a written document found in Bloom’s first drawer:

an infantile epistle, dated, small em monday, reading: capital pee Papli comma capital aitch How are you note of interrogation capital eye I am very well full stop new paragraph signature with flourishes capital em Milly no stop (U 17.1791)

The passage contains no punctuation marks, but it spells them out in words. Punctuation, it already tells us, cannot be spoken, only described: it essentially belongs to writing. It evolved slowly and relatively late; it is not necessary but is of assistance as a guiding and structuring device. It can indicate modulations of the speaking voice, stress, intonation, pauses.
Milly’s letter with its emphasis on the comma, note of interrogation, and full or no stop may indicate her young concern with punctuation, and some incipient skill, not unlikely a result of Bloom’s paternal instruction. Capitalisation is also highlighted. The reference to “full” or “no stop” clearly points forward to a characteristic of Molly Bloom’s monologue and its occasional, erratic capitalisation. The infantile script seems to put a moderate finger on idiosyncrasies of Joyce’s typographical devices. That the capital pronoun is spelled in homophonic variation, “eye”, shows what distinctions the spoken voice cannot express; it moreover appears to echo the phonetic coincidence of “I” and “eye” in “Cyclops”.

In “Cyclops”, the hangman’s application letter that is being read aloud is not a model of orthographical niceties. It consistently spells the pronoun (“i”) in lower case, and so decapitates it; as it happens capital punishment will be the first topic in the conversation that follows. In one instance an absent comma has a misleading effect: “i have a special nack of putting the noose once in he can’t get out hoping to be favoured i remain, honoured sir, my terms is five ginnese” (12.427). It diverts favour to the poor victim. The spelling “nack” is a further appropriately decapitated word. How, incidentally, can the typographical oddities in the written letter (“i”, “nack”) be pronounced for those listening? Speaking and writing, events in sound or else an arrangement of written signs, complement and occasionally exclude each other.

Milly at the age of exactly fifteen composed a more elaborate letter which is given in full, but with proportionately less punctuation. It is entirely free of commas (even after “Dear Papli”), particularly in its hurried P.S.: “Excuse bad writing am in hurry” (4.397-414). But, perhaps surprisingly, it features one parenthesis as it is commonly used for an aside or an afterthought, though its impact must have the opposite effect on Bloom: “Boylan’s (I was on the pop of writing Blazes Boylan’s) song” (4.408); somehow Blazes Boylan tends to “pop” up unbidden and against Bloom’s manifest endeavours.

1. “… he always tells me the wrong things and no stops” (18.729) seems to say that Bloom criticizes Molly’s lack of punctuation in writing.