Abstract: Punctuation is generally supposed to be a silent guide to the pronunciation of written words, but as this essay argues, Joyce shows how misleading this supposition is: rather than assisting the reader of a text to “hear” its words, punctuation can obstruct or even prohibit pronunciation. Joyce’s understanding of how discreetly placed ellipses and dashes can conceal and silence words, thereby leaving the reader uncertain as to what the text “says,” and how to perform it aloud, is part of a larger strategy to expose and overturn the normative and restrictive functions of punctuation. In examining a variety of instances in Joyce’s works where pronunciation is indeterminable, this essay posits that punctuation is a strikingly contradictory and inexact system that Joyce reveals is fundamentally ideological.

What was it?
A . . . . . . . . . !
? . . . . . . . . . O !
(FW 94.20-22)

Punctuation is an effort at compromise between the austere immutability of text and the everyday entropy of speech. It guides the transition of words from one form to the other, grouping and dividing them into units and instructing the speaker on timing, emphasis, and intonation. Punctuation marks map the act of pronunciation. “Pronounce” is itself a nuanced word, an unusual verb that bespeaks not just an action, but a commitment to the action, a decision to act.
To pronounce someone married, or guilty of a crime, or dead, is to transform that person’s official status, to cast him or her into history. Pronunciation, like criticism, is a judgment. The advent of silent reading (to which not altogether exact historical reference point is often appended the name of St. Ambrose) permits the suspension of judgment, even the ability to sustain the consideration of contrary ideas without having to select or privilege one over the other.¹

Text can be secretive; utterances are to be heard. We test others (and reveal ourselves) by how they (and we) speak. Pronunciation exposes so many things: place of origin or residence, social class and level of education, emotional or psychological state, speech impairments, and so on. To speak aloud is both to commit and to submit. The biblical story of the escaped prisoner trying to pass by the suspicious men of Gilead as anything but the Ephraimite that he is offers a most drastic example of this equation:

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12:6)

Mispronunciation proves fatal, disguise impossible. *Finnegans Wake* recalls this atrocity with its unassuageable sense of the absurdity of history: “So mag this sybilette be our shibboleth that we may syllable her well!” (*FW* 267.20-21). The meaning of the Hebrew word “shibboleth”, obscured by its infamous usage, is in fact “stream”.² There are many striking and pertinent ironies here: that the password should be that which continually passes; that one should be stopped by that which flows; that a word should effectively lose its meaning to its habitual function. With kabbalistic kinkiness, a guess-the-secret-password (or guess-the-secret-name) motif recurs throughout the

---

¹. We can compare and even connect this distinction to that between Socrates and Aristotle. The former pronounces (speaks), and as his gesture of pointing heavenward in Raphael’s painting of the philosopher in *The School of Athens* succinctly indicates, his thinking is utterly hierarchical. In the same painting Aristotle, the writer, points straight ahead.