

From Invisibility to Visibility and Backwards

PUNCTUATION IN COMICS

;

Jacques Dürrenmatt

ABSTRACT

In a literary form such as comics that combines images and texts punctuation is due to play a specific function. From its invention in the beginning of the 19th century, creators like Töpffer or Doré played with it, especially the expressive signs, imitating what happened at the same time in numerous novels. The habit of overloading the images, with exclamation and interrogation marks or dashes, leads however progressively to saturation in the golden age of superheroes comics and therefore to a sort of punctuation crisis. Questioning increased on the ideological meaning of such signs, which lead to rethinking what punctuating meant. Nowadays graphic novelists tend to invent new uses of the signs which question the way making language visible can produce interesting meanings.

INTRODUCTION

During the late 1950s, when punctuation was a matter reserved for printers and grammarians who had set increasingly rigid rules, Adorno chose to devote several pages to the subject, prompted by the new practices that he spotted in newspapers and modern literature which promised to simplify the system greatly, to the advantage of the “simplest” signs such as commas and points. It is no surprise to see this great thinker of the image beginning his analysis with a willful naïvety, taking into account a possible iconic interpretation of the signs:

The less punctuation marks, taken in isolation, convey meaning or expression and the more they constitute the opposite pole in language to names, the more each of them acquires a definite physiognomic status of its own, an expression of its own, which cannot be separated from its syntactic function but is by no means exhausted by it. [...] An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like a flashing light or the blink of an eye (1990, 300).

In an art form such as comics, in which the legibility of the drawings and the visibility of the text are continuously called into question, punctuation was to become a site of experimentation due to its uniqueness as a symbolic system that is both linguistic and iconic.

BIRTH OF THE COMICS:

FIRST EXPERIMENTS WITH VISUAL PUNCTUATION

By inventing, around 1830, what he calls “literature in prints,” Töpffer is very clear on the necessary complementarity of image and text in this new form of art: “This little book is of a mixed nature. It is composed of a series of autographed line drawings. Each of these drawings is accompanied by one or two lines of text. The drawings, without this text, would be obscure in meaning, the text, without the drawings, would mean nothing” (Kunzle, 2007, 60). The text is to accommodate itself to the drawing, which explains why it has to be very clearly written by the same hand that draws the images, separates them, frames them, *often* without hesitating to embellish the whole with tight networks of curls. Therefore, the punctuation is thought of as a mid-way point, because it is a system of signs that can easily be used in *other* ways than as indications of respiratory pauses or intonation

patterns or as syntactic organizers; *this is especially the case* when the marks are repeated, since one mark is normally enough to provide the necessary semantic and prosodic information. We can therefore say that the way Töpffer presents his characters' speeches, not in balloons but under the images, shows a continuity with medieval manuscripts where "speech tends to be represented as a scroll rather than a cloud or bubble, and it emanates from the gesturing hand of the speaker rather than the mouth; language seems to co-exist in the same pictive/scriptive space—hand-writing emanating from hand-gesture—instead of being depicted as a ghostly emanation from an invisible interior" (Mitchell, 1994, 92).

An obvious symbolic game with the number of punctuation marks takes place at the beginning of *The Loves of Mr. Vieux Bois*. The original manuscript of 1827 contains no trace of the expressive punctuation that will appear a decade later when it is edited by autography, a process in lithography by which copies of text or drawing are produced in facsimile. On the first page of the album, "Mr. Vieux Bois's encounter." becomes "Mr. Vieux Bois's encounter.....!!!!!" followed by a more neutral sentence with one simple period before the return of the former marks but fewer: "Mr. Vieux Bois feels through his inner fire that it is for life.....!!!". By contrast, the next page begins with a sentence without punctuation: "Mr. Vieux Bois is trying to distract himself by studying" In caricaturing *such* romantic effusions, exclamation is used here to display the beginning of a passion, which was not betrayed by a very neutral first caption. The shortening of the number of points until they vanish, moreover, visually suggests the painful disappearance of the "beloved Subject" and the relapse into banality.

In *Mr. Pencil* (Töpffer, 1840), we move from "The Doctor exclaims: Inhabited! inhabited! (the planet)" (12) to "The Doctor ran crying: Satellite!! Satellite!!" (13). Doubling the number of exclamation marks simply helps the reader to feel the rising excitement. In *Dr. Festus* (1840), a game on the height of the marks is added, which is not allowed by common typography:

"A huge planet!... opaque!... heavily inhabited!..... A satellite!!!!...

The whole Institute, by a spontaneous movement, rises shouting: A satellite.....

Long live the King!!!!!!!!!!!!..... (55)

The gradual reduction in size of the exclamation points which follow the word *King* leads to their final transformation into periods and symbolizes the gradual decline in sound level of a useless cry whose nationalism is slammed by the Swiss writer who wrote in his manuscript a more explicit "Long live the Bourbons!" and

in the novel published in parallel to the album: “Long live the *Barbons*.” The irony becomes obvious as the name of the French reigning family is distorted and becomes a pejorative word that designates grey beards. Moreover the rest of the passage is written as:

“A huge planet!.... opaque!.... elongated!.... heavily populated!! Three satellites!!! [...]”

The whole Institute, by a spontaneous movement, stood up and shouted: Three satellites!
(Töpffer, 1840, 123).

As for the increase in the number of exclamation points, it follows the graduation of the three successive discoveries and finally echoes the “three satellites” (which are themselves the misinterpretation of three blown off wigs).

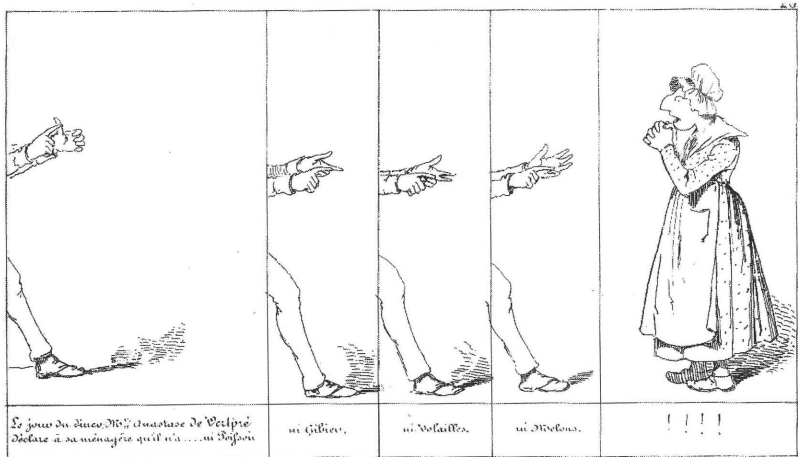


Figure 1: *Mr. de Vertpré*, 1840

Töpffer never tries to give autonomy to punctuation marks. This will be done by one of his Parisian followers, the forgotten Forest, in his *Mr de Vertpré* (1840): four exclamation points are used as a caption to a picture showing the housewife's expression of terror when she is told to prepare a dinner without the necessary ingredients and is therefore left literally speechless (*figure 1*). Until then the signs could only *accompany* an interjection such as *ah* or *oh*, which constituted the most basic form of expression of strong emotion. Alone, they intensify the impression made by the open mouth and clasped hands of the female figure. In this they correspond to the image that J. De Vere Brody gives of the exclamation point: a

sign that some call a “screamer” “performing in a singular gesture the “unity of the *gramme*... [the] attempt to recapture the unity of gesture and speech, of body and language [given that its body is its language]” (2008, 150). It is interesting to note that in the literature of the same time, the signs tend to be viewed as independent of the content of the statement for which they are somehow metonymically substituted. Here are two examples:

1) Balzac: *Modeste Mignon* (1845)

Six millions, voilà le prix d'un ami; l'on ne peut pas en avoir beaucoup à ce prix-là !... » La Brière entra dans le cabinet de son ami sur ce dernier point d'exclamation (1976, 600).¹

2) Hugo: *Les Misérables* (1862)

Mlle Gillenormand était remontée dans sa chambre très intriguée, et avait jeté dans l'escalier ce point d'exclamation: C'est fort! et ce point d'interrogation: Mais où donc est-ce qu'il va? (1951, 651).²

In fact, as written by M.B. Parkes, “in *Stop ! Stop !! Stop !!!* the punctuation might be interpreted as representing an increase in decibels; but in ‘*Stop !!*’ *she whispered* such an interpretation of the exclamation mark is not possible. The writer employs the symbol here to encourage readers to draw on their own experience so that it may contribute to the assessment of the message of the text. By invoking behavioral experience in this way, punctuation becomes a feature of the ‘pragmatics’ of the written medium. In spoken language such contributions to a message can be conveyed in various ways both linguistic and paralinguistic—such as a repertoire of intonations, or gestures and facial expressions—which can be employed because an interlocutor is present” (1992, 1–2). This latent visibility of the exclamation point can also be found in question marks or suspension points (usually to represent silence) and explains the everlasting success of these three signs in comic books and strips, sometimes so excessively that they can become unbearable.

¹ Balzac: *Six million is the price of a friend, you cannot have a lot at that price!... La Briere entered the office of his friend on that last exclamation point.*

² Hugo: *Miss Gillenormand had gone up to her room quite puzzled, and had thrown down the stairs this exclamation point: It is hard! and this question mark: But where is he going?*

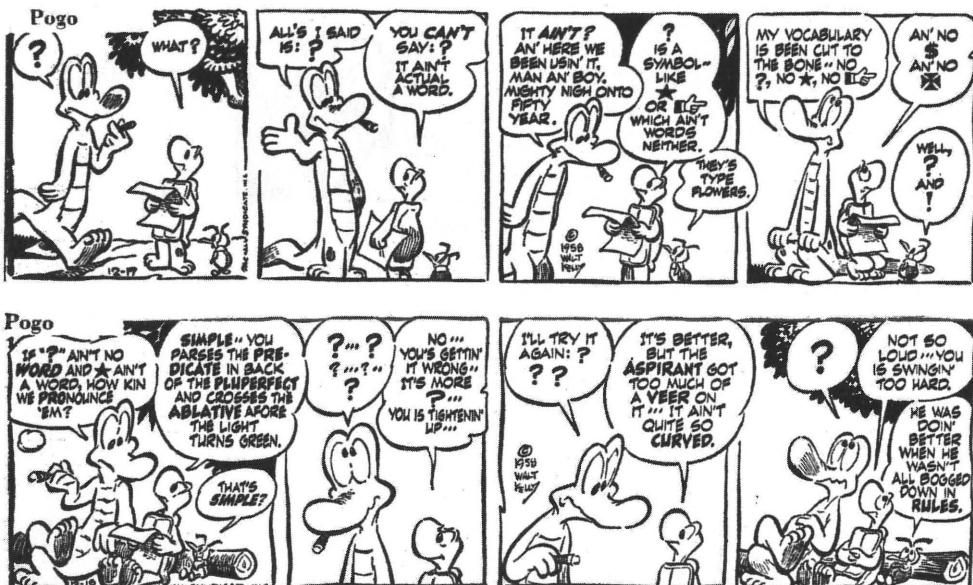
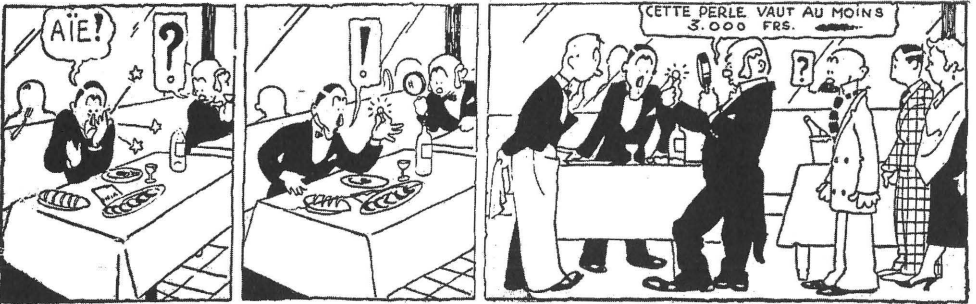
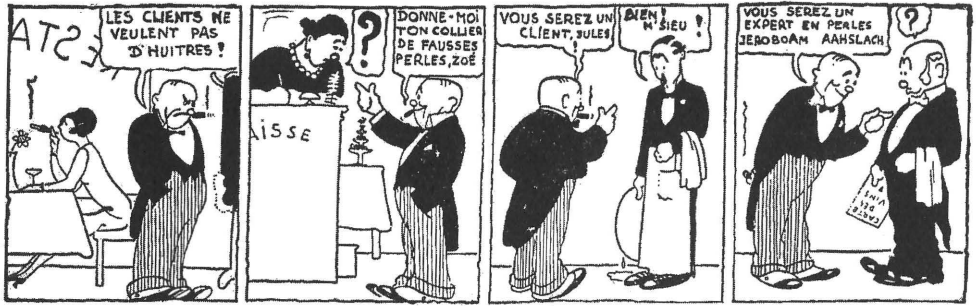


Figure 2: Pogo, 1958, Walt Kelly

EXCESS AND INVISIBILITY

With the arrival of balloons the isolated signs were assigned to characters and no longer supported by narrative and graphic authority, as these two strips (figure 2) by Walt Kelly (*Pogo*, 1958) humorously show. There are two opposing conceptions of the question: a brutal one expressed by the question mark alone and without oral equivalence, the other more specific thanks to an interrogative word (*what*), closer to the oral reality. What is at stake is the obvious visual impact of the signs, whether they can replace the text to express all the emotions (which leads to a more visual reading and gives ammunition to those who accuse comics of diverting children from serious reading), or support it by stressing the way it must be modalized. Inflation, in fact, will soon threaten the two dominant forms of the comics: the comic ones where all speeches need to be read as excessive, grotesque or at least more or less witty, and the action ones where intensity has to be almost constantly maximal. In the 1920s, Saint-Ogan colors some of the many exclamation points and question marks that dot its series *Zig et Puce* in orange to give them greater visibility in pages saturated



Le Lendemain !

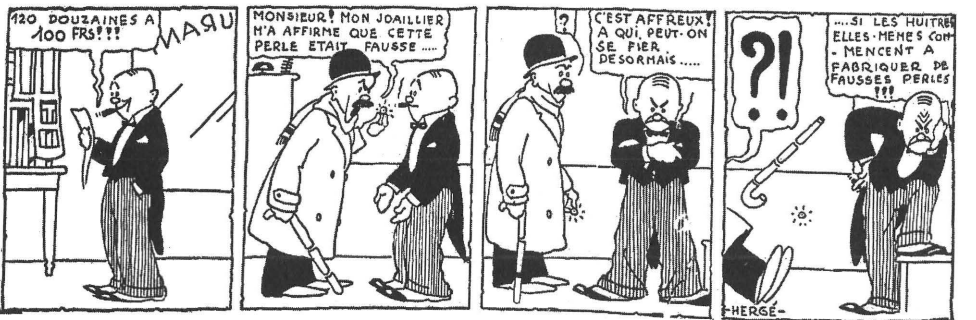


Figure 3: Réveillon, 1928, Hergé. Permission by © Hergé/Moulinart 2011

with punctuation. An example of this inflation can be seen in a page that the young Hergé, heavily influenced by Saint-Ogan, published in the journal *Le Sifflet* in 1928 (*figure 3*).³

The comic facial expressions are not considered enough to express surprise or questioning: Hergé chooses to stress them by using isolated signs in bubbles. He even combines marks in the last image although the codified movement of the character falling backward could have easily been enough to mean astonishment. The speeches of the owner of the restaurant end up being punctuated with three exclamation points that now express the strength of his contentment, and now ironically support his dishonesty to give more strength to the final joke. Even the time indication, that is nothing extraordinary and that articulates the two moments of the narrative, is equipped with an exclamation point. Later on Hergé will moderate his use of the “screaming” signs and find other ways to express *visibly* the intensity he wishes to convey.

The same desire for maximum expression explains the gradual invasion of superhero comics by exclamation points that will be made increasingly visible by means of flashy colors, thick lines and dynamic shapes. “By the late 1940s [in] DC Comics [...] most remarks in speech balloons became exclamations! Everything was dramatic! Even the most mundane remarks! And if a speech really didn’t call for an exclamation point or question mark... then it ended with an ellipsis—or two hyphens... (Or three hyphens, or one, or four dots [...]). One sign that American comic books were maturing in the 1980s was that they welcomed back periods” (Bell, 2008). A persistent story has it that this extensive use of the marks in question was due to the poor quality of the paper and ink used for the first publications: a period might disappear in the printing process used at the time, whereas an exclamation mark would likely remain recognizable even if there was a printing glitch. The previous Hergé example shows the reality to be different since these habits were already in place in comic strips and one-page comics published in the newspapers.

In any case, the main question is to determine if, confronted with such a pervasive use of emotional points, the reader perceives them to any greater degree

*3 The customers don't want oysters!
Give me your fake pearl necklace, Zoé
You'll be a customer, Jules
Ok! Sir!
You'll be a pearl expert: Jeroboam Aabslach
This pearl is 3,000 francs worth at least.
Oysters / Here, Sir / At last!... / Boom! Here
they are! / Oysters! / Waiter! Oysters! It's half
an hour since... / Here! / 100 francs the dozen!*

*The day after!
120 dozens at 100 francs!!!
Sir! My jeweler claimed that this pearl was
fake...
That's awful! Who can be trusted nowadays.....
.....if the oysters themselves begin to make fake
pearls!!!*

as signs with a specific value. It is easy to doubt it: most of the time the signs are only used for emotional charge, whether to emphasize the pragmatic function of the injunctions and warnings of the characters or to indicate their surprise when facing a reality that constantly eludes rationality. They share the same logic as the use of bold characters. This permanent intensity should allow effects of contrast with passages using a more neutral punctuation, but this is hardly the case. The variation between exclamation point and period is rarely significant. The exclamation point quickly became so tightly associated with comics that some authors eventually incorporated it into their pen names, like Elliot S! Maggin and Scott Shaw!. When many “serious” writers criticized the “crude” effect of such marks in their writings and got rid of them (DeVere Brody, 2008, 149–150), comics showed them off. Was it somehow naïvely or to demonstrate a form of refusal to submit oneself to the tyranny of good taste?

In the early 1970s, the great writer Stan Lee, at the time Editor-in-Chief of Marvel Comics, sought to ban the exclamation point without much success and with the paradoxical result of texts without punctuation, as reported by Cronin: he “decided that exclamation points were too juvenile, so he decreed that no Marvel Comics were to feature exclamation points from then on! Well, the problem was, most of these issues where he decreed would be without exclamation points were already getting ready to be sent out. So the solution was to just remove the exclamation points from the issues as they lay. The problem with that is that it only worked with exclamation points at the end of the word balloons (whether that was because they literally couldn’t or because they didn’t feel like it, I don’t know). [...] You’d have silly stuff like exclamation points in the middle of a long piece of dialogue but nothing at the end” (2010). Stan Lee was not followed. Was this due to the unwillingness of the printers? Authors didn’t really understand what was at stake and the ‘purification’ of the exclamatory was a failure. Nothing really happened until the arrival of new and more literary adult comics that began to exploit all possible sorts of nuances (narrative, ideological as well as stylistic). In *Watchmen* by Moore and Gibbons (1987), in particular, the suspension points and the bold characters only remain. Even interjections are devoid of exclamation points, which no longer appear alone in the balloons. However, in many other comics, old habits remain as shown in the commentary that Piekos makes in his normative “Comic Book Grammar & Tradition” on the use of the question mark / exclamation point combo: “This should only be used for a shouted question. It’s a loose rule that the question mark should come first. Marvel insists on it, and I agree, since the

text is probably already bold or enlarged (indicating shouting) so the only visual clue a reader has that it's also a question, is the question mark—giving it priority” (2009). The usual redundancy between exclamation points and bold characters is highlighted, while the question finally appears as the only interesting information in this type of combination.

In a recent work, inspired by Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, Matt Madden tries to propose *99 Ways to Tell a Story* (2005) by using 99 one-page comics that are all variations from a minimum script. One of them consists of a “Calligram” which takes the form of a large question mark made from a series of words and which highlights the fact that the short story is based on two questions made evident in the “template”: “What time is it?” and “What the hell was I looking for, anyway?” Another one, entitled “Reframing (Hands and Punctuation Marks),” isolates the question marks and exclamation points by a simple process of reframing, as if to emphasize the uniqueness of the comics, the only form capable of isolating and making sense of the punctuation marks *on their own*. Many continue to highlight ironically the pervasive (in)visibility of expressive signs in contemporary art forms, in the manner that Artschwager has proposed since the 1980s with his sculptures in the shape of question marks; these force the viewer to question simultaneously their legitimacy as sculpture, what they ask us to attempt in terms of interpretation, as well as the meaning we are used to giving to the signs (see DeVere Brody, 2008, 18–22).

SIGNS AND POLITICS

In 1964 Charles M. Schulz makes fun of the domination of the exclamation point in the comics in two *Peanuts* strips (*figure 4*). The “way out groups” represented by the minor (comma) or rare (the ampersand, asterisk, pi) signs express their willingness to discard the dominant sign, which is actually drawn bigger. During the conflict between the representatives of the exclamation point and the comma, the dialogue takes place only by signs: if the avalanche of points is immediately comprehensible as a mark of angry or, more broadly, violent emotion, the lonely comma remains perfectly mysterious (What is “that”?) since there is no symbolic meaning associated with its use as an isolated sign. Yet that last discourse triumphs: syntactic punctuation over emotional punctuation. Revenge of the text on the image but also of the smallest on the strongest, of the dominated on the dominant, of the one

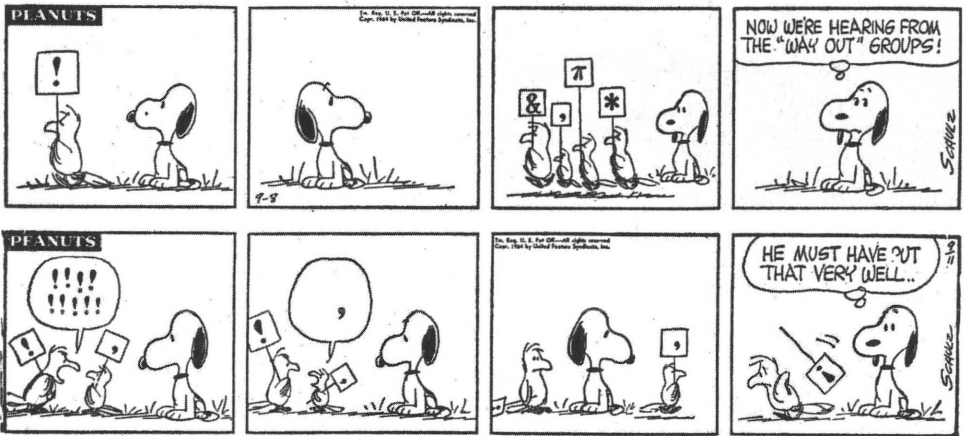


Figure 4: *Peanuts*, 1964, Charles M. Schulz

Figure 5: *Histoire dramatique, pittoresque et caricaturale de la Sainte Russie*, 1854, Gustave Doré

who was marginalized and rendered invisible by the mainstream on the one who became the representative of an entire art form, of the comic strip on the superhero comic book?

The ideological value associable with isolated punctuation appears very early in the history of comics. Gustave Doré chooses to end his violent and extraordinary satire against Russia, *Histoire dramatique, pittoresque et caricaturale de la Sainte Russie* (1854) in two stages (figure 5): by a huge question mark crowned with laurels, which seems to represent the glorious uncertainty of the fate which awaits the military sent to Crimea to fight against Russian troops in the year of the book's publication (« en attendant l'épreuve, ils se complaisent à interroger un avenir plein de gloire et surtout d'HONNEUR. »), but also by an epilogue with a quote from an obscure corporal: «Qu'on dit comme ja, que si on arrive, nous aut'Frrrancés, à leux y brosser leur czar, on leux y donnera plus le fouet comme à des bêtes; c'est alors que nous vous être des bons amis !!!!!!! ». ⁴ The contrast between the highly impressive solemnity of the question mark accompanied by an ironically emphatic text and the very familiar speech from the poor soldier, whose emotion is exhibited by the accumulation of exclamation points, expresses the political message of Doré who was strongly committed to the reconciliation of all nations, once rid of their tyrants.

4. "waiting for the confrontation, they indulge in questioning a future full of glory and especially HONOR"

".....Let's say that if we, Frrrenchmen, succeed in defeating their tsar, they won't be whipped any longer like animals; we'll all be good friends then!!!!!!!!!!"



Quelques esprits cosmopolites et avancés blâment Napoléon III d'avoir entrepris une guerre aussi hasardeuse.



Mais quelques autres esprits moins cosmopolites peut-être, mais sans doute plus avancés le sont déjà jusqu'à Warne,



où, en attendant l'épreuve, ils se complaisent à interroger un avenir plein de gloire et surtout d'HONNEUR.

MORALE ET ÉPILOGUE.

Si ta maison devoit ruiner, falloit-il que en sa ruine, elle tombât sur les atres de celui qui l'avoit ornée? La chose est tant hors des bornes de raison, et tant abhorrente de sens commun que à peine peut elle être par humain entendement conçue: et jusques à ce mourera non croyable entre les estrangers que l'effect assuré et témoigné leur donne à entendre que rien n'est ni saint ni sacré à ceulx qui se sont émancipés de Dieu et raison pour suivre leurs affections perverses, *coyre orthodoxes.*

[F. Rabelais, *Histoire de Russie, ou Vie de Gargantua.*]

.....Qu'on dit comme ja, que si on arrive, nous aut' Erraneés, à leux y brosser leur czar, on leux y donnera plus le fouet comme à des bêtes; c'est alors que nous vons être des bons amis!!!!!!

(Achille Champavert, caporal au 23^e de ligne.)

The dominance of the *capitalized* question mark on the crowd of the other lowercase signs will not last insofar as the text already provides the individual soldier with the last word.

Sign of the relative authority of one who can expect in the future and question, and therefore exercise power, the question mark can instead easily become the symbol of a weakness to understand things or express oneself. This is the case in some comics published during the heyday of colonialism and white power. The first Hergé gives fine examples of this even before his controversial *Tintin in the Congo* and *Tintin in America*. On the one hand, the character of Boy Scout Totor facing the savagery of Redskins (1927), on the other, the black Popokabaka submitted to European power (1928). In the first case (*figure 6*), the position of the big question mark at the center of the square is symbolic of the absolute impossibility of the two characters meeting, finding a common exchange. In the second (*figure 7*), the black question mark appears as an emanation of the character, wide-eyed in front of the mysteries of the civilized world and thus witness to the need of civilizing through a colonial presence. At the time “Belgium harbors a culture that could pass for a caricature of normalcy and respectability, though not without its dark side. Hergé was comfortable in the most banal backwaters of this culture, never questioning its prejudices (something he looked back on, late in life, with a sort of rueful self-contempt.) He attended a Catholic school, and upon graduating at age 18 went to work for a Catholic newspaper, *Le Vingtième Siècle*. The brand of Catholicism that embraced him was deeply reactionary, royalist, violently anti-Communist, strongly anti-Capitalist (Moscow and Wall Street being seen as two sides of the same Judeo-Masonic coin), unthinkingly imperialist. “Hey, the Belgian Empire allowed the missionaries to convert all those benighted pagan Blacks” (Buchet, 2010). Once these embarrassing anti-humanist influences are recognized, the whole work of Hergé will never stop trying hard to rebuild the relationship with the Other and to make the question mark the transitive sign that it should always have been and that Uderzo, playing with mock hieroglyphs, reinvents significantly in *Asterix the Legionary* (1967) in the mouth of the Egyptian Ptenisnet: with a sickle to separate known from the unknown and one eye to search but also to come into contact, the two key dimensions of the sign are thus highlighted.



Figure 6: *Boy Scout Totor*, 1927, Hergé. Permission by © Hergé/Moulinsart 2011

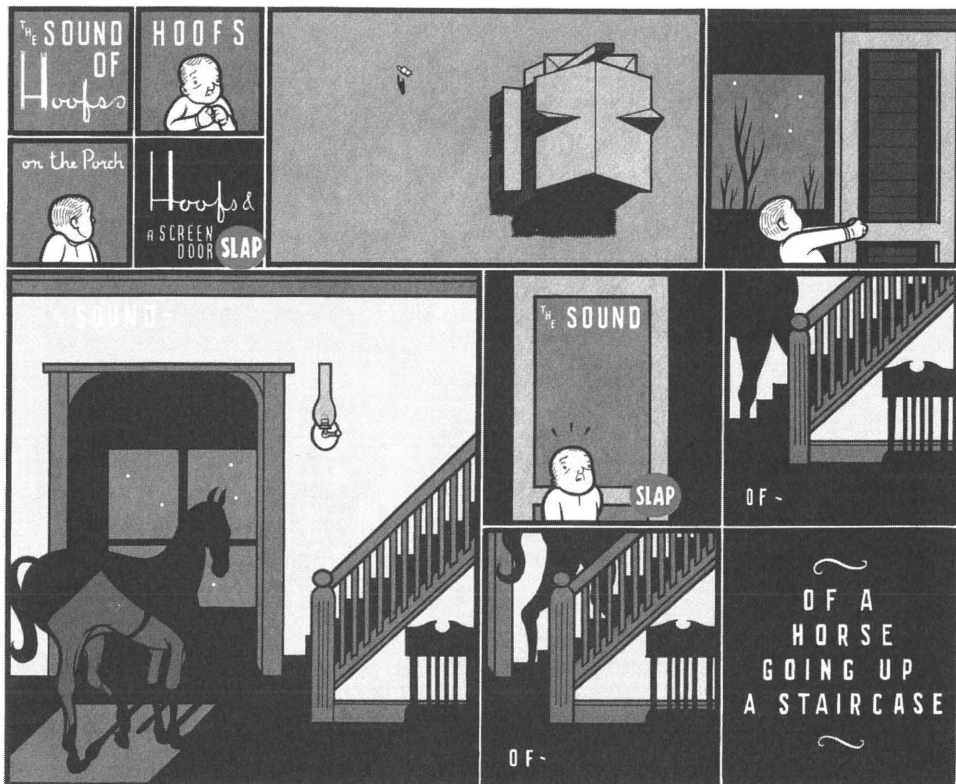


Figure 7: *Popokabaka* 1928, Hergé. Permission by © Hergé/Moulinsart 2011

HOW TO MAKE VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE

If, as we have seen, the immediately expressive signs have always enjoyed a real success in the comics, what about the “lower classes” of the signs that are used to organize discourse and seem at first sight incapable of representing anything: comma, semicolon, period, parentheses. Do they have a claim to autonomy? And if so what for? The examples are indeed very rare outside the purely experimental scope. We will take three contemporary ones, which appear as complementary.

The first one is the very special use that Chris Ware makes of dashes and periods in some passages of *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000). In the story of the nightmare (figure 8) in which the abstract word gets material through the form of a nightmare as in the famous painting by Fuseli, the text makes use of the symbolic value of different types of calligraphic letters but also of the delaying effects produced



by dashes which progressively shorten as the presence of the mare in the house becomes more obvious: “THE SOUND— / THE SOUND / OF— / OF —.” In the next page, punctuation disappears, which leads to the appearance of white balloons and strangely “naked” interjections (“HA HA”) while the narrative indications are, conversely, *overpunctuated* with periods, including the strange “BUT.” The disruption of the code helps to build a world that is both mute and awfully noisy, where images are extremely tight and at the same time cut one from the other by the authority of the written punctuation marks. It participates in the desire to make sensible by all means, and not just those traditionally allowed by the image and the narrative text, the very special unease and helplessness that one can feel during a nightmare.

The second one can be found in *99 Ways to Tell a Story* (figure 9). Imitating the style of some action manga, Madden uses above the predictable exclamation points,

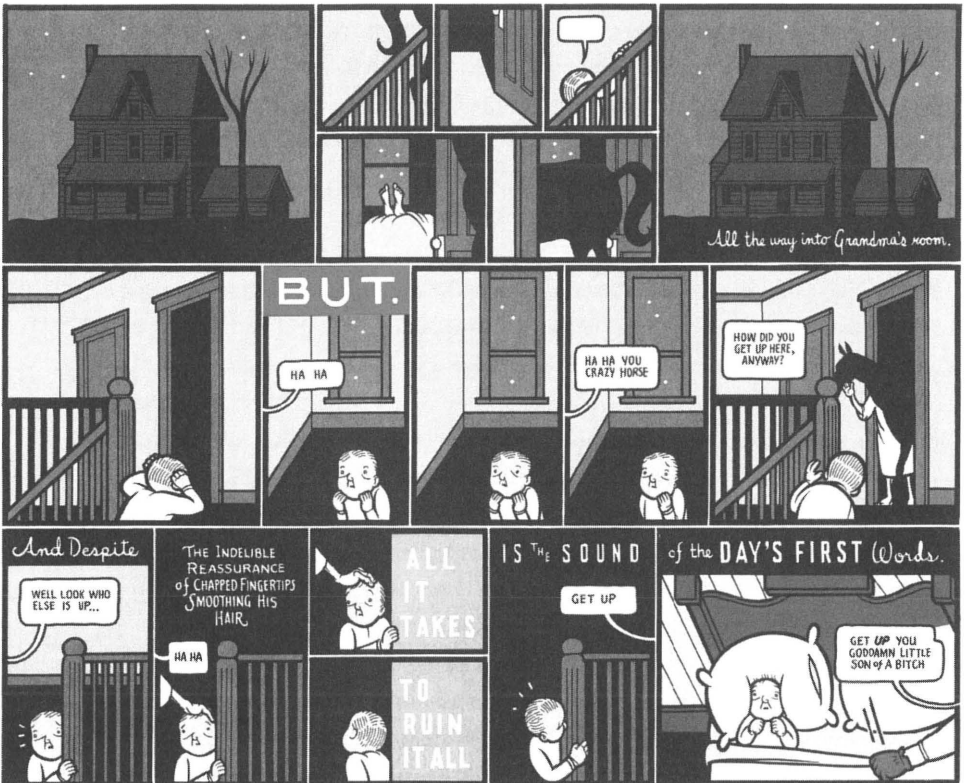


Figure 8: *Jimmy Corrigan*, 2000, Chris Ware. Permission by © Chris Ware

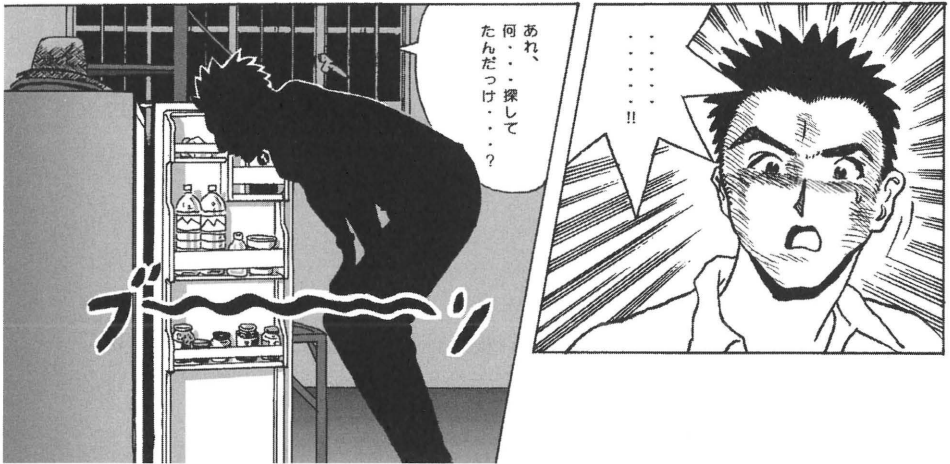


Figure 9: 99 Ways to Tell a Story, 2000, Matt Madden. Permission by © Matt Madden

rows of dots that are difficult to interpret immediately: they are usually two and replace the expected text without giving any clue of what it could be, so that the well-known autonomy of the expressive signs seems imitated, but without any effect. The very hyperbolic style of the majority of *mangas* thus allows the use of dots as a substitute for a text that does not need to say. The dot appears as the last step before a form of literature that would be wholly visual!

A third and final interesting example is provided by a sequence of the autobiographical *Yukiko's Spinach* (2001). Frédéric Boilet takes advantage of a special effect available in Japanese photo booths to place the couple he momentarily makes with Yukiko within a *manga* image (figure 10). The choice of the girl with glasses is due to a T-shirt similar to another worn by Yukiko and allows Frédéric to tell his girlfriend she would make a good comics character, accentuating her transformation into a two-dimensional figure. But what is yet more interesting is that the shade of a punctuation mark determines the organization of the representation. The freezing of the image gives the feeling that both characters are somehow locked inside parentheses consisting, left, of a script that mixes syllabic *katakana* characters and alphabetic ones and, right, of a drawing which is both alien (since it was imposed by the machine) and close (through the fetish T-shirt). Parenthesis perfectly summarizes the temporary love situation that is depicted by an album that combines writing, drawing and photography. It is to be noticed that the text contained in the rudimentary *manga* scene refers to “battle” and “parties” as an ironic echo of what is at stake in the narrative and the form of the book. The very word *parenthesis* is used by Boilet after three balloons which reformulate, in an increasingly deteriorated



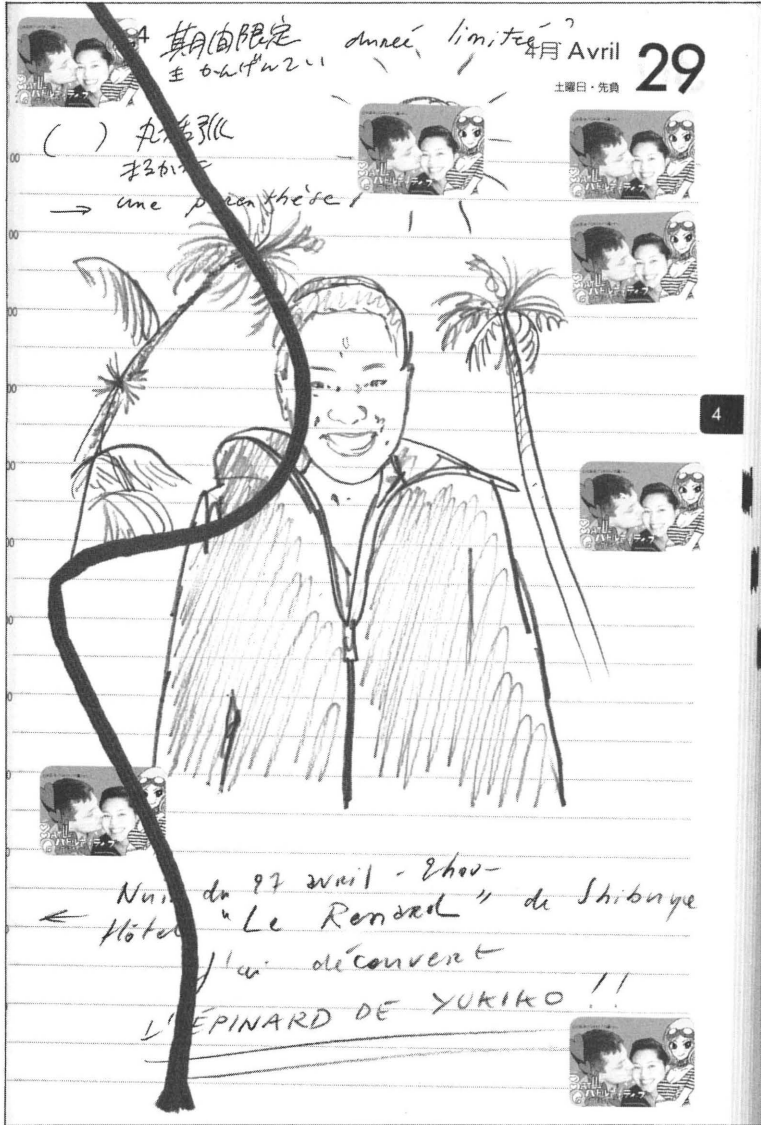
Figure 10: Yukiko's Sprinch, 2001, Frédéric Boilet. Permission by © Ego comme X

way, the possibility of a lasting love affair: “a beautiful love story,” “something between you and me,” “a hiatus,” while, concomitantly, the text occupies less and less visual space. On the opposite page, the composition of the page makes use again of the idea of parenthesis by enclosing a central mute image between two images with text. From the top balloon to the bottom one, the verb *decider* (to decide) changes from the infinitive, mood of all possibilities, to the indicative past tense, used for the accomplished, but goes also from the left to the right of the page. In between, the artificial pose that the two characters strike looks like a suspended moment.

The image that follows and takes the form of a calendar page (*figure 11*) reformulates the idea of parenthesis in four ways:

- by repeating it in the form of a synonym (“limited duration”);
- by drawing it through the Western punctuation mark: ();
- by translating it (the Chinese ideogram itself appears to reproduce three times the sign of Western parenthesis);
- by containing it in the zigzagging of the “real” bookmark that crosses a figure of Yukiko, herself caught between two palm trees as a parenthesis.

This saturation is indicative of the willingness of F. Boilet to make use of all the possible resources of image and writing to beautify the commonplace of romantic interlude and subtly make appear the inevitable failure of the meeting which gives its form to the album. Cinema needed to affirm the singular power of editing to get rid of the patronage of theater and photography; F. Boilet, because he is nourished by the example that the long tradition of Japanese *manga* provides, shows how the comics need to think about the problematic status of the sign, in all forms including punctuation, to become something other than “literature in prints” and play a real part in the contemporary aesthetics debate.



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 Figure 11: Yukiko's Spinach, 2001, Frédéric Boilet. Permission by © Ego comme X

CONCLUSION

In a text entitled “PONCTUATION :p (or) r, q-uo-i!” Laetitia Bianchi (2002) bases her work on a study made with pupils to try to understand the literary uses of punctuation:

D'ordinaire, les écrivains comme il faut italiquent bien les mots importants, soulignent à l'occasion. Le !?? paraît familier, malpoli, réservé à un emploi humoristique...

— Si quelqu'un ici veut que je tombe raide mort, il n'a qu'à me parler de cette question. Elle me rappelle la plus effroyable période de ma vie...

— !!!???...!!! nous écriâmes-nous simultanément. [Alphonse Allais, La logique mène à tout] ...ou à la bande dessinée :

[Elève] n°3 — parce que dans la bande dessinée Tintin il y a une fois où il y avait Tintin il mettait une bombe une bombe atomique et alors Tintin il a un cheval il est dans le désert il craint et tout à coup la bombe atomique elle explose et

Professeur — et alors il y a un point d'exclamation là

n°3 — ben oui ils mettent toujours ça⁵

The visibility of punctuation clearly appears here: it is spotted by children, without interpretation. But if the exclamation point partakes now, somehow, in the “comics effect,” it is time to try other things with other signs, as it is the case in poetry or in graphic arts. The attempts, still rare, of some major authors show the way: a whole area of creation remains to be explored.

5 Usually, proper writers italicize properly important words, underline on occasions. The !?? sounds familiar, rude, limited to a humorous use...

— If anyone here wants me to fall down dead, they just need to tell me about this issue. It reminds me of the most terrible period of my life...

— !!!???...!!! we cried simultaneously. [Alphonse Allais, Logic leads to all] ...or to comics:

[Pupil] n°3 — because in the Tintin comic book there's a time when there was Tintin he placed a bomb an atomic bomb and then Tintin has a horse he is in the desert he is afraid and suddenly the atomic bomb it explodes and Teacher — and then there is an exclamation point

n°3 — well yes they always put that

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AUTHOR NOTE

JACQUES DÜRRENMATT is Professor of Stylistics and Poetics at the University of Toulouse (France). He has published several books devoted to the issues raised by the division and fragmentation of the novelistic text or by the aesthetic uses of linguistic ambiguity, as well as numerous articles that try to capture the taste displayed by the Romantic period for experimentation, eccentricity and monstrosity, and that often deal with the materiality of the literary text. In parallel with continuing work on punctuation, he has been working for several years on the contribution made by to the field of literature and, following on from several articles, is preparing a book on the subject.

