

A Letter, in Haste,
to Nanni Cagnone

by Angus Fletcher

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Where are you? I suppose in this room—which “this?” this room. that one? In the castle of Elsinore, to get to the Queen’s bedroom, you had to pass through several other bedrooms, en route. Possibilities of the “clarity of incest” occurring to you, en route, were you Hamlet, for example.

Academically, à la polonaise, I’d better first-off smite the sled-ded polack on the ice: your book (What’s Hecuba to Him or He to Hecuba?) is a book, p-b covers simulating the hard white treacle they paint on reinforced concrete walls of modern buildings, an irregular texture of matte stripings; on the spine a strange word—“oolp”—some kind of last gasp, I suppose, the sound a dignified matron would emit if, out of London, she almost slipped on a banana-peel—she promenades by the sea, at Brighton, and almost slips, recovers, and, aware of Others, emits a vaguely flatulent “oolp.” [cf. the secretary in John Barth’s *Floating Opera*—another story]

Inside the covers, elegant layout—use of margins for visual beauty of the text, and for a frame of visual silence: each page = a visual anechoic chamber, therefore the “real” stanza is the white part of the page, not the printed verses.

Still more like Polonius, ever briefer and more tedious, I note, Nanni, unlike your prologuizer, Tomaso Kemeny, you never (?) use the word “labyrinth,” nor do you attempt to amaze your reader. As I see it, you avoid the ratio of temple and maze, because you wish to speak the truth about thresholds, which are the crossings between temple and maze: ie, the prophetic junctures (in a linguistic as well as a mythic sense), Roussel’s seuils, necessary non-experiences of the meaning of being deserted, required of the vates, before he is awarded his *diplome d’hautes prophéties*. Ah, poor Jonah... back to the whale-road, meboy!

Your wife is a kvetch, but there are many Ninevahs for you, before the end of this *commedia dell’arte*. But junctures, can we speak of them? The threshold does not exist; it is fairly pure betweenness. So you swing with *das Zwischen*. (Note on

“error,” from Ariosto and others, eg. Spenser: errare, wandering knights, planets, maze-walking: varieties of maze, mountains, the Grand Canyon vs Brice Canyon – or Zion – in the State of Utah, the maze at Hampton Court: Olivier and Michael Caine; Marvell's “Garden”, William Empson on “complex words,” etc).

Error and the possible need for an abortion: “Darling, we made a mistake.” Whose fault? The opening scene of *Lear*: to risk abortion is, at least theatrically, the consequence of man's need to allow Nature its way. What kind of silencing is abortion, then? Has the silencing already occurred, at the ill-timed meeting of egg and sperm? As Patrizia said yesterday, “you make Anglo-Saxon comments” —perhaps. Ounces of prevention, pounds of cure. With growing confidence in my concatenated tedium, I proceed, to get to the point of this letter.

The ground for any reasonable critique of your book is to explain, so far as possible, your use of the comma. Commas, we know, have been used before, and will hereafter continue to be used, abused, and as for me—your rash, intruding fool—perused. But, I would say, like the Bard of S-on-Avon, you are willing to be used by the comma.

As Lawrence Sterne was quite content to be used by the dash: in line with what I said, in response to your stichomythiad yesterday: *balancement de ballons entre Ballerini et Cagnone*, Act v, Scene 6 [*Les Indes Galantes*—No: Not the correct “source” —in fact the scene comestowards the middle of Rameau's lyric opera, *Les Paladins*], [heavy, serious comma here], —in line with my response, Sterne's dash is a love-making breather-marking, in all permutations conceivable. He's not so high on commas, because he is troubled about impotence—or rather, Tristram Shandy (and family) are. Impotence is a local phenomenon, for instance as experienced by the stepdaughter's stepfather when, to escape his amorous advances, she takes refuge in a cold shower.

But perhaps you are concerned about a more radical impo-

tence, the radical threat to utterance when the window-sash falls on your pen, as with *Tristram Shandy*. Let's see how the argument might go... I have my eye on my stop-watch, never fear! Let's see... 61/2 minutes elapsed.

Your commas might, if traditional, simply be clausal markers, for segmentations which would otherwise escape a tin-eared reader. Dr. Williams did not need them, however: so... you also obviously don't need them for that purpose. I notice that you employ dashes, colons, parentheses, even rarely semi-colons: and always as placed signs. Your punctuation, "pointers," are the hinges of each poem, even when they are absent, as in #29 (on "unremembering" and #31 (on slow water-dripping). Your stars, in the theatrical sense, are always points of punctuation. Limelight, spotlighting, etc. A dash is a slow fade. Tedium is a course in punctuation—Polonius takes his children to the bronx Zoo, and points to all the species of baboon, naming each, plus zoological data from his dimly remembered school-days, and appending to each indexed ape an appropriate moral tag, or perhaps a proverb.

But to get back to those commas. To what might they refer? We shall perhaps see to what. Seemingly commas do not "refer." But Hamlet says, "seems, Madam? I know not seems." A nice pun.

Then, do they command the reader? thus: pause here, breathe, then proceed to the next clause? If so, and this seems part of your technique in your poem on a play on words, they are an actor's stage-direction for his performance on stage. You are very theatrical—only theatrical??? Can one be anything more or less than theatrical in this Italian world we still hope, or fear, to live in, this operatic world? Can one be dramatic, instead? Theater is "show," spectacle, the real dream that troubled Augustine. Is theater all there is? (Like Wagner, Heidegger is theatrical—and regarding "being dramatic," you remember perhaps what Shaw said about *Meistersinger*: "It's a long time to wait for a singing contest." *Sein und Zeit*, if a comic opera, is

also a long time to wait for a singing contest.) Is theater all there is, or simply all that's there? If the latter, we know where "there" is—on stage.

The stage is a place of non-doing, *adran*—would that be the Greek word? ie, non-dramamaking, a special case of doing-as-non-doing. *Sein und Zeit* must be a comedy; its laughter, tedium of wit, is contagious. But theater is perhaps also something else: a being on stage, behind the footlights, in danger of falling into the pit, as Chaplin in *Limelight* indeed fell in: he marked the necessity of his own death, when it had to happen, —he punctuated it, by falling—exquisite comedian, to the end, —he fell over the footlights into a bass-drum—before that, the Great Calvero sought only to be masked, and "the source of wit in others," a player, *nella scena*—is that how you say it in Italian?

The comma then is the true hero, the real star, of *commedia dell'arte*—I believe in some strange wisdom preserved for us in these bad puns. Comma is *Arlecchino*, *Harlequin*, our "motley fool." His role is to interrupt all forms of spurious, merely seeming flow. More radically, he impersonates what is meant in Greek by the verb *koptein*, to "cut off." I agree with you [p. 159]: True—"Etymology? A science without foundation." Benveniste, too, would finally agree with you, at least, in principle. Therefore we can only say, without adequate grounding, perhaps, that the Comma seems to be the theatrical persona of *koptein*; Stevens called him "The Comedian as the Letter C," meaning *kappa*, in English our "hard C." The comic seer.

I stress this, Nanni, because if I (one) were to produce the morphology of your pointing, suppose I were Russian and wanted to become the Vladimir Propp of Cagnone's punctuation, I (one) would have to observe that commas and capons are rooted in the same etymology: Partridge, hasting beyond his own pun, *festina lente*, has [Origins, 78b]: *capon*, a castrated cock or male chicken: *oe capun*: L *capon*-, o/s of *capô*, akin to Gr *koptein*, to cut: cf. comma.

The capon/comma then marks the virtual or actual castration of a continuous speaking: what is called, “a spiel,” a “great speech,” something out of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*. Thus: Hamlet’s soliloquy from which your title and your entitlement come, “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” is one of the most heavily punctuated, self-castrated speeches in all theatrical literature—and its climax occurs precisely at the truncated quasi-line, “Yet I,” where the comma cuts off all possible prior ruminations emerging from the soup of Hamlet’s preconscious, and, by the act of uttering the real facts of his case, “Yet I, comma,” that he has been castrated, by at last, slowly, jerkily, enraged with increased intempestività, permits himself... what? of all things, the invention of a household device, a mousetrap. Given, note, the existence of plague, mousetraps are not useless inventions. And a mousetrap that will kill the polonius-strain of rat, and kill that strain on its most killing level, that of a false king—that trap is something. It is the hero’s admission, as Freud put it, in his section of Interpretation, the section where he disclosed his discovery of the Oedipus Complex—it is Hamlet’s admission of “the dream of the death of the beloved.” The first balletic step before one can move into one’s self-possession of one’s “act,” ie, gets one’s act together: a sort of plié, I suppose; warming up before the kill, the speech as action (vs speech as plaudern, babble).

Even when Papageno has learned a little silence in *The Magic Flute*—our best work on the range of senses of silence, rather better than Heidegger, anyway—Papageno can either (a) sing only folk-style strophic song-forms or (b) babble, at last, however, metrically, pa-pa-pa, pa pa-pa pa-pa, duetting with his frightening rur double, Papagena—the 2 of them the first preindustrial-age baby-making machines sent forth into the world of grand opera, ie, into the life of the West.

The radical use of Comma implies a tragic harlequinade, by contrast—our serious *commedia dell’arte*. Our serio ludere, our hapless, confident, almost always smiling, almost always

almost laughing at the edge of tears, our vigorous melancholia—our etceteration, as Maitland the great historian of constitutional law put it, when he demonstrated exactly why Queen Elizabeth's full titles (besides announcing her Empress, in effect, of all the British Isles, including Ireland, plus odd parts of France) ends with the word "Etc." Etc. means "just in case" we do get lucky and strike it rich—get that land back: all poets share in this need to Etc. Etceteration is the fully humorous form of the *commedia* of the comma. We're doubtless "cut off," but "just in case," says Arlecchino, I'll put in an etc. So he alleviates the gravity of real or fantasized castrations.

In terms of your book, then, all the single poems, gradually, begin to become comedic etceterations, transforming the dire interruptio of the placed comma, transforming that, bit by bit, into a seamless web of etceterating hopes. That's a bit fancy, you understand, but you know what I'm trying to say. Would you not agree, for instance, that # 47 uses the comma as it does, because it is a poem of death, that most dismal of castrations one might call it the last castration, or maybe just "the last round-up?"

So, then, we know: the comma does refer to something. We would call it "death," except that, as Bridgman, the physicist, noted: "one of the commonest illusions of human beings is the belief that death is an event." Marlowe knew otherwise. When his Faustus dies, after emitting, uttering the poet's most splendid of all speeches—doubtless the greatest "speech," as such, in our theatrical literature—this learned Doctor simply exits from the scene. Death is not an event; it is the foreclosure of a happening. And to that foreclosure, the comma does seem to refer. It refers, as well, to the very seemingness of exit; to its fundamental relativity, or complementarity (I, as Polonius, cannot resist a final caper of pedantic fancy footwork), to the reason for your title (an "enabling act," Maitland would say): What's Hecuba to Him or He to Hecuba?

Allora, basta, basta, down with this basta too, it's not enough;

it's too much—and this letter far too long; but then, as Keats said in his last letter, “I always made an awkward bow.”

Arrivederci, Nanni,

Angus [Fletcher]