

## THE FULL STOP

Diminutive as a mote of dust, a mere peck of the pen, a crumb on the keyboard, the full stop is the unsung legislator of our writing systems. Without it, there'd be no end to the sorrows of young Werther and the travels of the Hobbit would have never been completed. Its absence allowed James Joyce to weave *Finnegans Wake* into a perfect circle and its presence made Henri Michaux compare our essential being to this dot, "a dot that death devours". It crowns the fulfilment of thought, gives the illusion of conclusiveness, possesses a certain haughtiness that stems, like Napoleon's, from its minuscule size. Anxious to get going, we require nothing to signal our beginnings, but we need to know when to stop: this tiny *memento mori* reminds us that everything, ourselves included, must one day come to a halt. As an anonymous English teacher suggested in the 1680 *Treatise of stops, Points or Pauses*, a full stop is "a Note of perfect Sense, and of a perfect Sentence."

The need to indicate the end of a written phrase is probably as old as writing itself, but the solution, brief and wonderful, was not set down until the Italian Renaissance. For ages, punctuation had been a desperately erratic affair. Already in the first century A.D., the Spanish author Quintilian (who had not read Henry James) had argued that a sentence, as well as expressing a complete idea, had to be capable of being delivered in a single breath. How that sentence should be ended was a matter of personal taste and for a long time scribes punctuated their texts with all manner of signs and symbols, from a simple blank space to a variety of dots and slashes. In the early fifth century, St Jerome, translator of the Bible, devised a system, known as *per cola et commata*, in which each

unity of sense would be signaled by a letter jutting out of the margin, as if beginning a new paragraph. Three centuries later, the *punctus* or dot was used both to indicate a pause within the sentence and the sentence's conclusion. Following such muddled conventions, authors could hardly expect their public to read a text in the sense they had intended.

Then, in 1566, Aldus Manutius the Younger, grandson of the great Venitian printer to whom we owe the invention of the pocket book, defined the full stop in his punctuation handbook, the *Interpungendi ratio*. Here, in clear and unequivocal Latin, Manutius described for the first time its ultimate role and aspect. He thought that he was offering a manual for typographers; he couldn't know that he was granting us, future readers, the gifts of sense and music in all the literature to come: Hemingway and his staccatos, Beckett and his recitativos, Proust and his largo sostenuto.

"No iron," wrote Isaac Babel, "can stab the heart with such force as a full stop put just at the right place." As an acknowledgement of both the power and the helplessness of the word, nothing else has served us better than this faithful and final speck.