Towards a history of the Romanian punctuation

Adina Chirilă*

Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, West University, Bd. Vasile Pârvan 4, 300223 Timișoara, Romania

Abstract

In the process of constructing an academic edition for old and pre-modern texts, although they thoroughly record and comment the phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical variants of a text, its omissions and interpolations, etc., the Romanian philologists tend to deal tacitly with the problem of punctuation, by adding rational, syntactic punctuation, according to the contemporary norm. This method has certain advantages for the general public, but, in fact, falsifies the text, because it puts the actions of a secondary agent—the editor—on the author. Moreover, the lack of perfect archæological relevations of the Romanian old and pre-modern texts—which would show, in this respect, the more or less consequent working habits of our early writers—leads, at least for the moment, to the impossibility of presenting the scientific community with a history of the Romanian punctuation. This is, nevertheless, an idea whose achievement depends on an objective re-evaluation of our contemporary editorial practice.

Complex neurolinguistic studies have shown that in the process of silent reading of a text structured according to the modern rules of editing, the visual image of the linguistic elements on the typographic row (and, to some extent, on the handwritten row) is perceived and decoded in the cortex more rapidly than their auditory form, following certain inborn, as well as acquired, perfectible cognitive characteristics. However, the reading rhythm is influenced by textual variables (e.g., different levels of conceptual complexity in discourse, elements that surpass the frame of prediction created by the syntactic and semantic flow previously witnessed, etc.—which lead to an increased ocular fixation duration, a decreased saccade length, and an increased frequency of regression, Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989, Rayner, 1998), as well as typographical variables (different fonts, uneven lines, omission or incorrect use of punctuation symbols: space between words, comma, etc.). Researches such as these suggest that the millenary effort of scribes and typographers to increase the access to the content of books has resulted not only in the simplification of the neurophysiologic process of reading (through, e.g., disrupting *scriptio / scriptura continua* and introducing the visual marks of punctuation), but also in a gradual conditioning of the performance in the act of reception and comprehension of a text. Thus, a reader cannot be but a person of their epoch, and of the environment in which they evolve, shaped to optimally meet the features of a text constructed according to contemporary graphic norms or to those that are conventional in a specific context. Any nonstandard *mise en page* is, perceptively, an anomaly; that might, in certain circumstances (i.e., in literature), be stylistically and æsthetically recuperated (Vianu, 1968, p. 50–51) (e.g., Apollinaire's pictograms and ideograms, Mallarmé's typographical experiments, Beckett's æsthetical prospects, and, lately, the literary games in a limited number of characters, hosted on mobile phones' displays—Crystal, 2008, p. 74–86), but which, nevertheless, rises a difficulty to the reader.

From this point of view, the encounter between a reader and a text belonging to a past epoch requires naturally the adjustment of one towards the other: either by dispensing with the prerogative of an easy reading, as to the former, or by getting rid of some of its specific constitutive elements, as to the latter. In both cases, the process means the amputation of an organism that is sufficient and perfect in one context, but not functional, or only partially functional in another.

*Email address: chiriladina@yahoo.com.

In practice, throughout centuries, the one that has been usually "sacrificed", assuming the position of an object under constant adaptation, has been the book—extreme cases of such interventions being those of the abridged versions of the poems of Antiquity, linguistic rewritings of late medieval texts, which, at any time, remain relevant for the human spirit, but have become obscure on account of linguistic evolution, etc. These, and also those that claim fewer interventions upon the morphology of a text aim at preserving the text, namely its content, in the awareness of the general public[1].

However, a text is never just the story told by it. Its original aspect, at various levels, measures the capacities and needs of a certain epoch; its origin, its variants, or, on the contrary, the lack of variants, the identity of the agents that have produced the text and, later on, modified it, their reasons and purposes, etc. influence its reading and its message toward a present reader (Shillingsburg, 2006, p. 33). Any operation upon the text brings it closer to a form that is valid and important to the time of its alteration, but the same operation severs the text from the context that has generated it.

It follows that the decision of editing an old text according to certain principles ought to emerge after a profound deliberation upon the gain that might be obtained by the modern reader, and the loss suffered by the text. When the former has greater value (by the content of the text, by its moral or ethical value, by its founding character concerning a given domain, etc.), the editing would be reader-orientated; otherwise, there must prevail the text as a mirror of the epoch that has produced it. Thus, the question if a certain text should undergo the most severe editorial procedures in order to present itself as a scientific edition, or, on the contrary, if it should undergo the editorial procedures toward an ordinary edition is somehow wrong and hurried, ignoring a necessary prior question: if that particular text would contribute to the knowledge of the general public, so that the intervention upon the form of the text (punctuation, segmentation, text division, etc.) might be justified as means of making it more accessible.

Abreast letters and accents, punctuation is part of the *lexical codes* of a text (to distinguish them from the *bibliographic codes*—the type fonts, the deployment of the blanks, the binding, etc.), that influence the reading of the text[2]. Its emergence, development, and improvement—beginning with the 6th – 7th centuries, in texts that conveyed information to the mind through the eye (Parkes, 2012, p. 1)—would have satisfied the need for clarity and facility in reading and understanding the Latin and, later on, the vernacular texts. We admit that, moving from one cultural area to another, one cannot assume general-isations about the history of punctuation in Europe, but ought to observe the specific character of each area's evolution[3]; still, there are some aspects concerning the activities of writing, copying and printing

---

[1]We thus understand how pertinent an idea would be that of constructing a modernized edition of, e.g., Dimitrie Cantemir's *Istoria ieroglifică*, with a contemporary grammar!

[2]Answering to a correspondent who has asked for advice on how she should bring up her daughter, Jérôme gives the following answer (in letter 107.12, *Ad Lætam, de institutione filiæ*), that shows very well the early scribe's concern for clarity and accuracy: "Pro gemmis aut serico diuinos codices amet, in quibus non auri et pellis Babyloniæ uermiculata pictura, *sed ad fidem placeat emendata et erudita distinctio*." [cf. Fr.: « Au lieu des gemmes et de la soie, qu'elle aime les volumes divins. C'est pas dans la mosaïque enluminée d'or ou de cuir de Babylone qu'elle cherche son plaisir, mais dans *la netteté correcte et savante des textes*. » (St. Jérôme, 1955, p. 156); v. Idem, p. 212, note *P.* 156, *l.* 19 : « Cette netteté s'obtient surtout par la ponctuation, à qui convient spécialement le mot *distinctio* » / Engl. "Instead of jewels or silk let her love the manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures, and in them *let her prefer correctness and accurate arrangement* to gilding and Babylonian parchment with elaborate decorations." (St. Jérôme, 1933, p. 364/365); italics added].

[3]At the end of year 1470, Guillaume Fichet was adding Guarini de Vérone's small treatise about punctuation marks and their correct use to Gasparino Barzizza de Bergame's *De Orthographia*, and in Paris, during the 16th century, humanist typographers such as Simon de Colines, Geofroy Tory, Christian Wechel, Robert Estienne were deeply concerned about the quality of the reproductions of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and French texts that were being made in their shops, and about orthography, grammar, accents and punctuation, as well as about the emendation of the typographical characters (Perrousseaux [s.a.], p. 223); approximately at the same time, *Scrisoarea lui Neacșu* [Neacșu's Letter] (1521) does not show proper punctuation marks, only a separating dot between words or sequences of various length, with no real textual function; in ᴘʜ, the use of punctuation marks (punctus, comma and double punctus) "este, în general, arbitrară" [is, generally speaking, arbitrary] (Gheție & Teodorescu, 2005, p. 35); and in ᴄʙ, the ambiguous distribution of various marks suggests the idea that "nu se poate ști cu certitudine la ce serveau aceste semne sau ce marcau ele într-un astfel de text" [one cannot know for certain what the purpose of these marks was, and what they used to mark in a text as such] (Gafton, 2003, p. XLV, note 55; cf. p. XLVI, note 57); etc.

throughout the continent which cannot be denied *a priori*, namely: a) that there is a reason for how one uses the system of punctuation in a given text; b) that, at some point, as in the case of grammar and vocabulary, the tendency of emendating the punctuation of a text emerges, either by introducing marks where weren't before, or by replacing some with others, or by adopting new typographical or handwritten types; c) that two punctuation systems may operate, the rhetoric and the syntactic one, and that, at least in some cases, the authors chose and apply one of them more or less consequently.

To act upon these premises, as unlikely their pertinence be in the Romanian case, is not more noxious than to act upon the idea that, in order to facilitate the access of the modern reader to the content of the text (a reader who might not be as interested as we expect them to be), the editor should tacitly provide the text with rational punctuation (as they run through the text, following their own understanding of its content, or—when biblical texts are involved—the guidance of a canonical modern edition), "în lipsa totală de punctuațiune sau în locul celei greșite din mss" [in the absolute absence of punctuation or instead of the wrong punctuation of the manuscripts] (Russo, 1912, p. 61–62).

> Since editing a text in an academic way is regarded as preserving the auctorial intention, thus being retrospectively oriented, the editors do not cease to underline the necessity to evaluate the form of a text in the light of language evolution up to and around the moment of the creation of the text. Consequently, when one appreciates a linguistic form as correct or wrong, they do it in the presence and under the authority of a norm, one that can transgress the norm of the text, of the patois or of the cultural region represented by the text or by the text's author, but nevertheless real at that time. When it comes to the punctuation issue, there isn't a similar control structure available for old Romanian. This leads to dwelling on the punctuation as if it belonged to the bibliographical code, and to operating upon it under the guidance of the modern syntactic punctuation. This manner might be justified through the idea that the punctuation signs that mark out the syntax of a text are somehow redundant, they appear when and where the semantics of the text asks for them; thus the modern editor only renders evident something that already exists in the text, and does not falsify it (as it would be the case if the editor phonetically and grammatically homogenized or modernized the text). Still, this position (radically manifested in Stein, 1985, p. 214–222) does not represent, for the text itself, a more valid argument towards the emendation of the punctuation than towards the preservation as its original state.

The adverb *tacitly* ought to be the object of critic though, because it blurs the line between the work of the original author (or copyist, typographer), and the work of the modern editor—the objective data, and the subjective editorial judgement (Draguet, 1977)—, by bringing to the level of the original text every modification, addition and omission performed by the editor. The observation does not concern the opportunity of the intervention (which, in fact, is compulsory when one constructs a *critical* edition— see Chiari, 1951—, even if the editorial decisions were burdened by uncertainty when the editor has to uncover the archetype or the original text, or to chose between more plausible conjectures), but the prerogative of putting the actions of a secondary agent, even unintentionally, on the author.

About the punctuation rendered by the critical editions dedicated to the old Romanian texts, we know, by a centenary convention, that it does not reflect the one of the original pages[4]. This has become so self-evident and normal a fact that the fundamental and minute interventions in the field of philology of Onu (1973, 1978), Gheție & Mareș (1974) do not make reference to the problem of punctuation and to the editor's right to normalize it. But to know that we do not know something does not represent an acceptable solution to a problem, since the inquiring reader, who might ask about the original aspect of a text's punctuation, find him/herself in the position to recommence the work of the editor, by scouring

---

[4]When we do not forget, actually: "Citim de obicei textele mai vechi în ediții moderne, fără să ne gîndim prea mult la faptul că punctuația lor este actualizată, modificată conform normelor în curs" [We usually read old texts in modern editions without too much thinking that their punctuation is actualized, transformed according to the current rules] (Zafiu, 2006).

the text in the old method of writing and the original alphabet; their predecessor's effort to transliterate or transcribe the text is thus futile to them. The gain of the ordinary reader translates into a loss, not easily retrieved, for the specialist. One might object to this point of view by saying that, while constructing a sound critical edition, the editor has already studied this particular aspect of the text too, evaluating it as accidental (Greg, 1966, p. 376) or substantive (Parkes, 1998, p. 337), and operating upon it consequently. However, when the editor's interpretation is insufficiently sustained, or when the decision to ignore the "wrong" punctuation of the original is not documented, the re-examination of the data appears as a necessity. Renouncing some elements of the editorial model described by B.P. Hasdeu (1878, I, pp. 3-4), and, later on, the reserve of the Romanian editors concerning the drastic principles of the *diplomatic* editorial model, of François Masai (1950)[5] and others, have resulted in the lack of perfect archæological relevations of the Romanian old and pre-modern texts—each of them be the groundwork of a (more or less detailed) critical edition; or, as an objective corpus—the data for monographies about, e.g., the history of the Romanian punctuation (cf. Parkes, 2012), or the history of the reception of a text whose punctuation has been modified, augmented or reduced, throughout centuries, from one copy to the other; etc.

> The reason of a program that has allowed little space for diplomatic editing is connected to the need to recoup, to the general public benefice, the old and pre-modern Romanian culture, in a permanent race against time; while, by adopting the model of the Belgian school of philology, of Fr. Masai, L. M. J. Delaissé, H. Vanderhaven, of Charles Samaran from Geneva, or that that can be deduced from the more recent theories of D.F. McKenzie (2002) and Jerome McGann (1983) etc., the construction of the critical and general editions would represent secondary attempts, coming after the diplomatic ones, and coming too late in some cases.

For the time being, and, probably, for the years to come, the desire of presenting the history of the Romanian punctuation remains as such. We lack a much necessary objective corpus through which one would trace, without the impediment of the Cyrillic alphabet, the linguistic practice, in this respect, of the authors, transcribers, and typographers of the past—long before any model of *interpungere* would be described, though briefly and with a hesitating terminology, by Dimitrie Eustatievici Brașoveanul (1757), Constantin Diaconovici-Loga (1822), Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1828), Timotei Cipariu (1877).

Bibliography

Barbu, V. (1988). *Probleme și orientări în editarea literaturii medievale*, in "Limba română", XXXVII, nr. 3, p. 143–153.

CB = *Codicele Bratul*. Ediție de text de Alexandru Gafton, Iași, Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", 2003.

Chiari, A. (1951). *La edizione critica*, in *Problemi ed orientamenti critici di lingua e di letteratura italiana*. II. *Tecnica e teoria letteraria*, Milano.

Cordingley, A. (2006). *The Reading Eye from Scriptura Continua to Modernism: Orality and Punctuation between Beckett's L'Image and Comment c'est / How It Is*, in "Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle". Special issue: *Orality in the Short Story in English*, nr. 47, Presses De L'Université D'Angers, p. 49–63.

Crystal, D. (2008). *Txtng. The Gr8 Db8*, Oxford University Press.

Draguet, R. (1977). *Une méthode d'édition des textes syriaques*, in Robert H. Fischer (ed.), *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: studies in early Christian literature and its environment, primarily in Syrian East*, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, p. 13–18.

Drimba, V. (1985). *Ediție diplomatică și ediție critică*, in "Memoriile secției de științe filologice, literatură și arte", Seria IV, tomul VII, p. 85–92.

Gafton, Al. (2003). *Studiu filologic* la CB, Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, p. IX–CV.

Gheție, I. & Mareș, Al. (1974). *Introducere în filologia românească. Probleme, metode, interpretări*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București.

Gheție, I. & Teodorescu, M. (2005). *Studiu lingvistic* la PH, I, Editura Academiei Române, București, p. 23–75.

Greg, W. W. (1966), *Collected Papers*, Oxford University Press.

Hasdeu, B. P. (1878). *Cuvente den bătrîni*, I, Tipografia Sicietății Academice Române, București.

St. Jérôme (1933). *Select Letters of* . With an English translation by F. A. Wright, London, New York.

St. Jérôme (1955). *Lettres*. Tome V. Texte établi et traduit par Jérôme Labourt, Paris, «Les belles lettres».

---

[5]See also Drimba (1985, p. 88–90) and Barbu (1988, p. 146–148).

Masai, Fr. (1950). *Principes et conventions de l'édition diplomatique*, in "Scriptorium", IV, fasc. 2, p. 177–193, CrossRef.

McGann, J.J. (1983). *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

McKenzie, D.F. (2002). *Making Meaning: "Printers of the Mind" and Other Essays*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst.

Onu, L. (1973). *Critica textuală și editarea literaturii române vechi. Cu aplicații la cronicarii Moldovei*, București.

Onu, L. (1978). *Tehnica editării textelor românești vechi*, in Elena Barborică, Liviu Onu, Mirela Teodorescu, *Introducere în filologia română. Orientări în tehnica cercetării științifice*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică (ed. I, 1972).

Parkes, M.B. (1998). *Medieval Punctuation and the Modern Editor*, in *Filologia classica e filologia romanza: esperienze ecdotiche a confronto*. A cura di Anna Ferrari, Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, Spoleto, p. 337–349.

Parkes, M.B. (2012). *Pause and Effect. An introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, Ashgate (ed. I, 1992).

Perrousseaux, Y. [s.a.]. *Histoire de l'ecriture typographique de Gutenberg au XVIIe siècle*, Atelier Perrousseaux, [s.l.].

PH = *Psaltirea Hurmuzaki*, I, studiu filologic, studiu lingvistic și ediție de Ion Gheție și Mirela Teodorescu, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2005.

Rayner, K. & Pollatsek, A. (1989). *The Psychology of Reading*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, CrossRef.

Rayner, K. (1998). *Eye Movements in Reading and Information Processing: 20 Years of Research*, in "Psychological Bulletin", vol. 124, nr. 3, p. 372–422, CrossRef.

Russo, D. (1912). *Critica textelor și tehnica edițiilor*, București, Socec & Co.

Saenger, P. (1997). *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, Stanford University Press.

Shillingsburg, P.L. (2006). *From Gutenberg to Google. Electronic representations of literary texts*, Cambridge University Press.

Stein, G. (1985). *Lectures in America*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Vianu, T. (1968). *Cercetarea stilului*, in *Studii de stilistică*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, p. 41–59.

West, M.L. (1973). *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique (applicable to Greek and Latin texts)*, B.G. Teubner, Stuttgart.

Zafiu, R. (2006). *Din istoria punctuației*, in "România literară", XXXIX, nr. 48.