The Imperial Semicolon Holds Court at Il Ristorante Beauflanx, Selections from Story Conquers

Peter J. Aschenbrenner, Purdue University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/peter_aschenbrenner/127/
Chapter Fifteen.

I will name those seated at our table. From the Dydo of us all, Mrs. Barclay. On her left the Earl of Roswell, on his left your Pearline, and on my left Col. H. Blap, USAF, and on his left, Mrs. McGowing, and on her left the long-suffering and now merely second violin to the Earl’s long bow, the Lt. Commander, USN, and on his left, Prof. Fayre Rhapsody, and on her left Ashley Scriver and on his left Mrs. Barclay, and that completes the circle.

At the dias, the Committee and honored guests enjoy the repast that Il Ristorante Beauflanx has laid on.

As the garnishment – the Alarums are bubbling on tabletop when we arrived – is served pronto if not prontissimo and kept hot via spices and proximity to the firepot as I have described, the normal rules of social discourse are suspended and each diner is left to fill inner recesses as each her hunger demands.

‘As Chesly,’ Eva McGowing trumpets, while gulping filtered ground-water, ‘is not known for partiality to seconds or thirds – ’

‘These are all the comestibles,’ concludes Dydo Barclay, watering herself likewise, ‘we are ever likely to see.’

As the bottom of Col. H. Blap’s bowl has come into public view, he then turns his attention to –

‘What our barristers term cross-examination,’ Ashley whispers to me.

‘And small towns call humiliation,’ I add.

“That’s the Lt. Commander,” Col. Blap asks, “achieved acquaintance with Earl’s mighty tome Liars & Lawyers?”

“Was this not the work in which the grievous and nasty Russian paradox,” our naval representative takes his manly stab, “was unraveled?”

“Actually,” the Colonel replies, “it’s pronounced the ‘Russellian’ paradox.”

“Thanks, Colonel,” the Lt. Commander expresses sincere gratitude, “for the enunciatory aid.”

“It is,” the Colonel adds, “the first such work published by a member of the United States Senate since Thomas Jefferson raveled up the skein of venue.”
“Although,” Mrs. McGowing corrects the Colonel, “Thomas son of Peter was not himself a member of the Senate but rather its presiding officer.”

“No man renders a greater service than he who starts discourse off,” Ashley declares, “on the right foot.”

“And what,” the Earl asks Prof. Fayre Rhapsody, “is the name of your forthcoming monograph?”

“Judging Judges and Judgments.”

“Would ‘judgment’ be spelled,” the Earl inquires, “with two E’s or one? To get to the important matter first.”

“One,” Fayre Rhapsody answers.

“Bravo!” Col. Blap applauds. “Or brava!” he adds the necessary corrective, *e molto subito*.

“I am sure that you are prepared,” the Earl employs flattery, “for what you will face.”

“I am,” Fayre Rhapsody assures the Earl, “quite unprepared for the forthcoming change in my station in life, which will take me from mousey small-town college professor to brainy bombshell of worldwide fame.”

“I speak for all of us,” the Earl gasps, “when I hope those assembled were not distracted from our serious business when you drew out your hairpins, thereby loosing the most luxuriatingly brilliant and brunettesque cheveux ever seen, well, on this sphere.”

“Why Pearline,” Eva trumpets, “you dropped your fork.”

The Earl presses his attentions.

“In United Kingdom footnotes present,” he advises, “first, the year of publication.”

“I did not know that,” Fayre Rhapsody murmurs.

“For quotated matter, the single mark signals the perimeter,” the Earl presses his punctuated attentions onwards, “with,” he adds, “doubles following in twinn’d but inner proximity.”

“News to me,” Professor Rhapsody twirls at her locks and stares into some deep and dim recess of Il Ristorante. “How fascinating.”

“You’ve been published in the United Kingdom,” The Blap urges The Earl onwards, “have you not?”

“That’s quite true, Colonel. Or more precisely, the British Empire.”
“The Earl labors long and hard,” The Blap assures us, “over matters of punctuating emendations, which,” he continues, “does and rather neatly bring us to the Imperial semicolon, whose dimensionality is vastly greater than ours.”

“And that also inspires mention of the all-embracing single quote,” the Earl counterpoints the Colonel’s observation, “which to our way of thinking, that is colonial, must embrace the ‘full stop,’ within its strong and manly grip.”

“While,” Col. Blap nods his wisdom at the worldly-wise and very eager Miss Emma Mae Hotchkiss and Nurse Chesire Rarebit who just happen to be passing, baiting their breath at this exchange, “on terra firma transpondian (that is Britannic) if I may,” ‘oh you may,’ Nurse Rarebit exhales, ‘as matters of punctuography drive me to near-rapturous heights,’ “the single quote (’) must exhaust itself before the full stop’s shattering climax.”

And here the Colonel helpfully signals, via hand signs, the British (’) and American (.) preferences in these matters.

“Were I not diverted,” Nurse Rarebit hastily declares, “via Doc’s offer of his flask, I would have keeled into the lap of Col. Blap.”

“Endeavor to serve,” Doc winks at the ever-ready Colonel.

“I’m sure Professor Rhapsody is up to it,” the Earl turns to the Professor. “She will have her friends to assist her, as it is not to be hired out. It’s a labor of love.”

‘Is this what I’m in for?’ Fayre Rhapsody’s girlish eyebrow asks me.

I unleash my superciliary counterrogative to be taken by her in its true sense.

‘You asked for it, babe.’

“Back to footnotes, if I may,” the Lt. Commander goes on. “What does the publishing house require for citations to ancient authors?”

“Who knows in what year Plato,” The Blap blurts his question, “published the Protagoras, much less his Gorgias?”

“There is a simple rule,” the Earl declares. “The reign of Otto the Third supplies the demarcation or cut-off.”

“And yet credit for the modern footnote should also extend – the rule of the ‘rule of reason’ having been mooted – to the immortal Thomas Hobbes, right-hand-man of Francis Lord Bacon,” Dydo
ahems politely, but without effect, at which unwonted result, she delivers me, via glance Dydonian this message: ‘do you ever feel like no one’s listening to you, Pearline?’

“These are matters that will be brought to your attention,” the Earl purrs on and Rhapsody-wards, “in the contract offered you for publication rights worldwide.”

“We authors,” Fayre Rhapsody places the back of her hand on her fevered brow, “of such tomes must accommodate the customs of every clime, from the orthography of Australia to the punctuation of Peru.”

“It’s only natural that,” Col. Blap responds, “an author of worldwide reputation avoid offending local sense and sensibility.”

“And yet,” the Earl offers, “if I may, a mild departure from your views, Professor, “I have heard tell that there are some who would put color and odour in the same sentence.”

“There are those, Earl,” Mrs. Barclay states, “if I may motor into the champs, so to speak, de bataille –”

And here she signals for the assistance of Ashley.

The Commissioner clears his throat and plants his standard.

“There are those who adhere,” he proclaims, “strictly to the Websterian principle, ‘look to your Roman roots for orthodoxy orthographic’.”

“As opposed,” the Earl of Roswell stands his ground against our town’s natural born hero, “to the British principle which honours the pedigree proximate, à la couleur and odeur.”

“Duelling,” Mrs. McGowing flutters the valve on her trumpet, “is prohibited in this county, gentlemen!”

“In any event,” Mrs. Barclay soothes local feelings, “orthography is a legitimate subject of humor in a county both sophisticate and palatinate!”

“Indeed,” The Blap charges the field, “and do not the Teutonically inclined revel at the k appended suffixistically, as in the musick Royale or physick ditto?”

“But those misspellings,” Mrs. Barclay corrects the Colonel, “were corrected once Queen Victoria mounted the throne.”

“The house of Saxe-Gotha-Coburg,” Mrs. McGowing counter-corrects her sister, “mounted the throne.”

That does crack everyone up.

“There’s no reason to exclude the endogamous,” the Earl continues, “as long as we are promoting eugenics in matters of
spelling. Why may not ‘paramour’ and her hot sister ‘paramore’ live in harmony? Who knows what the offspring will look like?”

The Chairman has signal’d our table, waving at me, his finger in motion, and so this innocent hallo now becomes a matter of local interest. Encouraged by my tablemates, I approach the dias.

“After consulting with the Mayor and Vice-Mayor,” The Chairman apprises me, “I am happy to report that the Committee has taken official action by rescheduling the afternoon and opening session.”

“But,” I respond by asking, “Mr. Chairman, are there not witnesses served and under subpoena, thanks to the agency of The Hoovert?”

“We have asked,” The Chairman continues, “Mrs. Barclay to supply testimonial entertainment. At least,” he adds, “to start things off.”

“You’re running up the white flag,” I tell him, without hesitation.

“Any colours but Yellow,” Congresswoman Millifluent Fehrs ‘gives it up.’

“Do you expect a spectacular occurrence,” Congressman Richard Nixon inquires, “such as, two bands colliding on a one-lane bridge? Or Doozers diving into your town’s only waterway? Which, sadly I missed.”

“There is, indeed, always the possibility of surprising, yet inevitable, events occurring,” I assure, “at the Barclays’ beck ‘n’ call.”

“In any event, we’ve given up on,” The Other Congressman declares, “the Doozers’ claptrap. Who would believe that the American way of life may be subverted by flying cheese umbrellas?”

“And so,” the Congressman from southern Los Angeles County informs me, “we’ve resolved to change the name of our committee –”

“Do I,” I ask and here I must confess my Pearlines are well and truly displayed to our congressional guests, “have anything to offer you?”

“Your magic, Pearline,” Congresswoman Fehrs promptly replies, altho’ her glance is fixed on a distant vantage. “Something along these lines.”
“Why don’t you write it up and the girls,” The Chairman suggests, although I have no idea what ‘girls’ he has in mind, “can act it out.”

“Like the –”

“Known Throughout the World Trolley Follies of Nineteen Forty-Seven,” they blurt, and as one.

“But,” and I hasten on as the olive branch, by your leave, has been extended, “you know, this means truce, right?”

“Between,” The Chairman confirms, “Blue and Yellow.”

“But we have,” I rush on, as I am eager to nail down the pertinent terms here, “no electors to cast into the balance –”

“Let’s say the attractions are,” Congressman Nixon responds to my provocation, “latitude plus attitude.”