

The Erotics of Grammar

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I used to read grammar books for pleasure. Not all at once, but in the way you might thumb through an atlas, curious about how order gets made. My favorite was a thin green paperback with pages that smelled faintly of glue and dust. I liked the certainty of the examples: *The boy has a red ball. The girl will sing.* Everyone in those sentences knew what they were doing. I almost envied them.

My mother corrected me mid-sentence, almost absently, as she folded laundry or stirred something on the stove. *Me and him went* became *he and I went* with one gentle adjustment, like smoothing the wrinkles from a sheet. Her voice was never sharp; it moved patiently through a sentence until it fell into place. When I was young, I believed correctness was a kind of love.

When she said the words, I felt them in my throat before I understood them. *He and I went* landed differently in the mouth, the consonants clicking shut like a latch. Language didn't just correct me; it rearranged my muscles. I began to associate care with that shift of air — the small press of the tongue, the pause before a breath. Maybe that's why, even now, I notice how people breathe between words, how every correction is half an exhale. I learned that language, like the body, could be touched into shape. Syntax was a kind of tenderness you could feel under your fingers.

At school, I clung to rules as if they might hold me up. Grammar was a handrail. Each punctuation — a comma, a period — felt like a way to breathe safely, to know when to stop before something spilled over. The semicolon was my favorite; not a full stop, not surrender, just a pause long enough to feel the ache. Even then, I sensed that order and desire were never far apart. Perhaps I mistook discipline for affection. Or maybe I needed language to stay still long enough for me to find my balance.

Years later I recognized the same ache in Keats. His clauses pressed against the limits of what they could bear — *Already with thee! tender is the night* — sentences trembling on the verge of collapse and somehow holding. The breath that kept them alive felt almost human, like someone trying not to fall apart. Romantic grammar, I realized, is rarely tidy. It wants to feel the strain of its own construction. I recognized myself in that rhythm. The wish to yield. The humiliation in doing so.

Keats learned his grammar from Hazlitt and scraps of Latin. He wasn't trained to write "correctly," which may be why his syntax trembles so beautifully. The long clauses in "Ode to a Nightingale" or "Ode on a Grecian Urn" don't obey so much as *yearn*. They press toward something grammar was never meant to contain. In his letters, Keats treats punctuation as a matter of breath and feeling, each mark a trace of the body's rhythm. I think of the comma that way now — a soft stop, like breathing near someone. Not necessarily close enough to touch, but enough to sense the warmth.

Eighteenth-century grammarians cast punctuation as a discipline of sense-making, a way to keep thought from running wild. Keats, I suspect, would have disagreed. His commas act less like brakes than like pulses — brief stays of execution. The sentence, like the body, trembles in order to continue. If grammar was once a shield, it became, slowly, a choreography. The way a sentence bends under pressure, the way it resists or relents, a study in consent.

There's an intimacy in knowing where a sentence wants to end but letting it linger anyway. I think about this when my husband's hand finds the back of my neck, pausing just before the edge of my shoulder. The pause is the meaning. It's the grammar of touch — the delay before release, the choice not

to end the line. Maybe I learned that pause long before I knew what desire was: the pleasure of holding something just past the point of sense.

Sometimes I wonder if language taught me how to want. Syntax, after all, is the body's secret twin. Both organize chaos into sense; both break when overcorrected. Romantic poetry taught me that restraint isn't the opposite of passion but its pulse. What I couldn't confess in academic prose was how aroused I am by structure. The pleasure of control. The soft terror of release.

Desire and grammar share a lexicon. Both hinge on subject and object; both demand attention to position. *I love you* is already a grammar lesson. The power of the first person and the vulnerability of the second. The invisible verb holding them together. We talk about active and passive voice as though the body doesn't already know the difference.

Some mornings, in class, I watch my students wrestle with clauses that refuse to behave. One writes *I was being myself*, and we talk about how the reflexive can also be defensive, how grammar hides as much as it reveals. Another argues that commas are emotional pauses, not rules. I tell them they might be right. When we autopsy sentences across the whiteboard, I draw the subjects and objects like bodies leaning toward one another, tension in the connective tissue. There's always a hush in the room. Language, when you really look at it, is embarrassingly alive.

I sometimes think grammar was the first moral system I understood. Not commandments, but permissions: when to join, when to separate, how to hold meaning without breaking it. Even the notion of agreement — subject and verb aligning — suggests a kind of civility, a willingness to listen. When that agreement fails, the sentence stutters, like a conversation turning awkward. Maybe what we want from grammar is reassurance: that we can live together inside one syntax without tearing it apart.

Once, in a workshop, a student wrote, *He was touched*. She meant it literally, but I asked what would happen if she changed it to *Someone touched him*. The room went quiet. The sentence suddenly had a culprit. Agency had entered the room. This, too, is the erotics of grammar: who acts, who receives, who gets to be named.

I used to think submission meant erasure, but grammar has always known better. The dependent clause doesn't vanish; it leans. It exists in relation, not absence. Its meaning is contingent, yes, but not lesser. I think of the subordinate clause the way I think of surrender: deliberate, chosen, humming with power.

Sometimes, when I'm marking essays, I pause before drawing the red line. The pen hovers. I remember my mother's voice, the softness in her correction, how she never made grammar sound like judgment. Maybe she was teaching me the same lesson I try to teach now, that syntax is just another way of caring, a small attention paid to meaning. That the difference between *he and I* and *me and him* isn't moral, only relational. It depends on where you stand.

Once, someone told me to speak, and I thought they meant confess. I said something small, vowel-shaped, obedient. The sentence ended too soon. Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about how language behaves under pressure, how syntax rearranges itself by contact. Later, writing about it, I realized grammar had become a way to think through desire, a structure that could hold what I didn't yet know how to name.

When I read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I linger on the comma after *Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness*. The comma is everything. It arrests and

invites — the hesitation before the body of the poem opens. Keats knew that meaning depends on tension, that the sentence must tremble to stay alive.

Barthes called the text a “fetish object,” something that gives pleasure because it withholds. Reading him, I understood that language seduces not through clarity but through delay. “Language is a skin,” he writes, and I believe him. Each word a nerve ending, each pause a breath drawn in anticipation of the next touch. The same grammar that once protected me now invites me to linger in uncertainty. Punctuation can’t save you. The line breaks anyway.

Grammar has always been haunted by bodies. The terms betray it — agreement, possession, case, voice. Each implies contact. Even “sentence” carries the shadow of punishment, as if every act of speech requires atonement. When I write, I feel that inheritance pressing against my skin: the centuries of teachers, editors, lovers who have paused before a comma and thought, however briefly, of someone else’s breath. Maybe that’s why language never quite belongs to us. It keeps remembering the mouths it passed through.

I used to think the rules of grammar promised coherence, but now I think they only promise company. They give us a shared rhythm, something to touch when sense falters. Barthes was right. Language is a skin, but it’s also a crowd. Every comma is a small negotiation with everyone who has ever paused there before you.

Maybe that’s what excites me — the failure of control, the slip between syntax and sense. In writing, as in touch, precision can only take you so far. What’s left is rhythm, tone, the pulse grammar can’t quite legislate.

A friend once asked why I write about desire in academic language. I said because it’s the only language that ever let me close. The critic’s voice, with its precision and distance, feels almost devotional. I spend entire days diagramming sentences, tiny architectures of restraint, trying to locate where the feeling goes when you formalize it. But sometimes, late at night, I read my own writing aloud and feel the language giving way. The sentences start to breathe differently. They loosen, the way a body loosens after being watched too long.

Some nights, lying beside my husband, I listen for the small syncopations of our breathing and imagine them punctuating a page. The commas between us widen and close. I want to believe that’s what grammar is for — not to separate thought from thought, but to let them lean together without collapsing. The body, the sentence, both practicing restraint so that the next line has somewhere to go.

I think of all the rules I’ve broken, and the ones I still cling to. I think of Keats’s line, *Half in love with easeful Death*, and how the comma makes the phrase ache. The body wants what grammar promises — to be held, not halted.

I used to underline every instance of *as if* in my students’ essays, telling them it was evasive. Now I think *as if* might be the truest expression of desire. An attempt to reach what can’t be declared outright. Every comparison is a seduction — *as if you could be this, as if I could be that*. It’s the grammar of wanting more than language can allow.

Sometimes I catch myself correcting my children the way my mother corrected me. The impulse arrives before I can stop it, a ghost of care disguised as precision. When I manage to let the sentence stand, I hear her voice again, gentle but sure, and I imagine her smiling at my restraint. Perhaps love, like grammar, is measured by the pauses we allow each other.

Sometimes I think back to her folding laundry, correcting me softly. *Me and him went*. The phrase still sounds right in a way the rules never did: two people joined in motion, grammar bending toward intimacy. The line isn’t wrong; it’s just unfinished. It wants to keep moving.

Maybe that’s the secret grammar was always teaching me. That correctness is not the opposite of chaos but its partner. Every sentence, like every touch, is an experiment in how close we can come before the structure gives way. And in that nearness — the pause before the period, the inhale that refuses to finish — language, like the body, learns to mean by trembling.
