

Richard Witt

University of Bucharest

***THE ‘SPLIT INFINITIVE’ (OR INVASIVE ADVERB)  
AS CULTURAL EMBLEM***

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**Abstract:** *The use and forbiddance of the ‘split’ or ‘cleft’ infinitive in modern English is a famous source of controversy, irritation and incomprehension. In reality this particular idiom is more complex than at first appears: it involves a cocktail of issues, grammatical, semantic, rhythmic and aesthetic. I shall attempt to briefly clarify the status of the ‘split’ infinitive, and to show that caution about it is deeply rooted in the historical development both of the English language and of English stylistics.*

“Oh, against all rule, my Lord, - most ungrammatically! betwixt the substantive and the adjective...he made a breach thus,... and betwixt the nominative case...he suspended his voice in the epilogue a dozen times, three seconds and three fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time.- Admirable grammarian!- But in suspending his voice- was the sense suspended likewise?” (Sterne: II.5)

Big-Endians and Little-Endians apart, who would have thought, that a simple matter of English usage, whether or not it is acceptable to place an adverbial qualifier invasively between the preposition *to* and the zero form of the verb, would develop into a social armageddon? “I do not dine with those who split infinitives”, states Samuel Pickering, Professor at the University of Connecticut. And members of the Australian Defence Force, according to their staff duties manual, should ‘under no circumstances’ [!] ‘split the particle from the infinitive form by more than one adverb’; the battle may be lost by writing a sentence such as “To frequently, consciously and quite deliberately disobey an Admiral’s orders would be professional suicide”.

A convenient watershed for the present chronological overview is circa 1766, the year in which Denis Diderot completed his enormous enterprise, that *Encyclopédie* of which Michelet said that it was much more than a book, it was a political faction. In the underbrush across the Channel this is echoed by a general prescriptive tendency: an influential book by the cleric Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), though it will be another hundred years before a British grammarian officially condemns the invasive adverb, and thirty-five more before Onions and Jespersen accept it, and Henry Fowler (“If I can aspire to expertise in anything I suppose it is in split infinitives”)

writes his famous entry on this topic, sparkling with commonsense and wit, in *Modern English Usage* (1906).

From the remote origins of the language itself, until the subversive experiments of *Tristram Shandy*, usage is virtually uniform and normative. Where the writer makes the sense of a verb more pointed, by adding a modifier (an ‘adverb’), the modifier likes to remain outside, not inside but *only* in the special case where zero form is bonded with *to*; in other cases, this Anglo-Saxon conceit does not apply, as Bernard Shaw pointed out with relish in a playlet about transgression of various sorts:

LYDIA: Welcome, dear cousin, to my London house.

Of late you have been chary of your visits.

LUCIAN: I have been greatly occupied of late.

The minister to whom I act as scribe

In Downing Street was born in Birmingham,

And, like a thoroughbred commercial statesman,

Splits his infinitives, which I, poor slave,

Must reunite, though all the time my heart

Yearns for my gentle coz’s company.

LYDIA: Lucian: there is some other reason. Think!

Since England was a nation every mood

Her scribes with adverbs recklessly have split,

But thine avoidance dates from yestermonth. (Shaw: II.1)

For this situation the interaction of four factors was responsible: Tradition, New Learning, True Religion, and the Individual Talent. Traditionally - and unless one were a Scot, like Dunbar – the bond which I mentioned above was (like the atom in later times) considered unsplittable. The *to* was sometimes spiced up with a preliminary monosyllable, such as *so* or *al(l)* or *but*, a usage which Emily Dickinson appropriates: “It makes my Passion stronger but to think / Like Passion stirs the peacock and his mate.” We shall find incidentally, as we go along, that poets are less bogged down than others. Yeats, when asked “How are you today?” replied: “Not very well. I can only write prose today.” The late Peter Porter amusingly described poetry as “a form of refrigeration that stops language going bad.”

In the great shift, during the reign of the eighth Henry, from home-grown style (the Old Learning) to European style (the New Learning), the influence of imported models borrowed from classical Latin was profound and lasting. I need only quote Johnson’s early (1734) scheme for the classes of a grammar school, where, after practice in ground rules, “the greatest and most necessary task still remains, to learn a habit of expression, without which knowledge is of little use. This is necessary in Latin, and more necessary in English, and can only be acquired by a daily imitation of the best and correctest [!] authors”. The best Roman prose style – Cicero’s - was to be imitated in English down to its fine details, and one of the rules for effective diction that Cicero had

made was that a sentence should end convincingly (*clausula*, ‘close’) with any of a few surefire rhythmic patterns. Of these the most celebrated of which was (in Latin) *esse videatur* (‘that one be seen to be so’): in Morse code, dash, dot dot dot, dash, dot.

There are literally dozens of this pattern and its derivatives in the English of the *Book of Common Prayer*; for example ‘Whose nature and property is *always to have mercy*’ (at Communion) or ‘that it may please thee...*shortly to accomplish* the number of thine elect’ (Burial Service). For a very large proportion of the now Protestant English population, as they went to church service Sunday by Sunday, week by week, these rhythms became part of the conscious and unconscious verbal habits of learned and unlearned alike, at a time when no wedge had been driven between the written and the spoken language. Bottom’s garbling of *I Corinthians* in Act IV.i of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is an amusing comment on these habits, resonate in Milton, in Browne (“...so desperately to place their reliques as to be beyond discovery”) and in Dr Johnson’s referential echo of the *Service of Solemn Matrimony*:

Women have natural and equitable claims as well as men, and these claims are not to be capriciously or lightly superseded or infringed. (Johnson unpaginated)

The fourth factor is the practice of specific writers: the Individual Talent, filtered through admiration, indebtedness or reaction. What is the most famous line in Shakespeare (in English poetry? in English literature? in European literature?)

To be, or...to not be!

I’m not proposing to emend the text of *Hamlet*: the point is the power of a great individual writer to influence a whole tradition. John Donne ought be a test case; the poet who, according to Coleridge, wreathed iron pokers into true love knots; who was capable of writing such lines as, in tribute to Milton: “that tree/whose fruit threw death on else immortall us”. A search through John Hayward’s *Collected Donne* (Penguin Editions) fails to reveal anything closer than the couplets “to out-swive Dildoes” (very Chaucerian), and out-usure Jewes (very racist), and “to out-drink the Sea, to out-swear the Litanie” (102) On the other hand, Donne has a great fondness for the music of the preliminary *but*: “Is all your care but to be look’d upon?” (92) or more monumentally “‘tis the preheminece/of friendship onely to impute excellence (117)”.

Meanwhile the position of the adverb remained, as it had always been, very mobile. Even a writer as late as John Evelyn could frame the sentence “...any English Travlors (who but rarely would be knowne to passe through that Citty, for feare of the Inquisition)...”, not “...(who would be knowne to passe but rarely...)”. This indifference about position enables George Bernard Shaw to lodge, in a memorandum to his publisher, a protest against editorial mularkey:

Every good craftsman splits his infinitives when the sense demands it. I call for the immediate dismissal of this pedant. It is of no consequence whether he decides to go quickly or to quickly go or quickly to go. The important thing is that he should go at once.

Core meaning, in other words, overrides grammatical dress. Grammar once did mean ‘the art of writing’, or (in its spelling *gramarye*) ‘magic’. My paper inhabits a rather fuzzy area, for which ‘linguistic anthropology’ is a name as good as any other.

For the Augustan Age and the epoch of the Enlightenment the touchstones of style are respectively the precisian Alexander Pope, who - as you might expect - never allows the invasive adverb, and Samuel Johnson, “master of the English language”, who could produce the majestic very-fine-old-port phrase at will (“I am far from intending totally to exclude it”) and who was culturally committed to the New Learning:<sup>1</sup>

Modern writers are the moons of literature; they shine with reflected light, with light borrowed from the ancients. Greece appears to me to be the fountain of knowledge; Rome of elegance.

With the Romantics came a new freedom of language, and examples of the invasive adverb proliferate across the period 1780-1880. The *Westminster Gazette*, our earliest detailed documentation on the subject, mentions three poets (Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth, but surprisingly not Byron, who had written, so smoothly that it passes almost unnoticed: “To sit on rocks, to muse o’er flood and fell,/To slowly trace the forest’s shady scene.” Nor does the *Gazette* mention Burns, writing in his heroic rather than his ethnic vein: “*Who dared to nobly stem tyrannic pride*. Between prose and poetry, Robert Browning, in the prose Act II of *A Soul’s Tragedy*, has the invasive adverb in rather the manner of Henry James. His two citizens of Renaissance Faenza are discussing the changeability of a philosopher’s views, and Ogniben says: “It becomes a truth again, after all, as he happens to newly consider it and view it in a different relation with other truths”. Here the adverb cannot convincingly go anywhere else.

Occurrences in 19th-century prose are much commoner. A sign of the times is that Macaulay in 1843, having drafted the phrase “in order fully to appreciate”, actually altered it and wrote “in order to fully appreciate”. Long after becoming famous, Hardy annotated the inside back cover of his library copy of Ernest Adams’ *The Elements of the English Language* (the 25<sup>th</sup> edition, 1892) with examples of split infinitives from other 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors: Byron, Bagehot and Browning. The *Westminster Gazette* lists Lamb, De Quincey, Macaulay, Matthew Arnold; Charles Reade, and Samuel Wilberforce; Herbert Spencer, W.H.Mallock and Leslie Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf. Arnold uses it with calculated Oxonian irony: “...without permitting himself to actually mention the name...”, an irony audible from the printed page, and which is lost if the adverb goes elsewhere. Meredith, in *The Egoist*: has “...implore them to partially enlighten her...”, again, curiously, a verb of beseeching, a very muted tribute to the *Book of Common Prayer*.

What was happening all this time in the New World? In some ways Noah Webster and his successors can be seen, by a kind of inverted colonialism, as custodians of the literary accuracy of the English language, as in fact conservators. In 1834, an

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, in conversation with Ramsay, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1778

anonymous author, invoking “good authors” and “general and uniform practice” and “exceptions so rare”, gives the rule that “the particle *to* before the verb must not be separated from it by the intervention of an adverb or any other word or phrase; but the adverb should immediately precede the particle, or immediately follow the verb”. Avoidance is linked with elegance by Gould Brown in his opus magnum *The Grammar of English Grammars* (1851); in 1840 the invasive adverb is “a disagreeable affectation” (Richard Taylor). A recent commentator wrote: “Fifty years is clearly too short a time to get limber in the ways of grammar and style. Chicago [he means the *Chicago Style Manual*] was pushing eighty before it achieved flexibility on the split infinitive.” Writers who remain in the old tradition include Adrienne Rich: “What life there was, was mine//now and again to lay/ one hand on a warm brick...”

Earlier American prose writers cited for the invasive adverb include Benjamin Franklin, Abe Lincoln, Henry James and Willa Cather, with actual instances from Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895): “He tried to mathematically prove to himself (unavoidable); it would not be handsome...to freely condemn other men”; and more complex, “He waited as if he expected the enemy to suddenly stop, apologize, and retire bowing”, where ‘suddenly’ belongs not, I think, to the first verb, still less to all three, but to their composite effect, their *Gestalt*.

It was however in poetry that new things were being done with the concept of invasiveness underwritten by grammatical structure. Here Emily Dickinson, with her marvellously creative syntax, describes a railway train interrupting its journey, stopping and starting:

I’d rather be the One  
 It’s bright invisibility  
 To dwell – delicious – on  
  
 I like to see it lap the Miles...  
 and stop to feed itself at Tanks  
 And the prodigious step  
 ...then – prompter than a Star  
 Stop”.

In quite a different mode, e.e.cummings, in his poem *nobody loses all the time*, creates a sort of variations on the theme of interruption:

Sol indulged in that  
 possibly most inexcusable  
  
 of all to use a highfalootin phrase  
  
 luxuries that is or to  
  
 wit farming and be  
 it needlessly added [&c] (Cummings)

The invasive adverb, once its selfconsciousness has been officially established, can be the subject of postmodernist mockery, as here by an author not normally connected with postmodernism, P.G.Wodehouse:

From that moment," continued Rodney Spelvin, "I have had but one ambition – to somehow or other, cost what it might, get down into single figures." [golf]. He laughed bitterly. "You see," he said, "I cannot even speak of this thing without splitting my infinitives. And even as I split my infinitives, so did I split my drivers.

The much- and too-much quoted example is from *Star Trek*, "to boldly go where no man went before", is a theft from Fowler who had written "would he not have done better to boldly split both infinitives?" And we see the waves of historicity roll onwards, and a new monster's birth, when Douglas Adams camps up the already camp in:

In those days men were *real* men, women were *real* women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were *real* small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri. And all dared to brave unknown terrors, to do mighty deeds, to boldly split infinitives that no man had split before – and thus was the Empire forged.

The best I can manage for sex and the split infinitive, but it is a good best, is from a short story by a master of language, set in a medieval scriptorium. Here the invasive adverb is used to suggest ecstasy. The hero John of Burgos, a restless and highly-sexed monk working on illustrations for the *Gospel of St Luke* is asked by the senior copyist how the work, and in particular his portrait of the Madonna, is progressing. He replies:

All here!" John tapped his forehead with his pencil. "It has only been waiting these few months to – ah God! be born...

A verb such as *munch* at once creates its own picture, not to say cartoon. But not all verbs are as expressive as *munch*, and the writer will want to qualify, modify or intensify them, whether with a single word or with a phrase: an adverb, a term which gives nothing away. (I am talking always about effective writing, not ineffective writing, on which Orwell's 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language* is the final word). Hence the majority of split infinitives are the result of a desire to give a verb more power, to supercharge it. This is certainly so in two examples, of several, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897): "*And so we proceeded to minutely examine them...*" and "*...the necessity to utterly stamp him out.*" Henry James is after the same effect in *Pandora*: "...the President and ministers, whom he expected to see - to *have* to see - a good deal of,..." But the objective can also be achieved, and perhaps more subtly, by delaying, instead of forcing, the adverb. Thus in *The Miller's Tale* Chaucer has the resonant sentence "But with his mouth he kissed her nakeders/ Full savourly" – a shock plus an aftershock – and Yeats similarly writes: "No, and in time to be,/ Wherever green is worn,/ Are changed, changed utterly".

An exhortation in the comic mode demonstrates how verbal emphasis can easily cross over into verbal violence.<sup>2</sup>

Write confidently. Do not timidly and apologetically split an infinitive as though you were ashamed. Split it from helm to heel with a great stroke of your pen, and to the devil with all thin-blooded pedants. And if you want to scare a literary society out of its life,..., select a good whacking preposition to end up your sentence with.

It was perhaps not until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that the possibilities of using grammar and style as ammunition – construction as deconstruction – were fully appreciated. One thinks of Verlaine – “prends l’eloquence et tords-lui le cou” – but equally subversive, in a quieter way, is Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>3</sup> Though the verb *split* does not necessarily connote sexuality or violence, it can have as synonyms ‘to cleave lengthwise; to tear asunder violently; to divide; to throw into discord.’ This was exploited in the 1993 film version of J.M.Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. The traditional bloodthirsty curse of pirate chiefs in English and Scottish literature had been ‘shiver my timbers!’ some similar curse, equally suitable for family viewing but more modern in its language, was required for Captain Hook, and what the script-writers came up with was “Split my infinitives!”

The law of diminishing returns of course applies. In a famous outburst of savage irony against editorial insensitivity the great master of style Raymond Chandler wrote:

Would you convey to my compliments to the purist who reads your proofs and tell him or her that I write a sort of broken-down patois which is something like the way a Swiss waiter talks, and that when I split an infinitive, Goddamn it, I split it so that it will say split and when I interrupt the velvety smoothness of my more or less literate syntax with a few sudden words of bar-room vernacular, that is done with the eyes open and the mind relaxed and attentive. The method may not be perfect but it is all I have.

Those who quote this passage usually draw exactly the opposite message from what was meant. Chandler is not encouraging the writer to use the split infinitive as often as possible but as little (and therefore as powerfully) as possible. It is the writer’s job to be judicious; and in this connection we might note that Fowler’s *Society for Pure English Tract* (1933) on the split infinitive was on the library shelf of Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation received a round of applause from colleagues when delivered. Slightly unexpected is that ‘timidly and apologetically’ is an echo of H.A.Baker’s missionary classic, *Visions Beyond the Veil* (ca 1925).

<sup>3</sup> Cf Lecercle.



The linkage of the invasive adverb to a whole cultural profile is graphically shown in the description of an interview for a British radio programme. The date is the late 1970s.

Gosling [Ray Gosling, poet and broadcaster] turned up and leaned, like the teddy-boy mentally he was in a striped suit and a shirt with a huge collar, against the wall of my office, and metaphorically says, 'What you lookin' at , eh?' Just like the kind of guy who's threatening you with a razor in a bus queue. And I said, 'I'm thinking of doing a programme about Butlin's holiday camps, and I want to call it *Workers' Playtime*.' 'What d'you want to fuckin' do tha' for?' (qtd in Elwes)

A BBC interviewer and raconteur, to 'Gosling's way with words'. We can infer that the orally violent is stronger than the violent on the printed page. In the threat "I'm gonna totally pulverise him" or "I'm goin' to fockin' break your neck". Here the adverb or the obscenity reinforces the verb in the same way as 'bloody' reinforces the adjectives in Pyramus' speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Whereat with blade, with bloody blameful blade,/ He bravely broached his bloody boiling breast...." But on the page, too, the invasive adverb can be an aggressive weapon. In *Mathematical Writing* by Donald E. Knuth, a certain Nils Nilsson is quoted for the assertion: "A split infinitive should really jar", Nils said. 'It's got to light up in red!'

Transgression is next to aggression as godliness is next to cleanliness; and one way a writer can empower herself or himself is to transgress a language rule. The point is made explicitly by an American executive: "I don't think about rules at all. Split infinitives and so forth?" [He is implicitly making the intrusive adverb a test case]. "I split infinitives all the time". [This is ridiculously exaggerated: the opportunity occurs perhaps once in five hundred pages]. "I don't care much about that stuff. I write...and write aggressively, with purpose [as if it were impossible to write purposefully without aggression]." (qtd. in Ryan)

Though this is a bad case of barking up the wrong tree, Bardwell's views prompt some further areas for research, if we had but the concordances. Is fondness for, or avoidance of, the invasive adverb related to social status? Is it related to gender: the split infinitive as male aggression, a surrogate phallus of a seedy kind? (My own view is that it as sure as hell is not). A blogger named 'timjgreen' generalizes, unfortunately without supporting evidence, that "British English abhors split infinitives", implying that American, Australian and Black English do not; and it is certainly true that J.P. Donleavy, who qualifies as a postcolonial novelist, and who learnt some of his trade with Brendan Behan, appears to use them above the notional average.

To sum up. The idiom with the invasive adverb, a creative effect peculiar to English across its long history, poses a cocktail of issues: not just grammatical but semantic, rhythmic, aesthetic, cultural and countercultural. Even where a real choice is available, the tendency is still to adhere to a pattern ingrained from Elizabethan culture and society.



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