

## THE RHETORIC OF THE PARAGRAPH: A RECONSIDERATION

C.H. Knoblauch

Efforts to define the fundamental structures that enable meaning in discourse have a long history, beginning with ancient speculation. Classical logic, rhetoric, and grammar imposed restrictions on the processes of composing, as well as the shapes of finished texts, in order to safeguard the truth by attending to prerequisites for its effective communication. From earliest times, a concern for vindicating some larger moral order, and for teaching others to appreciate it, has often motivated pronouncements on the nature of verbal form. From Quintilian to the present, for example, teacher-scholars have striven to insure that logical and aesthetic values celebrated in the classical doctrine of decorum are made suitably manifest in student performance, as though to enforce publicly accepted styles of thought and action by reference to acceptable forms of language.<sup>1</sup> One consequence has been that social, ethical, and aesthetic preconditions have significantly influenced the evolution of theory. To be sure, disinterested scholarly curiosity has not been an altogether trivial motive for research. But it has usually been subordinate to deeper philosophical ambitions, so that the prescriptions regulating discourse that we have inherited from the past and that we continue to apply today, are loaded with political and literary assumptions that do not always facilitate our efforts to describe observed linguistic behavior.

The politically tainted quality of traditional thinking about verbal structure has, to a degree, inconvenienced contemporary speculation. But it is only part of a subtler problem. Arguably, all pronouncements about the formal limits governing composing, whether disinterested or not, are doomed to insufficiency because of their inevitable oversimplification of complexly organic processes. The inventive competences that speakers and writers actually manifest seem always to be richer and more flexible than statements intended to characterize them. The very act of characterizing, which emphasizes the normative and excludes the apparently idiosyncratic, reduces those competences to static formulae that can never fully depict the human ability to fashion infinitely new and various meanings through language. Even at the sentence level, where axioms about production are most reliable given the broad stability of

grammatical rules, creative behavior persistently resists formulaic description. The potential for new meaning that resides in stylistic alternatives, in supposedly deviant word combinations, in tropes, coinages, and wordplay, in transpositions, ellipses, and even intentional grammatical violations, testifies to the plasticity of linguistic form. And as we try to move across sentence boundaries into questions of form within sentence combinations, paragraphs, and paragraph sequences, the reliability of structural pronouncements, the likelihood that they will be truly encompassing, deteriorates substantially. Hence, whatever the degree of objectivity, our conclusions will always be liable to sabotage because of latent deficiencies in analytical method

When we consider the formal properties of the paragraph, therefore, two problems are immediately apparent, one having to do with the intrinsic difficulty of making plausible, relevant generalizations, another concerned with the necessity of freeing those generalizations from the value-laden perspectives that historical opinion has imposed on our thinking. Who among us has neglected, as a teacher, to insist that paragraphs are self-contained structural wholes, with topic sentences, tapered subordinations, and a cumulative significance anticipated, indeed guided, from the start? Of course, many paragraphs do reveal these traditional characteristics. But Richard Larson's summary of contemporary research in his contribution to the Tate bibliographies<sup>2</sup> suggests a broad scholarly recognition that the paragraph need not always have a topic sentence, that it need not focus on a "single idea" (assuming we know what that expression means), that it need not possess any other distinguishing structural feature than some set of diversely connected sentences, that it may be formed accidentally, not designedly, as the writer gropes tentatively through a succession of statements, and that it need not be a fully realized structural entity at all but can sometimes be a fragment of a larger context that completes or modifies both its structural suggestions and its tentative meanings. Even the venerable qualities of unity, coherence, and emphasis may be subject to challenge, depending on what they are taken to mean. If their definitions are too general, they lose all descriptive utility, as when we insist weakly that all the sentences of a paragraph must pertain to the same subject in order to be "unified." What does 'subject' mean? What does 'pertain' mean? On the other hand, if their definitions are too specific, the likelihood increases of finding paragraphs that deny their necessity. For instance, not all of the connections that make up the "coherence" of a given paragraph need be close, or self-evident, or even logical.

It isn't that the traditional prescriptions are never found or that they are not perfectly functional where they exist, but only that they imply a comprehensiveness, an inevitability, that even casual examination brings into doubt. Their prevalence in classical theory derives from logico-aesthetic presuppositions about balance and wholeness as conditions of truthfulness, and also from the inadequate conviction that, if some writing can be shown to exhibit given features, then all writing must exhibit them if it is to be meaningful. The issue, however, is not whether a given constraint *can* be perceived in a sample of discourses, but whether that constraint is truly a limiting factor in the production of intelligible statements or only a superficial prescription revealing the impact of certain public expectations. The tidy predictability of the Ciceronian oration-form, for example, or of the periodic sentence, is virtuous from the classical point of view because of a transparent orderliness which appears to promise a special coherence and validity. Kenneth Burke has called such structures "conventional forms":<sup>3</sup> they represent an appeal to formality for its own sake, whence their attractiveness historically to writing teachers, who are understandably tempted to equate formal tidiness with rational clarity, to view conspicuous order as a heartening sign that students are at last asserting control over their haphazard thinking. To be sure, writers work quite comfortably within the six-part oration form when they wish to, and they did so for many centuries. Student writers, similarly, can produce topic-sentence paragraphs or comparison/contrast essays when so directed, even though neither constraint is especially typical of writing outside the classroom. Moreover, since writing can observe a great range of artificial constraints, many different formal rules may be vindicated by the samples that manifest them, so that an intolerance for idiosyncrasy may be easily rationalized—as it sometimes is, regrettably, in our classrooms. But my point is, the same inventive competence that enables writers to work successfully within one system of venerated formal vehicles will also enable them to work within others. Hence, the question: which constraints are fundamental to meaningfulness and which merely reflective of some public or academic decorum?

An additional problem concerns the typical focus of analysis and the kinds of pedagogical recommendations it has yielded regarding the composition of new paragraphs. Historically, theories of form have been product- rather than process-oriented, derived, that is, from retrospective analysis of apparent structural frameworks governing whole, completed texts, or at least whole subunits within those texts. So, a theorist might say

that a given paragraph exhibits a movement from general to specific, or from cause to effect, or that it progresses by means of comparison or exemplification. The temptation is strong to suppose that these observed orders can be transformed into conscious structural decisions that writers consider as they go, so that teaching them as conscious options will enhance the development of organizational skill. Hence, many teachers reify them as “patterns” underlying discourse and insist on their validation in writing exercises. But the trouble is, we almost never proceed with such large formal principles in mind. They may be the product of our efforts to make order but they are seldom preconceived guides to the discovery of order. They are the results of a competence to tie ideas together but they are not equivalent to that competence, nor does an abstracted awareness of their existence in itself facilitate either actual writing or the development of writing ability. More important, while our capacity to unify ideas may indeed be manifested in some finite number of relational and structural possibilities, those possibilities do not represent an equivalently finite number of rational outlines governing the available shapes of all paragraphs. Rather, they predict only the available alternatives for connecting any two sentences, as Ross Winterowd has argued in “The Grammar of Coherence.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably, they may be infinitely varied as any chain of connections evolves: there need be no governing principle, embedded in a developing paragraph, that requires one kind of connection over another or that predicts when the connection-making will cease.

This awareness is the starting-point for those performance-oriented rhetoricians, like Larson and Winterowd, who have argued a linear theory of discourse.<sup>5</sup> The process of making meanings in such a view is always specific to a particular situation, and always a matter of solving local relational problems one sentence at a time, not of applying higher-order formal principles to a clutter of ideas. An implication of this reasoning might be that the paragraph need not represent a formal unit at all but only a conveniently visible space within which to work on some given set of problems. For one writer, then, the mere impression that a paragraph is long enough without being difficult to read might be sufficient to end it. Or, for another, the more evident shifts of argumentative direction might define paragraph boundaries without any conscious sense that forces within each paragraph must regulate, and finally terminate, its motion. Even if beginning and ending are not quite so arbitrary, the perception of unity, or of some other kind of internal integrity, may be a gradual, even accidental discovery emerging from the writing itself, not an architectural decision at the beginning. If writer and reader together attend to the

accumulating entailments through a paragraph, then seemingly they can also infer a unified impression that need not have preoccupied the writer initially. It is an interesting question just how large a role the writer actually must play in creating this perception. I have found that different readers, asked to write summary sentences of paragraphs, have come to subtly different conclusions about overall unity and emphasis. To a degree, such holistic conclusions may be fictitious, derived from our powers of intellectual compression, not so much implicit in paragraphs as estimated—and perhaps differently estimated—by the writer and by any reader.<sup>6</sup>

It seems worthwhile to labor the potentially accidental nature of a paragraph’s development, its evasion of larger structural constraints, the complexity of its orderly but not always systematic elaboration of consecutive ideas, in order to emphasize the danger, for research and teaching, of overformalizing its characteristics. Following is a paragraph from Neil Postman’s *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*,<sup>7</sup> chosen randomly, its sentences numbered for later reference:

(1) Physicians, of course, are notoriously guilty of both mystifying and terrifying patients by using polysyllabic technical terms to denote commonplace and easily curable disorders. (2) In fact, within the past few years, there has grown up a field known as *iatrogenics*. (3) It is essentially the study of how doctor-talk can intensify and even induce illness. (4) Though the term itself is unnecessarily mysterious, the idea of having a field within a field to monitor the harmful consequences of verbal mystification is, in my opinion, a splendid one, and I would urge its replication in every field. (5) Education, for example, is a field with which I am quite familiar, and I can assure anyone who is a member of the laity that there are very few terms employed by educators which cannot be expressed in everyday language and with admirable precision. (6) Therefore, there ought to be a field within the field which is devoted to translating, decoding, or restating in plain language what educators are saying. (7) If there were, educators would probably call it something like *pedagantics*, so that no one would know exactly what it is supposed to do.

This paragraph seems a fairly typical example of skilled adult prose. To call it a “bad” paragraph because it does not celebrate some artificial notion of the formal propriety of “good” paragraphs would be, at best, a trivial defense of the principle. And indeed it does not manifest traditional formal propriety. Most obviously, it lacks a topic sentence or in fact any

sentence anywhere that represents its cumulative significance as a paragraph. The first sentence, in its emphasis on the language of physicians, will prove to be quite misleading even as an example of what Postman finally means to say. The second and third sentences continue the direction of the first one, thereby establishing an expectation that the remainder of the paragraph will develop more closely the writers point about doctor-talk. It would be easy to write an ending to this paragraph, based on the first three sentences, that would perfectly illustrate the classic paragraph structure, from topic sentence to the smallest elaborative detail, all related to the subject "iatrogenics." But Postman fails to oblige us. At sentence four, his writing begins to move outward, instead of continuing downward, causing us to reorient our expectations about what the whole paragraph will "mean." Then the main idea now seems to be that all fields should have a subspecialty like iatrogenics. Given this idea, we could anticipate a new ending that revealed connections between what iatrogenics does for medical talk and what a similar study might accomplish in other professions. Indeed, sentence five, followed by six, appears to satisfy this anticipation. The paragraph could readily end at sentence six. But what of sentence seven? Its suddenly ironic reversal sabotages much of what has come before, specifically the careful preparation for our assent to the argument that all fields should do what medicine has done about technical jargon. Because of the last sentence, we cannot summarize the "unified impression" of this paragraph by saying that "all fields should have a subspecialty like iatrogenics." Perhaps the best we can manage in light of the ironic ending is a statement such as "all disciplines use unnecessarily complicated language to convey commonplace ideas." Yet this sentence misses more of the paragraph's meaning than it conveys.

Significantly, the paragraph makes adequate sense as we read it despite the fact that it lacks an encompassing principle of order, such as a movement from general to specific, or from statement to elaboration, or from cause to effect. The appearance of order is created by the serial connections of sentences, not by larger patterns of expectation and fulfillment. I doubt that Postman was being fiendishly strategic about the build-up to sentence seven, planning it from the first. Rather, the accumulation of successive connections caused the last sentence to reveal itself almost as an afterthought, a complication or qualifier regarding what had preceded. He is inventing as he goes, insuring only that the next sentence stands in some intellectual proximity to those before it. And the flexibility attending selection of that next sentence seems nearly infinite: sentence seven is as unrequited by the context, even though it superficially

completes the paragraph, as was sentence two or sentence five. At the same time, the lack of holistic strategy does not appear to bother a reader much, nor do the changes in direction and emphasis: we simply follow successive connections wherever they lead. The fact is, a reader's tolerance for disjunction is rather considerable, as we know from reading modern poetry and experimental fiction. We fill in the spaces between assertions with our own inferences, guided to be sure by the assertions the writer supplies but not very rigorously constrained in the effort. And as long as we can make plausible inferences about relationship across the boundaries of sentences, the disruptions implicit in their sequence will largely pass unnoticed.

The modes of connection in Postman's paragraph are by no means easy to describe even after we acknowledge their existence. Winterowd's seven possible relationships between sentences, for example, as described in "The Grammar of Coherence," do not seem fully adequate to the task. Winterowd's options include "coordinative" "obversative" "causative," "conclusive," "alternative," "inclusive," and "sequential."<sup>8</sup> The first three sentences of the paragraph might be related by the principle of inclusivity: that is, the second and third appear, loosely speaking, to be specific extensions of the more general first. The connection between two and three is plainly inclusive, since three explains two. But the connection between one and two is subtler. The second sentence is neither an example of the first nor a narration of details about it, which are the two possibilities Winterowd lists under inclusivity. It seems rather to offer a kind of proof of the validity of the first sentence: the development of iatrogenics attests to the fact that doctor-talk is terrifying. But this is not a connection that Winterowd lists among his seven possibilities. What about the relation that sentence four bears to the context preceding? It is not exactly coordinative, according to Winterowd's scheme, since it is more general than what comes before. Nor can it be called conclusive, since it does not complete a line of reasoning. It seems rather to be "expansive"; that is, it merely broadens the context, not because it is logical to do so but only because the writer chooses at that moment to do so. Even this quick analysis suggests that there may be many more than seven possibilities for relating sentences; more important, it suggests that the limits of inventive competence in paragraph development are no more narrowly definable than those governing sentence construction. In fact, they are probably far less definable.

A last point concerns the paragraph in context. After a fashion,

Postman's paragraph appears to be self-sufficient. But that illusion can be damaged by introducing the next paragraph in sequence:

In any case, we ought not to underestimate the consequences of mystification in medicine, education, or any other field. One of its principal effects is to make people feel stupid about and alienated from areas of human experience which are exceedingly important to them. Another is to further the notion that if you can *say* a mysterious word or a series of mysterious words, you necessarily know what you are talking about. I have previously said—and will stand by it—that the language of a subject is the subject. But there is a difference between saying technical words and understanding them. Goethe once remarked that where understanding fails, a word comes to take its place. And that is as good a definition of stupid talk as I have ever heard.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, the first sentence of paragraph two, with perhaps some minor stylistic adjustment, could readily be the last sentence of the preceding paragraph. Indeed, the previous paragraph might have been brought to a finer point if it had contained this sentence, since it recapitulates one possible focus of that paragraph as established in sentence four. It might even be possible to join the paragraphs as one, since the second only extends the reasoning of the key fourth sentence in the first. Breaking them accomplishes a rhetorical purpose, to be sure, by slowing the reading and emphasizing the notion of “consequences.” But it does not seem to have an important logical function. Hence, the formal completeness of each paragraph is largely a visual illusion, induced by the indentation marker and sustained by delicate alterations of style and rhythm, not by more fundamental structural principles. The illusion is quickly dispelled by seeing the two paragraphs as a context.

I would conclude by insisting again that paragraphs *can* enjoy structural integrity any time we want them to, just as they *can* feature topic sentences. But we must be careful to distinguish between what writing may look like under diverse conditions and what it must manifest by way of structural characteristics in order to be called writing, in a meaningful sense, at all. Historically, writing has not always been displayed as paragraphs. And even when it has been so displayed, its subdivisions have had different functions for different writers. Perhaps only two structural elements beyond the sentence are prerequisite to meaningful written discourse: the first is some pattern of consecutive entailments within its linearly arranged statements so that a reader can perceive logico-

grammatical connections between any two adjacent statements or between any one statement and the context preceding it the second is a pattern of repetitions that remind the reader about larger judgments regarding focus and emphasis throughout an evolving discourse. Neither of these structural elements is simple and neither has been explored in anything approaching adequate detail. But a useful first step toward their intensive analysis must surely be our willingness to look beyond the surface constraints of classical doctrine that still masquerade as intrinsic organizational features both in our theories about verbal form and in our sometimes over restrictive teaching of formal requirements in writing courses.

New York University  
New York, New York

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Decorum” applied to the features of acceptable style and included concepts of “purity,” “propriety,” and “perspicuity,” that is, the legitimacy, pertinence, and clarity of words and word combinations. See Quintilian, *Institutio oratorio*, especially Book 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard L. Larson, “Structure and Form in Non-Fiction Prose,” in *Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays*, ed., Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 45-71.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Burke, “The Nature of Form” in *Contemporary Rhetoric. A Conceptual Background with Readings*, ed., W. Ross Winterowd (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), pp. 183-98.

<sup>4</sup> W. Ross Winterowd, “The Grammar of Coherence,” in *Contemporary Rhetoric*, pp. 225-33.

<sup>5</sup> Articles defining “linear rhetoric” include Richard L. Larson, “Toward a Linear Rhetoric of the Essay,” *CCC*, 22 (May, 1971), 140-46; Robert Gorrell “Not by Nature: Approaches to Rhetoric,” *English Journal*, 55 (April, 1966), 409-16, 449; and Winterowd’s “Grammar of Coherence.”

<sup>6</sup> Reader-response criticism as practiced by Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Georges Poulet, and others, suggests that this process of “misreading” or textual reconstruction by readers is not only possible but, indeed, inevitable. For a survey of this thinking see *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* ed., Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Neil Postman, *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), pp. 228-29.

<sup>8</sup> See Winterowd, pp. 229-30.

<sup>9</sup> Postman, p. 229.