PARAGRAPHING

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A new breath. A macro-punctuation mark. A flash of lightning showing the landscape from a different aspect. A collection of sentences with a unity of purpose. The rules for creating paragraphs in the formal essay may be clear but, as these descriptions by Isaac Babel and others suggest, paragraphing in creative prose is a more instinctual business. For Australian author Anthony Macris (2007: 4), paragraphs are "small neighbourhoods" made up of "streets" of sentences, within the organisational units of chapters. For modernist author Gertrude Stein paragraphs were "emotional" in a way sentences were not: this, she explained, was not because they expressed an emotion, but because they registered or limited it (Stein 1975: 36). And yet, Stein wrote (1975: 17), "Rationalize it how you will but you make a paragraph when you feel like it

As Macris notes, few analyses pay much attention to the materiality of either sentences or paragraphs. Yet the paragraph's history is deeply material. Designer Jason Pamental traces it back to the ancient Greek *paragraphos*, a physical mark on the page within a solid text block denoting a change in speaker or passage. Scribes in the middle ages would standardise this mark into a symbol similar to the pilcrow—a reverse-facing double-stemmed P, with a solid head, which editors use today to mark up text. (This "blind P" appears in desktop publishing programs, in ghostly blue, each time we hit return.) When the printing press was invented, printers developed the convention of beginning each paragraph on a new line, leaving a space for illustrators to fill in with an ornamented capital; when these embellishments were abandoned, the indent space remained, which draws our attention to the new purpose of each paragraph. In his *Elements of Typographic Style* (1992), Robert Bringhurst would standardise this indent space as one em.

It is the Victorians, those great builders of paragraphs into mighty sequences, whose books of prosody offer the most fulsome analysis. In his *The History of the English Paragraph*, published in 1894, Edwin Herbert Lewis wrote that the paragraph is complete in itself, "but also a unit of composition". When thinking of paragraphs, one must considering the larger whole they organise and divide as well as the sentences that comprise it. For rhetorician A S Hill, the paragraph was distinct but also marked the natural divisions of a composition as a whole: "something more than a sentence and less than an essay" (quoted in Lewis 1894: 10).

A "paragraph is to a sentence," wrote Barrett Wendell, "what a sentence is to a word" (quoted in Lewis 1894: 30). Yet this does not help the writer to know when to bring a paragraph to a close. Even a single sentence can count as a paragraph, Lewis notes, if it obeys the rules of unity and coherence. (Though this remains contentious, even today; in 2008, novelist Philip Hensher would take Adam Thirlwell to task for his reliance on single-sentence paragraphs beginning with prepositions while Edward Channing would come to his defence). If nothing else, paragraphs offer the reader small moments of relief. "The advantage of at least one paragraph indentation on almost every page of a printed book," notes Lewis, "is felt by every reader" (Lewis 1894: 23).

If paragraphs are smaller building units within the whole, running on one after the other, a double-line break marks, in Lewis's words, an "unusual break" (Lewis 1894: 15). Such a break, which disrupts the organic flow of the whole, must also, logically, indicate a shift or cessation of feeling. What are we to make, then, of a growing trend in prose towards floating paragraphs without indents, each separated by a double-line break? This floating or fragmentary quality is a distinctive feature of the lyric essay, a form described by John D'Agata as "in-between the two worlds of poetry and essay" (2015: 6) but it is also becoming increasingly common in novels, such as those by Jenny Offill or Kevin Barry or Max Porter.

Does the growing prevalence of non-indented paragraphs, each floating in space each like a tiny stanza, have something to say about our times? David Carlin has suggested that contemporary essays are reacting ethically and effectively to the "complicated material realities" (2017: 2) of the Anthropocene by embracing particularly plastic forms that test the limits of human subjectivity and the limits of critique. This may be one motivation for the floating paragraphs in the writing of essayists like Wayne Koestenbaum and Eula Biss, who, instead of following the traditional associative flow of the essay by tracing threads of thought and emotion, offer instead assemblages of paragraphs that are also sections in essays such as "My 1980s" (Koestenbaum) and "Time and Distance Overcome" (Biss), which refuse closure in favour of ambivalence and inconclusion.

Some novelists also appear to be abandoning the novel's organic imperative and promise of rationed feeling by writing in unindented, floating paragraphs that offer small bursts of intensity. In Jenny Offill's *Weather*, the text's fragmentation into tiny startled text-bricks is implicitly a response to the terrors of the Anthropocene—our new era, in which human activity has become a geological force—in which the humble gestures of ordinary domestic life are haunted by the yawning void of a planetary annihilation that may be underway already. Although these unindented paragraphs, separated from one another by a double carriage return,

are organised loosely into sections, they radiate the angst and jumpiness of the narrator, who finds herself working in the Anthropocene field; meanwhile, the segments of blank page between them exert their own material force as a series of tiny voids. Perhaps, in this new age of terror and beauty, Offill infers—and reinforces formally—there is no place for the longueurs that once characterised the great novels. Her tiny paragraphs-as-sections go as far as suggesting that in this this age of catastrophic and rapid change, an older ecology of feeling in which human emotions unfurled across longer time-scales may itself be under threat. As her narrator notes (Offill, 2020: 18):

> My #1 fear is the acceleration of days. No such thing, supposedly, but I swear I can feel it.

1019 words

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Dr Delia Falconer is the award-winning author of two novels, *The Service of Clouds* and *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, and two book-length works of nonfiction: *Sydney*, a personal and cultural history of her hometown, and the essay collection *Signs and Wonders* (Simon and Schuster, forthcoming, 2021). In 2018 she won the Walkley-Pascall Award for Arts Criticism. She is a Senior Lecture in Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney.