

## Parataxis in Primordia

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Depend on going a lifetime in English without coming across the word parataxis. The nation in its habitus values plain speaking that at least purports to get straight at the topic and, as is well known, would rather skip rhetoric and its expertise. On the rare occasion, however, when that particular rhetorical term gained some general, if technical usage, as it did briefly in the 1950s in Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal theory of psychiatry as "parataxic distortion," it described the reality of individuals speaking in parallel fantasied miscomprehension past one another. That lesson should not be sloughed. But note that the interpersonal pathology, as Sullivan conceived it, is curiously identified as the intrusion of a rhetorical form on an otherwise healthy world of direct communication.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, the same ethnological animus is at least partly responsible for the fact that the term parataxis is then characteristically left aside in early schooling when the prohibition is established on the use of "and" as the first word

1 Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953), 18-19, 342-343.

of any sentence. What is supposedly faulty in the construction is thus left inertly opaque and this may remain to preoccupy the attentive student with the question of how it then ever occurred that a semi-archaic priest class fixed on that singularly embargoed word to initiate a sequence of thirty-one testamental verses that to this day stands as the most exalted and sublime text in the Western tradition. The verses persist in such universal familiarity that at their slightest invocation any mind will spontaneously and even correctly begin to fill out the ellipses, “And the earth was without form...And God said...And God saw the light...And God set the firmament... And God saw everything...” The majestic tone stands unassailable, like it or not. All the same, as the passage is thought through with an eye for third grade stylistics and puzzlement at the trivial construction, it must be a surprise to discover that its prodigious character depends entirely on the unconscious experience of the otherwise proscribed “And.” For the conjunction used in this manner turns out to be an extraordinarily ingenious technique, perhaps ages in the making, for prescinding from any claim of the mere creature to comprehend the creator’s intention and purpose.<sup>2</sup> It is “And...” that effects the infinite disproportion between a self-effacing speck of dust and the divinity and thus projects the awe-filled vastness of creation that the passage achieves. The profundity of this cosmic projection indicates that the act of self-diminishment that inheres in “And...” is by no means a sign of helplessness, but on the contrary internally comprises a gesture that authoritatively arrogates to itself the oblitative intention of the divinity toward any conjunction that would logically assert a capacity for subordination. Implicitly, paratactical “And...” condemns to extinction any hypotaxis—e.g. “Because”—that would presume, in flagrantly heretical despair, to conjoin sacred verses, as if it possessed the causal high ground and could answer the question why, and was perhaps even prepared to argue about it.

Parataxis, then, is a technique—possibly devout—for self-subordination to its own content. In its modern development, however, especially in the essay as form in philosophy and in psychoanalytic listening and treatment in psychology,<sup>3</sup> parataxis has been more important for what is beneath the heavens than beyond them since, for centuries, whatever the claims pro or contra, there is no alternative

- 2 Eric Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (Spring/Summer 1984): 151-171. Apposite to the discussion of parataxis as style, Adorno wrote to Peter Suhrkamp, “Aber das einzige, woran ich wirklich Freude habe, ist eben doch die Herstellung ‘heiliger Texte?’” (“But the only thing I really enjoy is still making ‘sacred texts.’”). Psychoanalysis does not generally use parataxis in theory construction or employ the term in describing the psychoanalytical technique, but from a vast literature; see, for instance, Theodore Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear: The Inner Experience of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

to the primacy of nature. Yet even in its modern development, it can sometimes be found allied with the West's primordial paratactical work. Here to read, for instance—below—is a passage that could only have been written post world war. The passage, obviously, is not to be *Genesis* but it is a genesis, probably the last one. And while “or” substitutes for “and,” the unprepossessing paratactical articulation once again arrogates to itself the force of what it is itself subject to, though this time self-consciously, as an individual voice in full self-possession. And while no trace whatsoever of awe in the universe can be located, this perception has not exactly vanished but, in the form of terror, become internal to the mind of the writer who, in confrontation with this force, is reduced to considerably less than a speck of dust, the immediately experienced source of its own lyrical tone. The passage is an epigram taken from Wallace Stevens' “Adagia”:

If the mind is the most terrible force in the world, it is, also, the only force that  
defends us against terror. (or)

The mind is the most terrible force in the world principally in this that it is the only  
force that can defend us against itself. The modern world is based on this *pensée*.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever slightest inkling of syllogism this adage may bear, a construction along the lines of “all men are mortal” cannot be articulated by a non-subordinating conjunction. And Stevens has placed “(or)” in external proximity to the two phrases, prominently, and certainly not as an afterthought. The result is spatial form.<sup>5</sup> Something in the passage is more there to be seen than what can be directly concluded. This is not a rejection of the capacity for drawing conclusions, however, even if judgement is no longer immediately sequential. But neither are conclusions relativized as plural, since the adage itself is a definition, if of an unusual kind. The standard of truth to which it appeals is fulfilled when, in an aesthetics reaching back to Dante, what is seen cannot be unseen. That whiff of syllogistic thus gives way to the puzzle of discerning and comprehending the difference between two broadly similar sentences—engaging the mind's simplest, most distinctive and compelling power, that of comparison—as the condition for understanding the last line of the adage, its *pensée*.

When parsed apart and reconstructed, then, the adage in whole is seen to present an alternative without choice. For if the “*mind is the most terrible*”—terrible, not in the sense of the worst but of the most fearsome—“*force in the world;*” and if the mind is all that can *also* defend us against *terror*, as if there might be another terror in this world; “(or)” if the mind is above all—that is, *principally*—the only force that can defend us against *itself*, then the mind is this *terror*. Logic has become

4 Wallace Stevens, “Adagia,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 911.

5 Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

a capacity for voice, how the adage speaks, not its negation. It leaves nowhere else to turn in this world except to what is most fearsome, to the terror that is the only defense against itself. This choiceless choice—says Stevens—is the *pensée* on which the modern world is based, call it its primordia, its premise and its definition no less than a conclusion. And what else would there be to say about this adage, at this point, except perhaps that Pascal's well known *pensée*—elsewhere quoted by Stevens that “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me,” a phrase that is itself sometimes held to be the very first glimpse at what modern means—here receives its decisive amendment in a realization first convincingly achieved only in the universal cognition of the abbreviation *WW* as it awaits full numeric tabulation. And, if so, if Stevens engages Pascal's *Pensées* not just as a learned reference, then the stance of the adage itself is not that of a commentary on its perception; it is not a reference to its topic that then comes to various conclusions along the way. It is itself conceived in recognition of its own thinking that here is mind in its self-possessed solitude writing and as an expression of the only defense we have against our ownmost force. One thus understands not only why it is said that to be modern is necessarily to be anti-modern, but why every development of radical modernism emerged in some permutation of this idea, now evidently inaccessible to us. One even understands that Stevens, who thought that poetry, itself necessarily composed of what is most fearsome, should “help people live their lives”—in distant and even unrecognized kinship to Matisse and Mondrian—and had no choice but to become a master in the repurposing of logical particles, sometimes in the penumbra of syllogism; as is familiar to anyone who has laid in bed night after night and, “nothing himself, beholds/ Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”<sup>6</sup> Which no less explains why important critics including R. P. Blackmur and Yvor Winters, not exactly unintelligent themselves, decided that Stevens' thinking was fundamentally unsound. Perhaps they never read Stevens' adage? And with absolutely nothing else in this discussion to add here, but since parataxis is more than a rhetorical technique and gains its ownmost potential only when it becomes a rhythm of constant finding, not just of looking, there might be something left to say—if not in the form of a commentary—for the adage that immediately follows next on the same page in Stevens' collection of epigrams, as freely binding as parataxis can be, by hiatus alone, that “the poet represents the mind in the act of defending us against itself.”<sup>7</sup>

6 Wallace Stevens, “The Snowman,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 8.

7 Stevens, “Adagia,” 911.