From Periods to Sentences

A sentence has a minimal grammatic definition : it must have a subject and a verb, and if the verb is transitive an object, but that is all. It is conventionally demarcated by an initial capital and a terminal full-stop, and in prose does not usually (save the pronoun 'I' and deictic capitalisation of titles, proper names &c.) use medial capitalisation ; in poetry and verse drama allowance must be made for initial capitalisation of lines, but the same is true.

A period has a maximal rhetorical definition, as the complete expression of a finished thought, more closely resembles a paragraph than a sentence, and is construed *per cola et commata*, according to its constituent *cola* (indicated by colons) and *commata* (indicated by commas). It is the usual (by no means universal) manner of construing syntax from later classical antiquity (post-Cicero) into the Seventeenth Century, and text may also be displayed *per cola et commata*, giving each *colon* a new line, as applied here to Nashe from 1592 :

> Hauing spent many yeeres in studying how to liue, and liu'de a long time without mony :
> hauing tired my youth with follie, and surfetted my minde with vanitie, I began at length to looke backe to repentaunce, & addresse my endeuors to prosperitie :
> But all in vaine, I sate vp late, and rose eraely, contented with the colde, and conuersed with scarcitie :
> for all my labours turned to losse, my vulgar Muse was despised & neglected, my paines not regarded or slightly rewarded, and I my selfe (in prime of my best wit) laid open to pouertie.

The rhyming *cola* are anaphorically paired, and the capitalised "But" beginning the third is a central pivot. Capitals following a colon are strongly associated with periodic grammar, which is *not* that of sentences – here, though the whole is grammatical, the first and fourth *cola* could not stand as sentences. Isabella in *Measure, for Measure* (F, 1623, again displayed *per cola et commata*) shows another common feature of periodic construction :

> Could great men thunder [/] As *Ioue* himselfe do's, *Ioue* would neuer be quiet, [/] For euery pelting petty Officer [/] Would vse his heauen for thunder ; [/] Nothing but thunder :
> Mercifull heauen, [/] Thou rather with thy sharpe and sulpherous bolt [/] Splits the vn-wedgable and gnarled Oke, [/] Then the soft Mertill :
> But man, proud man, [/] Drest in a little briefe authoritie, [/] Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd, [/] (His glassie Essence) like an angry Ape [/] Plaies such phantastique tricks before high heauen, [/] As makes the Angels weepe :
> who with our spleenes, [/] Would all themselues laugh mortall.

Each *colon* has a different grammatical subject – “euery pelting Petty Officer”, “Mercifull heauen”, “(His glassie essence)”, and (though it is in the third *colon*) “the Angels”, via “who”. It is not impossible to do something of this in grammatical sentences – Henry James shifts grammatical subject across a semi-colon, and William Faulkner’s hyperextended sentences can have successive subjects – but with the period there is no necessary expectation of a single grammatical subject.

Periodic construction and construal *per cola et commata* progressively falters and collapses during the first three quarters of the Seventeenth Century, the last major poetry to be written in periods being by Milton and Dryden, and, save a few very early ones in the 1680s–90s, novels being written in sentences. But the simple period of two *cola*, or *semi-cola*, much visible in the King James Bible and the Great Bible translation of the Psalms in the *Book of Common Prayer* from 1662, becomes the bipartite sentence familiar in much Eighteenth-Century and later writing (as with Dr Johnson : “The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction ; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more.”).

Beyond the intrinsic importance of recognising the system of periodic constructions (as ‘modernising’ Early Modernist editors have repeatedly shown they do not), what is of real cogency is that the collapse of periodic construction and the emergence of the much more linear grammatical sentence coincides with, and clearly reflects, the evolution of dominant modes of argument from argument by analogy (As every river tendeth to the sea, so every soul tendeth unto God), and argument by authority (It’s in the Bible/Plato/newspapers), to empiricism and informed logic. The successive *cola* of periods readily accommodate discursive analogies and promote parallelism, and equally allow invocation or citation of accumulating authorities, whereas the linear drive of the sentence is hostile to such recursions and heapings-up. Such things *can* be done in sentences (Faulkner again, and variously Beckett, Joyce, Woolf &c.), but there is a clear correlation between the shifting syntax and shifting mode of argument which is displayed in the punctuation-marks.

As a shorthand, periods are more like paragraphs, and connect *cola* that may have no, or differing, subjects in parallel, while sentences must have a subject, usually have only one, and connect clauses in series.