

# **Towards Understanding Rudolf Steiner’s Use of Language and Structuring of Text**

*by GERALD REILLY*

According to Rudolf Steiner, spiritual scientific literature itself is an instrument for the perception of the spiritual world. From his Basel lecture in 1916, he writes: “The literature of natural science communicates certain results with which people acquaint themselves. The literature of spiritual science is not of this kind. It can become an instrument of the soul of every individual. Anyone who permeates his being with the ideas that it propounds is not merely confronted with a direct result that can be learned, but has something which, through an inner life, unites him with the spiritual world he is seeking. Whoever reads a spiritual scientific book will—if he reads it properly— observe that what lives in the book can become in his life of soul the means of bringing this soul-life itself into harmony with spiritual existence. As this proceeds, it will become increasingly apparent that in a book that is truly written out of Anthroposophy we do not have what we find in other books, but something of the nature of an instrument that does not merely communicate facts of knowledge but through which we are able to arrive at such facts of our own activity.<sup>1</sup>”

Repeatedly Steiner points out that his work could not be studied merely as content, be read like cookbooks, or even ordinary works of philosophy. Instead, his basic books must be read with developed will forces. For example, the reader must attend to the unique sequence of ideas.

Indeed, he went so far as to say about The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity that this book was an actual organism whose thought development could not be arbitrarily manipulated. The reading of the book was compared at different times to a manual and an artistic book of exercises wherein the reader could master the text’s sequence of ideas and achieve a high level of spiritual insight.

In the 75 years since Steiner died, little concrete literature exists (especially in English) on the nature of Steiner’s writing, even as the effort to translate the texts continues. At the same time, there has been a lack of sustained attention paid to the nature of Steiner’s German style. In some instances, we have three and four generations of translated texts. The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity has enjoyed many separate English-language editions with translators including Collison, Wilson, Stebbing, Lindeman and most recently Lipson. In 1923 in Stuttgart, Steiner warned his followers that the inability to read this very book with proper attention to its method was a danger to the entire movement. Today the question seems all the more pressing.

In varied contexts Rudolf Steiner evidenced a keen awareness of contemporary literary styles. In his lectures on education and Waldorf curriculum, he repeatedly favored certain authors on the

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<sup>1</sup> GA35. Lecture of 10/16/16, a lecture reviewed by Steiner. Translated by Blaxland-de Lange in Approaches to Anthroposophy.

basis of their style. For example, “The style of Hermann Grimm could illustrate how language can be used pictorially for he still writes proper sentences, whereas nowadays you usually read not sentences but tapeworms of sentences.<sup>2</sup>”

In this context, it is helpful to look at an incisive comment he made about prose style in general before looking at his comments on his own literary style. In a lecture given during the Speech Course (Dornach 1924), he declared: “Style, however, requires continuity of thought. Anyone setting out to write an essay and to write in style ought already to have his last sentence within the first. He should in fact pay even more attention to the last than to the first. And while he is writing his second sentence, he should have in mind the last but one. Only when he comes to the middle of his essay can he allow himself to concentrate on one sentence alone. If an author has a true feeling for style in prose, he will have the whole essay before him as he writes.<sup>3</sup>”

As Rudolf Steiner proposed this standard of symmetry in prose even at the level of sentences, it would behoove the conscientious student of his work to attend to the intentional form of his texts at that level. This mode of expressing and understanding language embodies a fundamental principle of spiritual science voiced by Rudolf Steiner in various contexts: organizing his expression along the model of the human being or what he calls elsewhere “the human being systematic.” In this case the symmetry in language reflects the seven-fold nature of the human being, which itself also reflects the seven-fold quality of time in human evolution. The first is mirrored in the seventh, the second in the sixth, the third in the fifth, and the fourth stands alone, ‘speaking’ for itself.

We can observe an example of this *conscious attention to form* in the way Steiner structured his first finished book, The Theory of Knowledge. He used dashes at the end of certain sections of the book. These dashes stand after the final period of a section, and they would appear to have no obvious grammatical use except as indicators that there is a separation between the just-finished section and the following section. In the original 1887 version there were six such dashes, thus giving it a seven-fold structure clearly intended by the author.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking that thirty-seven years later Steiner actually changed the dashes for the 1924 edition so that the later printing contains two such structural dashes and, thus, three divisions of the book, in contrast to the earlier six dashes and seven divisions. The fact that he edited the book this meticulously should only emphasize the responsibility we have as readers. Yet sadly, the dashes have vanished from the latest German editions of the book. In America and England, they have been ignored.

In his autobiography, Rudolf Steiner explains: “...a rightly composed anthroposophical book should be an awakener of the life of the spirit in the reader, not a

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Rudolf Steiner’s Curriculum for Waldorf Schools, Karl Stockmeyer.

<sup>3</sup> ‘GA 282. Lecture of 9/7/24, Translated by Mary Adams in Speech and Drama

<sup>4</sup> See Florin Lowndes’ Das Erwecken des Herz-Denkens (1998) p. 106-107 or for fuller analysis „Ein Geheimnis Des Ersten Buches Von Rudolf Steiner“ by the same author.

certain quantity imparted. The reading of it should not be a mere reading, it should be an experiencing with inner shocks, tensions and resolutions.”<sup>5</sup>

In keeping with the unique mission of such literature, Steiner commented that he modified his style accordingly. “In writing I subdue to a dry mathematical style what has come out of warm and profound feeling. But only such a style can be an awakener, for the reader must cause warmth and feeling to awaken in himself. He cannot simply allow these to flow into him from the one setting forth the truth, while he remains passively composed.”<sup>6</sup>

Here, as so frequently elsewhere, Steiner emphasizes the need for *active reading* and the fact that his own writing was meticulously designed to draw out an active response from within the reader. It seems appropriate, in light of these comments and the rigor and accuracy of method that they imply, that the *reader’s* attentiveness should extend all the way down to the level of punctuation and the word order of the sentences. Otherwise, why would the author have overseen their revision so carefully?

How wonderful to have The Road to Self Knowledge (GA 12) and Threshold of Spiritual Worlds (GA 13) back in print in English. These remarkable works are true meditative texts, as Friedman Schwartzkopf notes in the introduction to the new edition.<sup>7</sup> Yet the lack of attention to Steiner’s original structuring of the text contained within this latest translation is of concern. Look closely at Chapter One of Threshold. Steiner’s original edition contains eleven separated paragraphs and seven dashes establishing seven more structural subdivisions, or a total of eighteen. This arrangement was not changed in the subsequent editions during Steiner’s life. The translator’s choice to organize the chapter into seventeen paragraphs would seem to be an effort to encourage the flow of the chapter. Yet it threatens to make the all-important structural polarity unrecognizable. It does not follow either the original paragraphing or take into account the additional structuring by means of dashes. An understanding of the intentional, fundamental structure of the chapter would be impossible without the German original.

The lack of symmetry and polarity likewise applies on the level of sentence-paragraph. In the same chapter, the third paragraph has five sentences in the original, not the six indicated here. There are many other divergences from Steiner’s original. Even such subtle differences blur the attentive structural awareness that Steiner posited as *necessary* for competent style.

Another example is the 1918 preface to The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, the latest translation.<sup>8</sup> Steiner, commenting on this work in his lectures to youth, said “in what I have named Anthroposophy, in fact in the preface to my Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, you will meet with something that you will not be able to comprehend if you only give yourself up to that passive thinking so specially loved today.”

Promisingly, the newest English-language edition supplies paragraph numbers to facilitate study and easy reference. Yet even here, there are problems. The new edition

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Translation from George O’Neil, A Workbook on Rudolf Steiner’s Die Philosophie der Freiheit, 1962.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> A Way to Self-Knowledge, Anthroposophic Press, (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path, Anthroposophic Press, (1995).

misreads the basic structure of the preface. Like so many translations before, the dash separating the last sentence of paragraph 2 from paragraph 3 is ignored. As Florin Lowndes points out, (and George O’Neil in 1962 before him), the fundamental structure of the preface is fully understood only by attending to the dash. It is read most meaningfully as six paragraphs, not five.<sup>9</sup> Only then is the polarity made clear between the first three paragraphs, all in third person, talking about the cognitive sciences and the second three paragraphs, written, by contrast, in first person, treating the book as moral reality. Thus the reader sees that the structure of the preface (two groups of three paragraphs) reflects the structure of the book itself, divided into two seven chapter sections (and leading to the concluding section): the science of freedom and the reality of freedom.

The point to such observations is not to argue the specific choices made by specific translators and editors who have labored mightily at a task that is so often taken for granted. Rather, all our efforts are potentially diminished by a lack of understanding and attentiveness to Steiner’s unique use of language and style.

For the purposes of this discussion, I want to separate Steiner’s unique style and language from the impulse towards an “organic” style that filled essays and literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and England. Like Blake before him, Steiner was not satisfied with merely comparing artistic activity to natural activity— he points out the *beingness* of the literary creation, whether philosophical or spiritual scientific. Or as he told an audience in Vienna in 1910: “Thus even when we hear the deepest truths of the heart stated in words, we must accustom ourselves to perceive behind them the thought-forms and their content.”<sup>10</sup>

The works of George O’Neil and Florin Lowndes already cited have been instrumental in clarifying the qualities of “organism” in Rudolf Steiner’s writing. Steiner is not speaking metaphorically when he writes at the start of his career in the very beginning of The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity (what was later to become the second appendix of the 1918 edition): “We have not just a knowing about things but we have made *Knowing* instead into an actual, self-governing organism; our authentic, active consciousness has placed itself above a mere passive receiving of truths.”<sup>11</sup>

In this context, it is understandable why Steiner gave such specific indications about the necessity of the strictest attention to detail in the use of language in anthroposophic contexts. At the very end of 1914 in a lecture cycle on the arts, for example, he commented: “Often what is of essential importance to me does not appear at all in the transcript (of the lectures) Speaking in the manner of other sciences, we would say ‘Spiritual Science wants something.’ But spiritual science says ‘what it *should* want or *must* want.’ And I say ‘the way I *must* express myself,’ and not ‘the way I express myself’... A great deal depends on such subtleties; we must not pass them by.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Lowndes, op. cit. page 166-169; O’Neil, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Microcosm and Macrocosm, GA 119, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Translation by Florin Lowndes, study-group version.

<sup>12</sup> Art as Seen in the Light of Mystery Wisdom, p. 20, translated by Pauline Wehrle, from the lecture of December 28, 1914.

We can see how the issues of style become fundamental in the supersensible domain. One only needs to be reminded of the following excerpt from the remarkable talk in 1911 about the occult nature of the colors and decorations of the Stuttgart House. On that occasion Steiner stated: “...This means that within the world of etheric substance which surrounds us, with all the beings incarnated in it, the forms we see here are actually present. There are beings who really have these forms in the etheric worlds; and when we look at one of these figures our etheric body adjusts itself to build up forms in its own movements according to these lines. The figure produces a thought-form which then proceeds from it; and according to the thought-form our etheric body will be able to make a real union with one or another kind of being.”<sup>13</sup>

The very same *beingness* granted to colors and decorations must be accorded to Steiner’s words, which are *actual instruments* for seeing into the spiritual world. Through the written texts, the experience of thought-beings is achievable. Let us make no mistake about the radical program of Steiner’s language usage. He explained in an educational lecture at Ilkey: “If we understand one another at a level higher than speech by means of deeper elements in the soul— by means of thoughts carried by feeling, warmed by the heart— then we have an international medium of understanding, but we need a heart for this to come into being. We must find the path to the spirit of man at a level higher than that of speech. The search for a language of thought, as well as all other matters connected with philosophy, education, religion, and art— that is the significance of the Anthroposophical Movement in the historical present...”<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes the most revolutionary path can be a return to a starting point: in this case awareness of the literal form of Steiner’s organic expression and its connection to the future capacities of heart thinking. Certainly the recent work of Florin Lowndes characterizing Steiner’s organic style has revolutionized spiritual scientific study for many readers.<sup>15</sup> It seems crucial for anthroposophists today to recognize that the understanding of Steiner’s texts—not to mention a *higher* understanding of them— demands that the reader honor the literal, mathematical level of their expression. In this way the light- and warmth-filled response the author intended might indeed come forth.

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<sup>13</sup> “Occult Features of The Stuttgart House” 10/15/11

<sup>14</sup> GA 307, “Farewell Address”, 8/17/23. Translation by Jesse Darrell in *A Modern Art of Education*.

<sup>15</sup> See Lowndes, *Das Erwecken des Herz-Denkens* (1998), and also, in English, Lowndes, *Enlivening the Chakra of the Heart*, Rudolf Steiner Press, London, 1998.