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Meeting Apart and the Togethertocolored Instant: Typography and Communion in Dickinson and Cummings

Kate Morley ’11

Emily Dickinson and E. E. Cummings both deviate substantially from normative typography throughout their respective bodies of work, but their preferred ways of straying from those norms could not be more dissimilar. Dickinson uses punctuation to expand the spaces around her words; Cummings uses words to collapse the spaces around his punctuation. Dickinson adds unexpected capitalizations; Cummings erases expected ones. Yet for all their differences, both artists’ patterns of typographical deviation do share one feature: Each enhances its respective creator’s arguments about the conditions under which interpersonal communion becomes possible.

In the early stages of the field’s development, literary semiotics focused primarily on the sign systems created by textual content; most theorists ignored typography in favor of studying syntax, tropes, and narrative structures (Bressler 111-14). In recent years, however, an increasing number of scholars have turned their attention to the idea that the physical arrangement and appearance of written language functions as its own sign system, one that plays a part “in making a text not only visible but meaningful” (Gutjahr and Benton 2). The theory rests on the premise that “[o]nce given visual form, any text is implicitly coded by that form in ways that signal, however subtly, its nature and purpose” (6). In more extreme versions of this view, every typographical feature imaginable has its potential significance, from the relative letter shapes of different fonts to the decision to indent a line of poetry; if it exists, it matters (Gutjahr and Benton 7; Miller 204).

Cummings scholars are nearly unanimous in their acceptance of typographical semiology as a both plausible and valuable tool for approaching the poet’s work; it is now something of a critical commonplace to say that “[t]he words [in his poetry] are not only linguistic signs... but mainly graphic signifiers” (Lapacherie 60). In fact, this view is so prevalent that it appears as a stock side-note even in studies devoted principally to other aspects of the poet’s work. For example, Irene R. Fairley’s analysis of Cummings’ syntax includes a brief reference to the importance of “the spatial distribution of... words on the page” in “expand[ing] the possible dimensions of statement and meaning” of Cumming’s poetry (13). Even those skeptical of the theory’s usefulness for interpreting literature in general acknowledge that in Cummings’ case, the “poems would indeed lose major elements... if printed differently” (Miller 222).

Dickinson’s critics, however, are less united on the relevance of her typography. Some present her formatting as crucial to understanding her content, as in Heather McHugh’s claim that Dickinson’s preference for the
The same emotions or think the same thoughts. This pattern. Here, the speaker prefers the titular two- to five-line sections. But it takes a specific intensity of "Agony" to produce such unquestioned evidence of another person's feelings: the pain felt at the moment when "[t]he eyes glaze once—and that is Death" (5). In order for the observer to truly know the sufferer, the latter has to die; the two must undergo a separation that will endure for as long as the former remains alive.

In Dickinson and Cummings' work, this mirroring of punctuation and content is at its most interesting in the context of the poets' depictions of interpersonal connection. "Connection," in its broadest sense, encompasses an almost unlimited variety of interactions between people, and Dickinson and Cummings write about nearly all of them. For the sake of the current argument, I will limit my discussion to representations of a state of communion between two individuals, a sharing of the innermost self. This "sharing" takes two different forms. In the first, both partners actually feel the same emotions or think the same thoughts. In the second, mutuality of experience is not required; one partner simply grants the other knowledge of the content of his or her inner world. Both poets write frequently of such communion, but each portrays it as occurring under very different circumstances.

In Dickinson's case, emotional and psychological closeness usually takes place across some sort of literal or metaphorical distance. The relationship between intimate revelation and withdrawal into death in the poem "I like a look of Agony" offers a relatively straightforward example of this pattern. Here, the speaker prefers the titular "look of Agony" because, as something "[i]mpossible to feign," it is one of the few displays of emotion that an outside observer can ever "know [is] true" (Dickinson, "Agony" lines 2-5). But it takes a specific intensity of "Agony" to produce such unquestioned evidence of another person's feelings: the pain felt at the moment when "[t]he eyes glaze once—and that is Death" (5). In order for the observer to truly know the sufferer, the latter has to die; the two must undergo a separation that will endure for as long as the former remains alive.

Even the word "glaze" connotes physical division in a way that alternatives like "dim" or "dull" or "dull" would not. The two other verb-form meanings of "glaze," to coat pottery or to mount glass panes into a window frame, both entail the construction of a barrier. The dying expose themselves, then promptly withdraw beyond their companions' reach. Tellingly, the most revealing aspect of the agonized expression, the part that is singled out as truly "Impossible to feign" (with "Impossible" emphatically capitalized), are the "Beads" left "upon the Forehead" by the exertion of the death throes—and these appear in the poem only after the sufferer has already died (6-7). The moment of communion arises out of the moment of separation itself.

This idea that connection and separation arise from the same circumstances, or even serve as the circumstances that produce each another, persists throughout much of Dickinson's poetry, and her heavy use of dashes creates a typographical reflection of that concept. Out of all the punctuation marks available to an English-language writer, the dash imposes the greatest amount of physical space between words. "I like a look of Agony" contains relatively few dashes for a Dickinson poem. However, the positioning of those dashes that do appear in it provides an example of the way in which Dickinson's use of expanded page space interacts with the content of her poems. Three of the four dashes fall at the end of a line (more specifically, at the ends of lines 2, 4, and 5). Since the words they come between are already sundered by line breaks and not placed next to one another on the page, the contribution these dashes make to the poem's spacing is minimal. This makes the poem's single mid-line dash all the more visually striking in its isolation, calling our attention to the place where it occurs: "The eyes glaze once—and that is Death" (5). The dash falls at the precise point in the poem when distance first interposes itself between the speaker and the sufferer, in the tiny space between the moment when the body shuts down and the moment when the deathbed watchers realize that the self inside that body is gone. At least on the level of the printed page, that dash grants external, physical expression to the opening of an internal, intangible gap.

From here until the period that closes the poem, the remaining lines continue without the interruption of a single mark of punctuation: "Impossible to feign / The Beads upon the Forehead / By homely Anguish strung" (Dickinson, "Agony" 6-8). The poem's most fragmented line is thus directly juxtaposed with its least fragmented ones. Each of the five lines preceding this section ends with either a dash or a comma; none of them are allowed to flow into the following line without some sort of typographically mandated pause. The contrasting ease of connection between the words of the final lines is fitting, since the "Beads" of sweat they describe are the indicator that allows the speaker to know the other person's emotional experience. The visual appearance of the lines thus reflects their content.

This interplay between punctuation and meaning becomes more pronounced in the closing stanza of "I cannot live with You." Having
dash over other forms of punctuation is responsible for much of the interpretive “fluidity” of her poems (108). A few scholars, carrying their support of this argument to its logical extreme, mark typography as so important in determining her poetry’s meaning that even things like “the number of folds” in Dickinson’s original fascicles or the “slant” of her handwriting on a certain line have indispensable value (Miller 204-5). Others, like Cristanne Miller, call for a reduced emphasis on the appearance of Dickinson’s texts, protesting that Dickinson did not “[conceive] of poetry... as significantly visual in its forms” and thus “did not write poetry for the page in the same sense that [C]ummings did” (221-2). Miller argues that no matter how stylistically idiosyncratic and rebellious Dickinson might be, as a member of a “nineteenth-century... culture more attuned to structures of sound than sight in poetry,” her rebellion would have been directed against “aural” norms and not visual ones (205-6). Yet even Miller includes one typographical element in her list of those “irregularities” of Dickinson’s she considers worth analyzing: her punctuation (226-7). Any alteration made to normative punctuation changes the ways in which the words on a page relate to one another, and this in turn affects—or at the very least reflects—the ways that the concepts expressed in those words relate to one another.

In Dickinson and Cummings’ work, this mirroring of punctuation and content is at its most interesting in the context of the poets’ depictions of interpersonal connection. “Connection,” in its broadest sense, encompasses an almost unlimited variety of interactions between people, and Dickinson and Cummings write about nearly all of them. For the sake of the current argument, I will limit my discussion to representations of a state of communion between two individuals, a sharing of the innermost self. This “sharing” takes two different forms. In the first, both partners actually feel the same emotions or think the same thoughts. In the second, mutuality of experience is not required; one partner simply grants the other knowledge of the content of his or her inner world. Both poets write frequently of such communion, but each portrays it as occurring under very different circumstances.

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This interplay between punctuation and meaning becomes more pronounced in the closing stanza of “I cannot live with You.” Having
detailed all of the reasons why she
cannot be with her beloved in life, in
dearth, or even in the afterlife, the speaker now explains the one form of
collection still open to them:

So we must meet apart –
You there – I – here –
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are – and Prayer –
And that White Sustenance –
Despair – . (Dickinson, “I cannot” lines 45-50)

Just as it was in “I like a look of Agony,” the first function of the dash in this
section is to give the lovers’ impending separation a physical equivalent on
the page. The speaker tries to define the nature of the distance she and her
would-be partner will have to keep from each other, and the line in which
she begins to do so, “[y]ou there – I – here,” is broken into three segments by
two different dashes (46). This makes it something of an oddity within the
context of the fifty lines in this poem, thirty-five are written as
unfragmented blocks of words, their dashes deferred to the end. Out of the
fifteen lines chopped by mid-line dashes, thirteen bear only one internal
dash, limiting them to only two fragmented parts apiece. But here, as the
speaker shifts from outlining the lives she and her lover will never share
together to describing the life that they will have to endure apart, a line
finally splits into more than two sections. The abrupt increase in the
concentration of dashes expands the line to an almost excessive degree,
intensifying the reader’s perception of the distance unfurling between the
beloved’s “there” and the speaker’s “here.” The dashes’ visual doubling of
the poem’s action continues in their isolation of the “I.” The dashes cut it off
from direct contact with either “there” or “here,” leaving both the word and
the self it represents hovering between them. She cannot and will not live
with the person she addresses, but she will never fully belong to her own
home, either; her perpetual yearning for the beloved, her efforts to
rebuffs an unidentified “some one[‘s]” attempt to “twine” with her,
preferring to reserve “[t]hat right” for her absent inamorato (Dickinson
“How sick,” 2-6). While the twining proposed by the other person may very
well be that of sex or matrimony, it is equally easy to read it as an offer of
genuine communion. The would-be companion approaches the speaker
because the latter “look[s] tired – or alone – / Or breaking – almost – with
unspoken pain” (3-4). The proposal to “twine” may thus be an offer of
empathy in exchange for confession, motivated by the asker’s desire to know
the private causes of these “unspoken” sufferings. When the speaker rejects
this opportunity for intimacy, two dashes mimic her self-isolating gesture:
“And I turned – ducal – ” (5). The word the speaker uses to describe her new, aloof
identity stands removed, as segregated from its fellows as the “ducal
speaker” is from hers. The opening line makes similar use of the dash as a
visual metaphor, chopping apart the speaker’s realization of “[h]ow sick [it
is] – to wait – in any place – but thine” with three different mid-line breaks
(1). This radical expansion of page space heightens the sense of distance
between the speaker and the object of her yearning, thereby intensifying the
reader’s understanding of just “[h]ow sick” the separation feels.

We can see these resonances between Dickinson’s punctuation and
her themes easily enough by studying her work in isolation, without any
comparison to other practitioners of this kind of typographical manipulation.
Nevertheless, knowing how a certain technique operates across the work of
many different artists can greatly enhance our appreciation of the way it
operates in the work of any given individual. If Dickinson’s particular ways
of abandoning conventional formatting contribute to the presence of certain
interpretive possibilities within her poetry, then another poet’s very different
ways of abandoning those same conventions ought to generate an equally
different set of available interpretations. Cummings, whose approach to
typography and ideas about communion are both in opposition to
Dickinson’s, is an ideal choice for such a comparison.

1. In most of the poems I discuss in this paper, there is little textual basis for
assigning a gender to the speaker. However, for the sake of avoiding the awkward
constructions of “he or she” and “his or her” or perpetually having to repeat the
epithet “the speaker,” I will refer to Dickinson’s unnamed speakers as “she” and
Cummings’ unnamed speakers as “he.” This is not meant to suggest that either
Dickinson or Cummings never wrote from the perspective of the other gender; it is
simply an attempt to reduce verbal clutter without automatically defaulting to “he.”
Unlike Dickinson, Cummings roots acts of mental and emotional communion in moments of actual physical connection, from the “togethercoloured instant” of lovemaking to the simple brush of arm against arm (“sometimes” line 7). In his treatment of romantic love, Cummings is nothing if not a poet of the body, displaying “a completely physical approach to love” in which sexual “attraction [is what] creates depth of feeling” (Attaway 15). Across poem after poem after poem, Cummings links the sharing of the inner life with touch. In “it is so long since my heart has been with yours,” for example, the “heart[s]” of the title line are able to join because they are “shut within” the space created by the lovers’ “mingling arms” (Cummings lines 1-2). Elsewhere, the beloved’s “mind [walks] into [the speaker’s] kiss” (5-6). This identification of kisses as a site for the transfusion and sharing of selves continues in “silentl if/ out of not knowable,” where the speaker tells his lover that during “your kiss/ losing through you what seemed myself, i find / selves unimaginably mine” (8-10). The body becomes the primary medium through which one person can access and know another’s soul. One of Cummings’ more frequently deployed forms of typographical deviation, the collapsing of space around a punctuation mark so that it becomes the only thing separating two words, functions as a visual literalization of this touch-based communion. The words, like the minds and souls they describe, flow into one another through the act of touching the same “body.”

This linking of punctuation and message is evident throughout much of Cummings’ work. For example, in his erotic poem “sometimes i am alive because with,” the “togethercoloured instant” of sexual union takes place at “the moment... / when, her mouth suddenly rising, wholly / [she] begins with mine fiercely to fool” (Cummings lines 7-10). Awarding the title “togethercoloured” to sex suggests an expectation of gaining more than just physical pleasure from the act; the speaker’s goal is to experience a sense of intimate connection with his partner. Accordingly, in the line where the intercourse first begins, the written words begin to meld together. Twice in the same line, the traditionally expected spaces do not appear between a comma and the word following it. It is the only part of the poem in which this space-free punctuation appears; at the moment when the lovers are closest, so are the words.

Cummings employs a similar typographical strategy in his less sexual love poems as well, hoarding his irregularities of punctuation until the one key moment of connection. The relatively chaste “since feeling is first” makes a particularly fitting subject for a typographical study, as its claim that “life’s not a paragraph / and death... is no parenthesis” gives explicit voice to the idea that the physical form of written language can serve as an equivalent for real-world concepts (Cummings lines 15-16). Cummings maintains normative spacing around his punctuation marks in all but two of the poem’s lines. This distance finally vanishes when the speaker witnesses his lover’s “eyelids’ flutter which says / we are for each other:then /.../ laugh, leaning back in my arms” (12-14). The compression of the colon and comma unites three separate actions. The first, the flicker of the eyelids, serves as a form of communication, a way for the “lady” to share the knowledge of what she is feeling with her lover (10). Afterwards she “laughs,” expressing her pleasure, then immediately “lean[s]” against the speaker’s body, reestablishing the physical aspect of her relationship with him. The deliberate erasure of space around the two punctuation marks fuses the moment of communion, the moment of joy in that communion, and the moment of physical connection into a single unit on the page, providing yet another visual correlate for Cummings’ insistent equation of the bodily contact with spiritual contact.

In the poem “look,” Cummings’ manipulation of typography becomes somewhat more elaborate. The entire poem builds towards the speaker’s realization that he and his lover have undergone a mingling of selves. After running through a list of all the parts of his body that he can no longer “recognize” as being purely “[him]self” anymore, he acknowledges that these changes stem from the transfusion of identity he received from his lover:

someone whom you love
myself has entered and become such
lips as i use to talk with,
a new person is alive and
gestures with my
or it is perhaps you who
with my voice
are
playing. (Cummings, “look” 18-19, 23-33)

The “new person” residing inside the speaker takes the form of both “someone whom [his beloved] loves” and the beloved herself (or himself); he has actually absorbed elements of his lover’s personality and incorporated them into his own. The figure of “someone whom you love” represents the speaker’s understanding of the qualities his lover most desires to find in other people, and as such, is more an extension of the lover’s own selfhood than a separate entity. Thus, in order for this intertwining of selves to have taken place, the speaker must be aware of at least some of the private desires and hopes and needs of his partner; otherwise, the “you” of the poem could not truly be the one slipping inside the speaker and “playing” with his “voice” (30-33). The intimacy of the knowledge required here, and the speaker’s ability to adopt and experience parts of his lover’s inner world as his own, marks the fusion of selves presented here as an act of communion.

The speaker delays any overt mention of these changes to the internal self until the second half of the poem. Meanwhile, he devotes the first half to a brief catalogue of the parts of his physical self that “are different / from what they were” (Cummings, “look” 11-12). These are the
places where the shifting of his identity first becomes apparent, and all of
them—his “fingers” (2), “hands” (7), “wrists” (7), and “arms” (12)—are
instruments of touch, thus reconfirming bodily contact as the site of internal
transformation for Cummings. Each time the speaker mentions a new body
part, Cummings deletes the space around a single punctuation mark within
that phrase. As it progresses, this sequence of typographical deviations
gradually comes to reflect more and more of the poem’s ideas about the
body’s relation to the self.

The catalogue begins with the speaker’s “fingers, which / touched
[his lover]” and now no longer “resemble” themselves (Cummings, “look”
2-3, 6). The condensed spacing operates very simply here. The elision of the
expected gap between the “fingers” and the word nearest to them allows
those fingers to do on the page what they do in life: touch. This particular
typographical gesture does little else to shape the interpretive possibilities of
the line, perhaps because at this point the body the speaker caresses is still
just a body. The reaching fingers feel only the lover’s “warmth and crisp /
littleness,” and while “warmth” can describe personality as well as
physicality, the poem offers little compelling evidence that the speaker
means the term any way other than literally (4-5).

During his next observation of how touching her has altered him,
however, the speaker acknowledges the personhood of his lover’s body:

My wrists [and] hands
which held carefully the soft silence
of you (and your body
smile eyes feet hands)
are different

from what they were. (Cummings, “look” 7-12)

Coming from Cummings, the separation of “your body” from “you” here is a
surprising gesture, implying a division between soul and flesh not elsewhere
present in his poetry. Were the formatting of the punctuation normal, the
relegation of the body to a parenthetical clause might make it seem like an
afterthought, the incidental casing of a personhood deemed to be separate
from it. In Cummings’ hands, however, the content of the parenthetical
clause and the abnormal spacing around that first parenthesis work together
to prevent that reading. The most striking feature of the list of the body’s
attributes (“smile eyes feet hands”) is that it includes the “smile” as
something that the speaker can hold when he embraces his lover’s form
(10). Not the lips, not the mouth, but the actual facial expression itself, and
by extension, the emotions that produced it. This idea that one can hold
another person’s “smile” in one’s arms thus parallels an idea expressed in the
earlier “you” section, that one can hold not just a silent body but, through it,
the “soft silence” of the personality itself (8-10). Such paralleling resitutes
the body in the realm of personhood originally granted to the internal “you”
a lone. The moment in which the passage finally breaks punctuation
convention works in conjunction with this verbal content to reunite the

“you” of the self with its “body.” Rather than being divisive, the opening
parenthesis actually brings the two closer together than an unpunctuated but
regularly spaced line could have, allowing “you” and the first word of the
phrase “and your body” to bleed together into what is, visually, a single unit
of text. This time it is not the speaker and lover who touch across the
modified punctuation; it is the body and the soul. This moment, and the
typography that produces it, serve as the conceptual stepping-stone between
the speaker’s earlier touching of only the physical properties of his lover’s
body and his later claim that “all of [his lover] lay folded” in his “arms” (12-
13, emphasis mine). In turn, that shift from feeling only the “warmth and... /
littleness” of a body to recognizing that by holding it, one holds “all” of a
person is what allows the commingling of selves to take place during the
latter half of the poem (5-6, 13). Thus, by contributing to the argument that
the body is a viable medium for self-to-self communion, the unusual
formatting of the punctuation plays a valuable role in conveying the poem’s
message.

Critics sometimes accuse Cummings of stylistic carelessness. Some
dismiss his experiments with form and format as little more than a collection
of flashy stunts, selected at random for the sake of drawing attention. To
them, “grammatical or typographical contortion are not in Cummings the
outward sign of complex thought that they are in [other poets]” (Dougherty
184). But as my examination of three of his communion poems hopefully
indicates, Cummings’ use of non-normative punctuation is anything but
slowy. The specific placements of his typographical deviations mirror and
play off of the action depicted in the language they shape.

When a writer capitalizes a proper noun, or ends a sentence with a
period, or places one space between typed words rather than two or five or
none, it is not because this is just the way text naturally happens to fall on a
page; it is because the writer chooses to do so. That decision may be
subconscious or ingrained to the point of reflex, but it is still a choice, and
the individual makes it for a reason: because each of these typographical
features carries information about the text they shape. Yet like any sign
system whose norms of usage are so widely practiced that observing them no
longer requires conscious effort, typography easily becomes invisible as a
bearer of meaning. Sometimes we need an encounter with someone who
creates meaning by dramatically breaking the system’s rules to remind us
that it can serve as a sign system at all. If seeing a sentence end with an
ellipsis or a dash can startle a reader into wondering how that impacts the
potential readings, perhaps it can also make the reader realize that the period
that could have ended that sentence would have imposed its own range of
possible meanings and tones and subtexts. Thus, Dickinson and Cummings’
use of typographical deviations as reflections of their poetic content does
more than simply reinforce the themes and ideas at play in their own
individual bodies of work. It allows the reader to rediscover typography’s
ability to serve as a legitimate medium of communication. For all their
differences, the sprawling dashes and cramped commas ultimately speak the same truth: No aspect of written language is meaningless.

Works Cited


