

E. E. Cummings's Parentheses: Punctuation as Poetic Device

M. B. Parkes, in a groundbreaking book on the history of punctuation in the West, gives these two short examples to demonstrate that punctuation is an object of interpretation:

- 1) Stop! Stop!! Stop!!!
- 2) 'Stop!!', she whispered

In each of these cases, Parkes explains, we interpret the exclamation mark differently, and through this we can see that “punctuation becomes a feature of the ‘pragmatics’ of the written medium” (1-2). Indeed, punctuation marks are a curious thing. Intricately connected with the written medium, originating, as Parkes shows, with aids for the inexperienced reader in Antiquity (10-11), they have gone through a long history of changes, shifts, and adaptation to new circumstances and needs. Punctuation researchers have identified two prototypical functions. The first, traced by Naomi Baron back to Aristophanes around 200 BC, is assisting the reader to re-create an original oral rendition of the text, as in marking for the reader varying lengths of pause for when the text is to be read aloud. This role affirms an affinity between marks of punctuation and spoken or performed language. The second, more uniquely associated with the written text, is that of clarification of meaning and organization of units, particularly through marking syntactical relationships (20-25).¹

But the most curious thing about punctuation marks is not their liminal status between the rhetorical and organizational functions or their physical location in-between (or above, or below, or around) the letters, but their semantic in-between-ness. In short, punctuation marks are semantically fuzzy. They are part of the linguistic code, and in that sense are shared and subject to (dynamic) conventionalization. Numerous handbooks on punctuation, as well as editors who try to “normalize” writers’ use of punctuation, all attest to the fact that punctuation is institutionalized. However, marks of punctuation are void of specific semantic content and are significantly more vague than many other signifiers.

As fuzzy, punctuation marks are amenable to appropriation, to exploitation, and to projection. Gertrude Stein, in her essay “Poetry and Grammar,” takes this notion to extreme heights when she speaks of different marks of punctuation as possessing different personalities. In a lengthy and humorous discussion of the nature of colons and semicolons, for example, Stein offers the following account: “I began unfortunately to feel them as a comma and commas are very servile they have no life of their own they are dependent upon use and convenience and they are put there just for practical purposes” (131). Later Stein contemplates the fact that the colon and semicolon “might have in them something of the character of the period,” only to conclude

I think however lively they are or disguised they are they are definitely more comma than period and so really I cannot regret not having used them. They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. (131)

This is more than mere personification. If the use of adjectives like *servile*, *lively*, *powerful*, and *pretentious* to discuss a semicolon makes any kind of sense, it is because the opaque nature of punctuation marks allows for such attributions. Because they are fuzzy marks of punctuation can be imported into the human realm by way of discussing their character. They can likewise migrate into other fields for different means.

Some have recognized the significance of punctuation in poetry: punctuation as a poetic device. Punctuation in poetry, especially in free-verse poetry, is “a matter of artistic choice” writes Alan Golding (71). For Alan Helms, “far from operating as a peripheral part of a poet’s work,” punctuation “is central to our understanding of poetic meaning because of its ability to influence prosody” (177). “The unorthodox use of punctuation to increase the expressive complexity of literary texts still awaits its historian” says Gerald Janecek in an essay devoted to the Russian poet Gennadij Ajgi’s idiosyncratic use of the colon and hyphen. George Monteiro outlines the long-standing critical dispute regarding a comma or lack thereof in Robert Frost’s line “The woods are lovely, dark(,) and deep.” And most proverbial in English is Emily Dickinson’s idiosyncratic appropriation of the dash which has received its fair share critical attention.²

E. E. Cummings’s idiosyncratic use of language, including punctuation, is no less recognized than Dickinson’s.³ Among wide circles Cummings is best known as the poet who did not use capital letters, so much so that even his name is often spelled, to this day, in lowercase letters. In fact, as even a cursory look at his poetry or prose books reveals, Cummings did resort to capitalization, but he de-automatized

its usage by making of it a poetic choice. Such questioning of linguistic and other givens is usually associated with Modernism, within the general context of which Cummings is often placed. David Perkins, in his *History of Modern Poetry*, situates Cummings among a group of poets whom he characterizes as “modern poets of Romantic sensibility” (9). Considered part of the Modernist avant-garde in the 1920s when he published his first three books of poetry, Perkins maintains that Cummings derived his style from the earlier phases of Modernism of the 1910s, with a particular emphasis on the Imagist movement, early Pound, Dada, modern painting, and its theorizations (45, 37). Barry A. Marks notes some of Cummings’s linguistic techniques, fragmentation and recombination of words and syllables, in connection to “a realistic impulse” shared by a group of twentieth-century artists “to break through conventional perspectives”: “He broke off lines in the middle of words; placed the first syllable of a word at the beginning of a poem and the last at the end; . . . used verbs, adverbs, and adjectives as though they were nouns; used nouns as though they were verbs” (94, 100).

Cummings’s use of typographical units is even more experimental than his word-coinage and syntactical distortion (Friedman, *Art* 88). Michael Webster makes the crucial point that Cummings “manipulates spatial, visual and syntactical elements of language as *material*, creating physical effects on the page” (120). Cummings, like quite a few modernist contemporaries, objectified language and even committed what we might call organized acts of violence against it. But this is violence with a cause, as Cummings’s linguistic innovations and typography serve poetic means within his philosophy. Theodore Spencer is accurate when he writes that through his typography Cummings “wants to control the reading of the poem as much as he can, so that to the reader, as to the poet, there will be the smallest possible gap between the experience and its expression” (120). Gorham Munson, writing as early as in the 1920s when Cummings was just at the beginning of his career, already realized that “Cummings makes punctuation and typography active instruments for literary expression” (10). The operative word here is *active*, action, process, and movement being prized concepts in the Cummings metaphysics. Norman Friedman highlights Cummings’s “obsession” with Making: “Experimental technique is the means whereby the poet tries to reproduce in the reader’s mind the vital flux of becoming which he (the poet) sees in life” (*Growth* 49). Something of this spirit is revealed by Richard Cureton when he says that “Perceptual immediacy for Cummings was not just an aesthetic principle: it was a central theme of his art” (“Iconic Syntax” 184).⁴

Punctuation, E. A. Levenston teaches us, is a physical aspect of the text, and together with other physical aspects as typeface, layout, and spelling, participates in the creation of meaning, and “provide[s] additional information not directly available from the flow of speech” (63-65). It would come as little surprise, then, that in accordance with his penchant for linguistic estrangement, typographical play, and the creation of movement and experience, Cummings found punctuation a particularly rich arena. As available linguistic material and poetic repository Cummings made full use of the entire range of semantic, physical, and conceptual contexts punctuation participates in creating. And among the various punctuation marks none has been more explored, used, and abused by Cummings than parentheses. The overwhelmingly vast majority of Cummings’s hundreds of poems include parentheses in any number of forms.⁵ Cummings *is* the unparalleled poet of parentheses, and the parentheses are for Cummings an extraordinarily prized poetic device, granting us a unique test case of punctuational appropriation.

The exploitation of parentheses is not Cummings’s invention and has been the topic of a breathtakingly vast and thorough research by John Lennard, who makes the distinction between parenthesis the mark of punctuation and parentheses the grammatical category by referring to the punctuation marks as *lunulae* (“little moons”). Lennard traces the parentheses from their earliest known instance in a scribal manuscript from 1399, concentrating most on exploitation in verse from the Elizabethan times up to Modernism, including illuminating discussions of Marvell, Pope, Coleridge, Byron, Browning, Eliot, and many others.⁶ This research is particularly helpful in showing us the development of the device and how its historic use relates to the cultural context of the time. But no poet, from Shakespeare to Modernism, has used it more thoroughly or more innovatively than Cummings, nor has anyone made of it such a central part in their poetics.

What is the status of parentheses outside of poetic contexts? Contemporary or near-contemporary punctuation handbooks can provide part of the answer, a *communis opinio*. Besides their more formal and minor functions of enclosing serial numbers or letters and page references, parentheses are said to primarily enclose “incidental explanatory matter” (Summey, *American Punctuation* 107). Parentheses are normally used as the punctuation marks for separating a phrase when it “Acts as an opinion, identification, or explanation,” whereas dashes are used to achieve more drama (Lauther, *Complete Punctuation Thesaurus of the English Language* 122). Similarly the *Thesaurus* applies the same rule to when one whole sentence interrupts the other: “when the interruption acts more like a side comment, where an opinion, identifying information, or explanation is quickly provided, encasing it

within parentheses [and not dashes] is more acceptable" (172). Both sources attribute the same sense of secondary importance to material within parentheses, *American Punctuation* saying that "parentheses seem to say 'here it is if you wish it; it's only an aside'" (107), the *Thesaurus* mentioning that parentheses encase "what might otherwise be called 'throwaway information' — that which usually interrupts and would not be missed at all if removed" (289). Robert Grant Williams makes the forceful point thus: "For many handbooks . . . the parenthesis signifies dead text, an appendage to the work which is neither vital nor functional, an appendix which instead of contributing to organic unity only stores toxic waste . . . the intrusive adjunct which readers quickly skim over to return to live text" (57).

This is just a point of departure, but it is an important one. Cummings's poetry will make straight use of, subvert, and altogether transcend this common-sensical use in various directions. Cummings has plucked two keys from the typewriter and from the linguistic code: "(" and")." His usage echoes their original place on the typewriter, their historical usage, and their potentiality in ways never before actualized. In the remainder of this essay I wish to show this and demonstrate the ways in which Cummings appropriates this punctuation. I have divided Cummings's uses of parentheses into seven categories according to the functioning within the poem. The examples I give for each category are what I consider good and/or interesting representatives of the function throughout Cummings's career; other poetic examples can be found throughout the Cummings corpus per each of these categories.⁷

Category 1: Iconicity

Cummings, unlike the Dadaists, "does not attempt to *replace* traditional linguistic utterance but to *modify* and *enhance* it," claims Martin Heusser, and to that effect he "makes particularly apt use of the iconic dimensions inherent in the typography" (19). Indeed Cummings explored iconicity in many aspects of language, and when dealing with his use of parentheses the most rudimentary examples are those that draw on its graphic shape. The poem "windows go orange in the slowly." (*Complete Poems* 103) ends with the words of the moon:⁸

(ta-te-ta
in a parenthesis!said the moon

)

The closing parenthesis, visually foregrounded because it occupies an entire line, is aligned in opposition to preceding lines, and ends the poem, is read by Kidder

as a picture of the crescent moon (47). Similarly, Webster (124-5) finds another instance of using the parenthesis not only to suggest the moon, but actually as a substitution for the word moon itself, in *CP* 571:

who
is
the

)

Webster finds two more iconic uses of the parenthesis: the edges of a pond (*CP* 99) and swooping shapes of birds (*CP* 448) (119-120, 123). The poem “sh estiff” (*CP* 444) describes an act of striptease, read by Marks as obscene rather than artful, with the girl revealing herself at the end as a mere “it” or inhuman: The empty parentheses at the end emphasize this point — they are empty, an image of nothingness, like her (82-83).

seethe firm swirl hips whirling climb to
GIVE
(yoursmine mineyours yoursmine
!
i(t)

But these fairly straight usages are limited, bound by the limited representational potential of the parenthesis mark itself.⁹ A more suggestive exploitation can be found in Cummings’s sonnet “i carry your heart with me(i carry it in” (*CP* 766), which might be said to validate Karen Alkalay-Gut’s observation that in Cummings’s writings on love the self “is often perceived as being fulfilled as an individual only through the existence of some complementary lover” (256).

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done
by only me is your doing,my darling)

i fear
no fate(for you are myfate, my sweet)i want
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)
and it’s you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

The speaker expresses his feelings throughout the poem via the titles he bestows upon the lover, all in the possessive: my dear, my darling, my sweet, my world, my true. His affection is bound up with the connection between them, not only to her being his, but also through her reverberation of everything that happens to him: wherever he goes she goes, whatever he does is her doing, his fate is hers, and her world is his. The central, repeating metaphor “i carry your heart with me(i carry it in / my heart)” is the peak of this connection.

The additions of parentheses in the poem act primarily to physically realize the metaphor, as every part of what the speaker says carries with it a parenthesized appendage. The poem is in fact an on-going series of statements that are alternately outside and then inside parentheses. Each statement is immediately followed and accompanied by a parallel statement inside parentheses, literalizing that the speaker is “never without” her. Thus we have “carry” both in and out of parentheses, time outside parentheses (“never”) and space inside (“anywhere”), “fate” and “world” both inside and out, then three full lines outside parentheses followed perfectly by three full lines inside them.

But the parentheses act out the metaphor of her existence inside his heart even more: in the parentheses of the second quatrain it is the “you” who is in the parentheses whereas it is the “i” who is the subject of the sentences outside. In that sense the parentheses are also a typographical icon of the speaker’s heart which she is in. Like her heart is inside his heart, so are the parentheses inside the poem (inside and in-between his words), and so are the words relating to her inside the parentheses. The phrase “the root of the root and the bud of the bud / and the sky of the sky” further plays on this theme of containment. This phrase is itself within parentheses which in this case add another layer thus deepening the “deepest secret” the phrase introduces. The first and last sentences of the poem are almost identical, creating in their repetition an additional frame for the poem, repeating the notion of encapsulation. The point of her heart being “with me” has been so clearly demonstrated, actualized, and radicalized throughout the poem, that it is omitted from the last line of the poem.¹⁰ Finally, the first and last lines enact a prosodic frame for the sonnet, with a chiasmic relationship between the number of syllables in and out of the parentheses: seven and five in the first line, five and seven in the last.¹¹

Category 2: Protection and Intimacy

In this category we are considering how the physical delimiting, enclosing, encircling attribute of parentheses placed around a text is used to engender conceptual

/p/ in *prurient*, *pinched*, *poked*, the scientists by the assonance in *naughty*, *thumb*, *prodded*, and religion by the assonantal /i:/ in *scraggy*, *knees*, *squeezing* and *conceive*. Unlike the physical actions of the three forces (pinching, poking, prodding, squeezing) earth's rebuttal is, in the spirit of Cummings, transcendental. Connecting alliteratively back to the first line, spring's nonviolent and delicate conduct is aptly emphasized by its inclusion in the unassuming parentheses.¹²

The anti-war poem "my sweet old etcetera" (CP 275) uses the second pair of parentheses in a similar way to that of "O sweet spontaneous," though here it is the world of dreams, hope, and love rather than earth that is in need of separation (I address the first pair later).

my sweet old etcetera
 aunt lucy during the recent
 war could and what
 is more did tell you just
 what everybody was fighting
 for,
 my sister
 isabel created hundreds
 (and
 hundreds)of socks not to
 mention shirts fleaproof earmuffs
 etcetera wrists etcetera,my
 mother hoped that
 i would die etcetera
 bravely of course my father used
 to become hoarse talking about how it was
 a privilege and if only he
 could meanwhile my
 self etcetera lay quietly
 in the deep mud et
 cetera
 (dreaming,
 et
 cetera,of
 Your smile
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

The poem is clear in dramatizing the harsh reality: while the speaker "lay quietly / in the deep mud" his family talk about the war (aunt, father), engage in meaningless

and unhelpful activities (sister), or even hope he dies (mother), though with the deferred enjambed qualification “bravely.” But through attuning to the parentheses I would suggest that the contrast in the heart of the poem is ultimately not of the reality of a soldier’s life on the front with the views of his family back home (as Kidder suggests, 72-73), but rather the contrast of reality in its entirety with the possibility of dream. “dreaming,” the first word inside the second pair of parentheses, suggests transcending harsh reality into a better existence. This alternative state, accessed while “dreaming,” is qualitatively separate from reality and is marked by the protection of the parentheses as being more fragile. Notice that unlike in the previous poem where the parenthesis coincided with and thus reinforced an already existing strong syntactical break, here the opening parenthesis enforces a break between the main part of the sentence and its modifying participial phrase, playing a much more salient role in parsing the poem and marking a conceptual separateness. This is also the first time in the poem where as opposed to “my . . . / aunt lucy,” “my sister / isabel,” “my mother,” “my father,” and with them “my / self,” we are introduced to a capitalized *Your*. The poem ends with the recurring word etcetera, its marked capitalization fixing upon it a sexual referent, a mischievous dream within the dream.

A much later poem, “(fea” (*CP* 653), is the only poem in the Cummings corpus that is enclosed entirely within parentheses. The parentheses here too can be said to act as projecting a sense of protection, as if the “feather-rain” is so light and delicate it needs to be completely sealed off from without. A central attribute of the feather or the rain is softness. We must go inside the protected world that is created by the parentheses if we want to read about or feel this softness. Marks points out the fragmentation of the word “soft” in the fourth stanza to be intensifying because it lends itself to be read as “so soft” and understands the two exclamation points surrounding the “f” as an acoustic invitation to sound out the letter “f” whose sound becomes a metaphor for the meaning of softness (101). Another function seems to me to be similar to that of the parentheses: surrounding the letter “f” which is as light and feathery as the rain or as the very concept of softness. It is a double protection as we are already inside one layer, created by the hug of the parentheses at the beginning and end.

(fea
 therr
 ain

 :dreamin
 g field o

ver forest&
 wh
 o could
 be
 so
 !f!
 te
 r?n
 oo
 ne)

Besides separating in an attempt to protect or to convey the sense of a need for protection, as has been the case in the previous poems, parentheses through their delineation of a separate space also create intimacy. Their protective capabilities and their understated status allow for something more intimate, secretive, or delicate to be put in them. One of Cummings's famous poems, "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" (*CP* 367), provides an example of parentheses used as intimacy creators. The lyric, which consists of five four-line stanzas, parenthesizes the three first lines of the last stanza (I leave the first pair of parentheses for consideration later):

somewhere i have never travelled gladly beyond
 any experience,your eyes have their silence:
 in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
 or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
 though i have closed myself as fingers,
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
 (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and
 my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
 as when the heart of this flower imagines
 the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
 the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
 compels me with the colour of its countries,
 rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
 and opens; only something in me understands
 the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
 nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

The poem is predicated upon the paradoxical minimalist axiom “less is more”: the more subtle her gesture, the bigger the effect on the speaker; the slighter the look, the stronger the impact. The parentheses draw attention to the last stanza, differentiating it from the rest, and with this they complement our expectation of the special significance of endings. Here the parentheses protect the last stanza, the stanza in which lays the most intimate material of all in an already intimate poem. Almost “too near” to be communicated, this summit of intimacy is the speaker’s admission of epistemological failure after an entire poem of trying to explain her influence on him. The parentheses help maximize a sense of intimacy, as if the speaker is sharing a secret. They also affect the tone, lowering it almost to the point of whispering.¹³ The parenthesized material is so intimate, secretive, and delicate that it is hard to imagine it said outside the protection afforded by the parentheses.

The double function of the parentheses is never more evident than here: they protect the intimate confessional material and simultaneously intensify the intimacy of the material simply because it is enclosed in them. It is here that we also encounter the paradoxical effect of the parentheses themselves, not unlike the paradoxical effect the addressee has on the speaker. Though parentheses make the enclosed material seem incidental, an aside, *American Punctuation* notes that “such an aside may be intended for special notice — like many a remark that begins with the disarming by the way or incidentally” (107). The parentheses, which are often thought of as carrying an aside, become for Cummings carriers precisely of the most prized. Curiously, there is an historical dimension to this privileging of parentheses. Lennard shows that from Elizabethan times parentheses have had an emphatic function too, a supposed contradiction to their assumed status today: “there is nothing in principle or practice to prevent them from being as inevitably emphatic as a box drawn around an item on a list” (36, 5). But here it is their status as throwaway digressions that is the background against which Cummings’s subtle emphatic function operates.

Category 3: Direct Address

The delineated, privileged space between parentheses is a textual site that Cummings often uses for purposes of creating intimacy between his speaker and an other, by way of direct address. When cues as to the identity of the addressee are kept to a minimum the addressee can be understood as the reader herself. The “fourth wall” is replaced by the parenthetical walls and ontological instability is ensued. David Johnson, in an article on the effect of suspension dots, parentheses and italics on the lyricism of “Song of Myself” points to this also, in saying that the pieces of

information within the parentheses “when directed toward the audience, create an intimacy between narrator and listener” (55). Lennard shows how Byron uses parentheses to mark this mode when he “reaches forward from his page to tap the reader on the shoulder” and notes that vocatives were a conventional use of parentheses (160, 19).

A deceptively simple example of this function can be found in the short poem “of all things under our” (*CP* 825):

of all things under our
 blonder than blondest star

 the most mysterious
 (eliena,my dear)is this

 — how anyone so gay
 possibly could die

Here the parentheses include only the three addressing words: “eliena,my dear.” However, as we find out at the very end of the poem, eliena is dead and so this is an apostrophe rather than a naive question addressed to someone or concerning “anyone.” It is as if the speaker wishes to postpone as much as he can the reality of her death — until the very last word of the poem and not before. Her death dawns on us unexpectedly, and little or anything in previous lines prepares us. The appearance of eliena inside the parentheses has the effect of bringing her alive, a distinct second-person ontology amidst first- (“our”) and third-person (“anyone”) positions. Dead outside of parentheses and still living inside them, the parenthesized and nonparenthesized contents are thus at acute odds.¹⁴

If in “of all things under our” entering the parenthetical space is entering a higher level of engagement with the poem’s subject — from general contemplation to direct address — how can parentheses function in a poem built entirely as an address? In “up into the silence the green” (*CP* 529) the parentheses differentiate between mere addressing and its more intense form, an imperative.

up into the silence the green
 silence with a white earth in it

 you will(kiss me)go

 out into the morning the young
 morning with a warm world in it

 (kiss me)you will go

 on into the sunlight the fine
 sunlight with a firm day in it

you will go(kiss me
 down into your memory and
 a memory and memory
 i)kiss me(will go)

The poem is carefully built of alternating two-line and single-line stanzas. As are many Cummings poems, the poem is highly repetitious. The first three two-line stanzas are built similarly, emphasizing the addressee's departure from the speaker, going "up into the silence," "out into the morning," and "on into the sunlight." The first three single-line stanzas consist of exactly the same words, "you will go," with the position of the interpolated parenthetical imperative "kiss me" changed. Grammatically, a two-line and single-line stanza together form a unit (sentence), though with the standard order inverted, moving from the complement (where you will go) to the subject and verb (you will go). Another reversal can be found in the places the "you" will go to. "silence with a white earth in it" is the reversal of the seemingly more logical "earth with silence in it," and similarly, "morning with a warm world in it" and "sunlight with a firm day in it" have the same container-contained switch. The "kiss me" request, an intimate plea from speaker to addressee, is an undercurrent present throughout the poem, and its interruption or supposed misplacement only strengthens its intensity.

The last pair of a two-line and single-line stanzas differs from the preceding three pairs: the subject here shifts from "you" to "i," the up-beat prepositions related to her going ("up," "out," "on") are replaced by "down," and unlike in previous couplets here the second line of the couplet does not add new elements to those in the first line, but rather repeats what was said in it: "a memory and memory," showing, perhaps, the irrelevance of this memory. As opposed to his love the speaker will only be going *down* into his love's memory. A final reversal to complete previous ones we find in the last line, related to the parentheses: unlike the three other single lines, here "kiss me" are precisely the only words *outside* of parentheses. The speaker is by now already forgotten, and so parenthesized, diminished in relevance. With his fear of being forgotten now more urgent if not desperate, his plea "kiss me" is let out of the confinement of the parentheses.

Category 4: Plural Layers and Framed Poems

Parentheses provide a dual status to the material in them: it is part of the whole text (it is on the same page and part of the same poem) but also separate. The separation is not complete or total, and this allows for many interesting manipulations which will hinge upon the question of textual autonomy: how independent is the

parenthesized material and how dependent? In this category parentheses are not used to create a protective shield around delicate content or to signal a part of the text for subordination or superordination. Rather, they are used to interlink two different sections of the text, causing them to exist simultaneously in isolation and in interaction. Etienne Terblanche points to this very capacity when she shows that parenthesizing six lines in the Shakespearean sonnet “i thank You God for most this amazing” signals the Petrarchan sonnet structure lurking behind (11-13). In “Spring(side)” (*CP* 436), for example, the parentheses delineate two whole parts, both independent and interrelated. Are these two parts, the parts inside and the parts outside of the parentheses independent from each other? It is exactly this tension between their making sense separately and being typographically as well as thematically intertwined that is at play here, like two poems melted into each other, or two layers of the same poem.¹⁵

Spring(side
 walks are)is
 most(window where blaze

 naLOVEme
 crazily
 ships

 bulge hearts by
 darts pierced lazily writhe
 lurch faceflowers stutter
 treebodies wobbly-

 ing thing
 -birds)sing-
 u
 (cities are houses
 people are flies who

 buzz on)-lar(window called sidewalks
 of houses called cities)spring
 most singular-
 ly(cities are houses are)is(are owned

 by a m- by
 a -n by a
 -oo-

 is old as
 the jews are a moon is

 as round as)Death

Reading inside the parenthesized layer we easily pick up the conceit CITIES = HOUSES. This metaphor is repeated and elaborated: if a city is a house, its sidewalks are the house windows, and the people walking are the flies buzzing on the window. The nonparenthesized layer is made up of another metaphor, less elaborate but more surprising: Spring most singularly is Death. Each layer is split though when followed systematically makes independent sense. But a closer look at the stitches between the two layers, stitches marked by the parentheses, underscores the connection between them. In the first line of the second stanza and in the last line of the sixth stanza the parentheses separate two verbs — “are” inside parentheses and “is” just beside it but on the outside. This highlights the contrast between the singularity that is the topic of the parenthesized layer in contradistinction with the plurality of the nonparenthesized. The placement of parentheses in the poem’s third line vaguely allows for us to read “most windows,” even though “most” is a part of the sentence outside and “windows” is a continuation of the sentence that began in the first pair of parentheses. Likewise, the second line of the fifth stanza has a parenthesis separating what could have been one sentence: *birds sing*, a point where the two layers temporarily merge. And finally, the very last word of the poem belongs both in and out of the parentheses, as it completes the sentence “spring most singularly is Death,” but can also supply the parenthesized fragment “a moon is / as round as” with an ending. These instances — in which the parenthesized and nonparenthesized materials “meet” — gesture towards a third layer, that of the poem as a whole. The organizational principle of expanding from one-line to five-line stanzas then contracting back enhances this layer, creating Gestalt integrity for the whole poem. The third line of the fifth stanza, the geometrical center of the poem, signals itself as such typographically.

A favorite technique of Cummings is to create a parenthesized layer that frames the nonparenthesized one, rather than intertwine the two throughout the poem as in “Spring(side.” In these framed poems there is a single closing parenthesis that detaches something at the beginning of the poem and then a single opening parenthesis detaching material close to the poem’s end.¹⁶ The poem “mortals”)” (*CP* 536) describing circus aerialists is built around one example of these inverted parentheses, an example whose internal logic is explicated by Cummings himself in a letter to Leta Hannan dated October 31 1958 (for the letter see *Selected Letters* 258-9 or Kidder 151): “These extraordinary creatures (= the aerialists) . . . appear together on the tanbark as mere ‘mortals’ . . . but then . . . transformed from ‘mortals’ into ‘im’ mortals because they risked their lives to create something beautiful.”

mortals)
 climbi
 ng i
 nto eachness begi
 n
 dizzily
 swingthings
 of speeds of
 trapeze gush somersaults
 open ing
 hes shes
 &meet&
 swoop
 fully is are ex
 quisite theys of re
 turn
 a
 n
 d
 fall which now drop who all dreamlike
 (im

It is this process of turning from regular mortals into immortals, to which the rest of the poem, in many ways a “picture poem,” is dedicated. The word “climbi / ng” is arranged to present stairs for climbing, the acrobats’ “re / turn” is realized by the way the second part of the word returns to the beginning of the line after drifting so much to the right, and the perpendicular arrangement of the word “a / n / d” demonstrates the way the acrobats “fall” and “drop.” Another Cummings trait is coining neologisms, like “eachness,” the admired state the acrobats achieve. This idea is reiterated three other times in the poem, by the words “hes shes,” the word “theys,” and the juxtaposing of the verbs “is are.”

It is not at all certain that the reader will initially pay due attention to the poem’s parenthetical frame. Reading linearly, while disregarding the parenthesis in the first line, “mortals” is simply the subject of “climbing,” the agents of the life risking activities depicted (the risk being compounded by the reference to mortality). The parenthesis after mortals can bear to be disregarded. The final parenthesis cannot, however, be ignored, as there is no way to connect the word “dreamlike” to “im.” Puzzled by the seemingly incomprehensible “im” we acrobatically “glue” it back into the first word of the poem, (re)creating the parenthesized layer. This corresponds to the actions of the acrobats themselves, as Cummings explains in the same letter: “Finally they all disappear into the place from which they appeared; just

Category 5: Heteroglossia and Interpolation

When the parentheses are used to host an address they can become a locus of ontological shift (category 3). But parentheses are oftentimes used by Cummings to echo epistemological uncertainty as well. That parentheses create an entity which is separate and also part of the rest of the text has been used by Cummings as we have seen both in its physical aspect (category 1) and in its more symbolic aspect (category 4). Epistemological plurality occurs, though, when the entity which the parentheses help create is a different “voice.” Perkins distinguishes three cases: “parentheses may indicate an interpolated thought or an utterance in a different tone of voice or by a different speaker” (45). One poem in which this function is at use is ““but why should”” (*CP* 738):

“but why should”
 the
 greatest
 of
 living magicians(whom
 you and I
 some
 times call
 april)must often
 have
 wondered
 “most
 people be quite
 so(when flowers)in
 credibly
 (always are beautiful)
 ugly”

More interesting technically than thematically, the main difficulty the poem poses is on the level of speaker differentiation. Due attention to quotation marks helps distinguish two speakers. The first, an embedded, quoted speaker is *april*, “the greatest of living magicians,” whose speech appears at the beginning and end of the poem. Between these two places speaks the primary speaker, the poem’s “i.” But these two speakers, two voices, are carefully fused together in three main ways: First, the primary speaker’s speech is embedded in april’s speech (in a reversal of its diegetic status). Second, there is potential grammatical continuity between

the two speakers, as we can read the first few lines as a single sentence: “but why should the greatest of living magicians. . . .” And finally, the sixth stanza, starting “have,” hosts both speakers, making it very easy indeed to miss the return back to april’s words. The presence of other participants in this short poem makes this problem of identities even stronger: the reader/listener is present through an address to a “you” (created by the first pair of parentheses in a way described in category 3), as are magicians and “most people.” Cureton maintains that Cummings fuses syntactical constructions for representing fusion as theme (“Iconic Syntax” 199-201). I would claim that in this poem too the fused grammar (the second way in which the speakers are fused which I mention above) is thematically purposeful, showing the fusion of the two identities, and hinting at the possibility that they are one of the same. april’s personification (talking, wondering) and the various ways of intertwining the two speakers — all open up the possibility that april is no more than a projection of the speaker’s own thoughts.¹⁷

But what of the second and third pairs of parentheses in the poem’s penultimate stanza? Containing the fragment “when flowers always are beautiful” they perform a radicalization of the fusion between the two speakers or identities. Are these the words of april or of the speaker? Their being part of the quote, indeed inside april’s discourse, suggests that april is their speaker. Nevertheless they are distinct from april’s words, both because of the parentheses and because they do not grammatically fit in the sequence of the sentence. This, therefore, supports the view that they are insights entered by the primary speaker, whether echoing his own notions of flowers or rhetorically entering april’s mind and arguing on april’s behalf. So the parenthesized material is a microscopic epitome of the fusing identities existent throughout, and through it we are invited to see that there is barely a discrepancy between the two speakers’ voices or identities.

The short poem “pieces(in darker” (*CP* 623) has two pairs of parentheses, and quantitatively most of the poem is parenthesized. While the first pair interpolates an ungrammatical sentence between “pieces” and its complement “of mirror,” the second pair’s interpolative act is more daring.

pieces(in darker
 than small is dirtiest
 any city’s least
 street)of mirror

lying are each(why
 do people say it’s un
 lucky to break one)

whole with sky

Here there is only one speaker though the words or voice of others are echoed in the parenthesized material in the second stanza. The parentheses function rather like in their formal conventional way, allowing for what “people say” to be included, but in a “by the way” manner. The pace of reading these parentheses is probably made faster because we are so accustomed to parentheses being only an aside. Their inclusion in an awkward place in the middle of the sentence — after “are each” and before “whole with sky” — encourages further acceleration of their reading pace because of our cognitive pressure to complete the sense and the sentence. Content-wise the proverbial wisdom expressed within the parentheses is essentially opposed to the view expressed by the speaker. Appreciating the aesthetics of the broken pieces of mirror reflecting the sky, it seems that the parenthesized material here is a rhetorical device. The speaker’s claim gains strength by the inclusion of a popular opposing belief, and by mentioning it only in parentheses it portrays this belief as being of parenthetical importance, almost to the point of ridicule.

Johnson remarks that “when the narrator adds information, simply as an aside — addressing no one in particular — an . . . introspection of the speaker is revealed” (55). This has to do with the secrecy afforded by the physical shape of parentheses, but also with their assumed status as including mere digressions. The parenthetical question and answer in the middle of “nothing is more exactly terrible than” that we considered at the end of the previous category is a nice exemplification. This is a place where the speaker cuts off his continuous discourse and offers a reflexive comment on the events, and on his own discourse. Likewise, the opening stanza of the poem “he does not have to feel because he thinks” (*CP* 406) shows how the parenthesized inner “voice” of the speaker follows his nonparenthesized voice like a shadow, casting doubt on what is being said or contemplated. Each statement about the “he” is followed by a counter, more negative one:

he does not have to feel because he thinks
 (the thoughts of others, be it understood)
 he does not have to think because he knows
 (that anything is bad which you think good)

Again, it is the parenthesized statements that are used to give the impression of more loyally portraying the “true” thoughts, or “true” voice, of the speaker. The parentheses not only enable plural identities to exist and be heard in one poem (the voice of the people and the voice of the speaker in “pieces(in darker”), but also enable plural voices of the same speaker. That parentheses have been conventionally used to reflect doubt, as Lennard shows (25), is precisely in par with this sophisticated self-deprecating tone.

Category 6: Subverting Formal Expectations

In parentheses Cummings finds a rich field to generate effects by playing off the reader's expectations. We have seen how he foregrounds their typography, uses them to enclose the most intimate material or no material at all, and inverts them. The boundaries between the material inside and outside the parentheses have also been shown to be flexible and tentative. Here I wish to consider three latent expectations that parentheses evoke and Cummings's subversion of them for specific poetic goals and a general tendency to "make it new." For one, there is an obvious expectation that the parentheses signal *something*, which amounts to saying that treating them as transparent and reading through them is a subversion of an expectation.¹⁸ But oftentimes in Cummings there is grammatical continuity between the material outside and inside the parentheses, with the effect of encouraging a temporary disregard of them, followed (usually) by an amended reading that takes them into fuller account. Going back to one of the poems we discussed in category 3, we can see this in action:

up into the silence the green
 silence with a white earth in it

 you will(kiss me)go

We have read "kiss me" as a separate, imperative sentence, but given the words preceding it the sentence gestures towards another reading: "you will kiss me." This second, hoped for meaning, is ultimately forsaken upon arrival at the verb "go," though its shadow lingers. Though punctuation's "primary function is to resolve structural uncertainties in a text," Cummings uses parentheses here similarly to the way Irene Fairley claims he uses syntax: to expand possible meaning relationships and ambiguity (208). It is precisely an attribute of the parenthesis, dimly obtrusive, present and absent, that facilitates such amphibologic functioning.

Another expectation is that the material in the parentheses, whatever its level of importance vis-à-vis the text it is embedded in, will nevertheless add something to that text. This is so obvious it barely requires articulation. But what happens when the material inside the parentheses is identical to that outside? Such is the case in the first set of parentheses in the poem "my sweet old etcetera" which we discussed in category 2:

my sister

 isabel created hundreds
 (and
 hundreds)of socks not to
 mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

One way to fully gauge the impact of the parentheses around “and hundreds” is to imagine the poem without them. It is quite plausible that the text would simply read “isabel created hundreds and hundreds of socks.” What, then, is gained by adding the parentheses? The answer is related to our expectation for added content upon entering them, an expectation that is enhanced in this case by the strong enjambment that gives special weight to the word following “and.” What we find, rather, is an exact repetition of what we just read outside the parentheses: hundreds. The failure to meet the expectation for something new works here to stress the meaninglessness and emptiness of the sister’s gestures: the hundreds of clothes amount to nothing.

Finally, an even more basic expectation related to the parenthesis is that there are two: an opening and a closing one. When our eyes meet an opening parenthesis we switch to a different mode of reading and breathlessly await its closing counterpart. This expectation is manipulated by Cummings in quite a few of his poems. One such example is the sonnet “a blue woman with sticking out breasts hanging” (*CP* 216):

a blue woman with sticking out breasts hanging
clothes. On the line. not so old
for the mother of twelve undershirts(we are told
by is it Bishop Taylor who needs hanging
that marriage is a sure cure for masturbation).

A dirty wind,twitches the,clothes which are clean
— this is twilight,
a little puppy hopping between
skipping
children
(It is the consummation
of day,the hour)she says to me you big fool
she says i says to her i says Sally
i says
the

mmmoon,begins to,drool
softly,in the hot alley,
a nigger’s voice feels curiously cool
(suddenly-Lights go!on,by schedule

Putting aside questions of stereotyping and representation, one can conjecture about the relationship between the speaker and the “blue woman,” a mother of twelve “undershirts.” At first the speaker seems an omniscient extra-diegetic depicter,

not part of the scene he is describing. The first pair of parentheses engage him somewhat through a creation of a “we,” but immediately after the second pair his involvement increases dramatically. We are suddenly and abruptly brought into their conversation whose manifest content becomes more and more sexually oriented through his Sally-ing, the drooling of the moon, and the “hot alley” juxtaposed with the “curiously cool” voice. In the last line something else happens “suddenly,” and the relative darkness of twilight is now exposed by the “Lights,” possibly the morning sun, coming “by schedule” after the “mmmoon” has drooled its way to disappearing. What will happen now is unknown, and we are left in the midst of much suspension. The parenthesis of the last line separates the on-going narrative from the sudden occurrence, but moreover acts to lend a sense of suspense by the fact that the closing parenthesis, and the feeling of closure that comes with it, are denied.¹⁹

Category 7: Temporality, Simultaneity, Tmesis

Finally, I would like to consider the temporal dimension of parentheses. One aspect, detected by Cureton, regards the first pair of parentheses in a poem discussed earlier:

your slightest look easily will unclose me
 though i have closed myself as fingers,
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
 (touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose

The verb “opens,” which ends the third line of the stanza, “waits” for its object. By this postponing of verb completion, Cureton explains, Cummings “prolongs the durative action expressed by *open*” (“Iconic Syntax” 204). Indeed all parentheses incorporated as subordinate material to a main text cause a stretch, but the ultimate effect has to do with the poetic context. In the following example, taken again from a poem we have already looked at for different categories, the prolongation engendered by the parenthesized alliterative and repetitive material is harnessed to create suspense:

slightly i am hearing somebody
 coming up stairs,carefully
 (carefully climbing carpeted flight after
 carpeted flight. in stillness,climbing
 the carpeted stairs of terror)
 and continually i am seeing something

In addition to “carefully” which repeats itself across the parenthesis à la category 6, the parenthetical material suspends the progression of the narrative, in iconic temporal correspondence to the prolonged duration of stair climbing.

Often with Cummings a single word is split and is interpolated by another word, fragment, or even an entire poem, as in “mortal).” Such tmesis can have various effects, but fragmenting and interpolating the fragmented has the specific effect of producing simultaneity, a kind of atemporal temporality. As Levenston astutely writes: “simultaneity of perception in time can best be represented by interpenetration in space” (26). The crucial point here is that the integrity of the fragmented material has to be maintained to a degree for the effect to work, and parentheses are a prized device to achieve this controlled fragmentation. Sometimes they are used to expose a word within a word, as when “he” is shown to be hiding in “where,” itself part of “nowhere” (*CP* 606):

r
 olle
 d i

 nt

 o
 n
 o

 w(he)re

Besides an iconic representation of the act of hiding, surrounding “he” multiplies the possible readings and opens the door for yet others: in addition to *rolled into nowhere*, also *rolled into now*, *into he*, *into here*, *into where*. In a kind of Poundian Image (presenting, we remember, “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”) transferred to the physical realm of the words themselves, these possibilities are presented by the parentheses as locked together, existing all at the same time. In pointing to the *he* embedded in *where* Cummings also performs what might be called an essentializing act, hinting that *he* is purposefully part of *where* rather than arbitrarily so.²⁰

At other times parentheses split a prefix from the rest of the word to create a pun, as Friedman insightfully shows, saying that “one world is disappearing and another is appearing to take its place” in *CP* 348 (*Art* 116-17):

the
 how
 dis(appeared cleverly)world

 iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG
 !

Or, parentheses are used to insert more elaborate content, forcing us, as Marks says of the following example from *CP* 195 “to hold in mind at the same time both the wheeling of the pigeons and their effect on the sunlight” (77):

pigeons fly ingand
 whee(:are,SpRiN,k,LiNg an in-stant with sunlight
 then)-
 ing all go BlacK wh-eel-ing

Thus far we have seen parentheses at work in many ways on the page. But what happens when a poem that contains them is read aloud? What happens to the visual simultaneity when it is transferred to the inevitably linear temporal realm of speech? A Caedmon collection of taped recordings of Cummings’s from 1953 to 1961 gives us the rare chance to listen to how one performer, Cummings himself, deals with this problem. Side A of the first cassette includes a reading of the satirical poem “a salesman is an it that stinks Excuse” (*CP* 549) which includes the following lines:

hat condoms education snakeoil vac
 uumcleaners terror strawberries democ
 ra(caveat emptor)cy superfluous hair

The third line is the most interesting in terms of the choice the performer must make, and in this recording Cummings chooses to read the line exactly as it is on the page, giving the parentheses pride of place: he reads the “democra” of “democracy,” halts for nearly two seconds, reads the parenthesized “caveat emptor,” then the remaining “cy” of “democracy.” However in other instances, when parentheses do not split up a word but rather include a fragment in a sentence, they hardly change the performance. Most of the examples we have analyzed belong to this group, and in Cummings’s own reading of “i carry your heart with me(i carry it in,” for example, there seems not to be any shift in the tone or pace of reading when he reads the parenthesized material (cassette 2, side D). This is a good reminder of the fact that parentheses are first and foremost signs of written language (Parkes 1) and do not have a necessary one-to-one vocal correspondent. But their effect on the conceptual tone, on the poem as read in the mind’s ear and by the eye, can hardly be overrated.

By Way of Conclusion

The 2004 editor of *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* joined a tradition of editors in overriding the poet’s original punctuation: “In order to make the poems more accessible to the eye of the modern reader, the oddities of punctuation and capitalization have been regularized in this edition” (xx). But if we concede that

“Punctuation can modify the emphases, and hence the ‘meaning’, embodied in a text, and has been used to communicate particular interpretations to readers” (Parkes 4), what are the implications of regularizing “the oddities of punctuation”? Working for the eye as well as for the ear, punctuation in poetry performs poetic tasks. It is no less or more odd than meter, rhyme scheme, or diction. When this punctuation, as is the case with both Dickinson and Cummings, originates with the author rather than a scribe, editor, or compositor, it is doubly crucial. Cummings’s poetic reliance on punctuation is unique in quantity and quality, but it is also prototypical of the role punctuation can and often does play in poetry. Tampering with it is no less significant than tampering with any other poetic device, and failing to give it due critical attention is failing to notice a highly significant, oftentimes crucial, component. Communicating an interpretation and subjecting itself to it, punctuation must be *read*, and read with no less critical attention than any of the other, more recognized, poetic devices.

Notes

¹ The second function is alternatively called “grammatical,” “syntactic,” or “logical” (Baron 23). Parkes treats these two functions as two different modes of analysis: grammatical and rhetorical (3-4). Borochofsky Bar-Aba, based on Ornam, categorizes the marks of punctuation somewhat differently, but similarly recognizes an “organizational role” and a “rhetorical role” (1032-33). Levenston provides a tripartite division, saying that “punctuation communicates in three distinct ways: phonological, grammatical, and semantic,” the latter, “astonishingly wide” ranged, being the information about meaning not signaled by grammar and/or phonology, as when a colon clarifies that what comes next is a list (64-65).

² On this see especially Miller (51-53), Denman, and of course Crumbley, who have all recognized the dash as a crucial poetic device for Dickinson.

³ In capitalizing Cummings’s name I follow Norman Friedman’s convincing evidence that this is the way Cummings himself intended his name to be written, unlike popular belief and usage (see Friedman, “Not ‘e. e. cummings’ Revisited”).

⁴ Rushworth Kidder has made the interesting point that Cummings’s admiration for feeling, intuition, and spontaneous responsiveness over rationalism and intellectual thought is paradoxical: “The fact is that Cummings uses logic, thought, and a great deal of calculated skill in writing poems which assert that feeling is first (8). The complex, sophisticated and subtle ways Cummings manifests this paradox is the topic of many of the researches reviewed by Guy Rotella, in spite of which he still makes the assertion in 1982 that Cummings’s “critical reputation . . . remains in doubt” (18-19). This might well be connected to Cureton’s grievance that

though critics have listed and classified Cummings's syntactic manipulations in his poems, "they have often been unable to motivate those manipulations in terms of Cummings's themes, to explain why Cummings resorted to those manipulations" ("Prenominal Modifiers" 64).

⁵ By this I am referring to the punctuation mark, and not to parenthetical expressions in general, expressions which can be enclosed by parentheses, dashes, or commas. *American Punctuation* defines parenthetical expression as a term that applies to "groups that interrupt the straight run of the sentence," and also to "loosely attached modifiers, to punctuated connective expressions, and to some expressions (Yes, No, True) that might be construed as amorphous sentence members" (60).

As for quantity of usage, of the 71 poems of *No Thanks*, for example, only 4 have no parentheses. Of the 54 poems in *IX1*, 12 have no parentheses. Of the 95 poems in *95 Poems*, only 7 lack parentheses. Though so prevalent in practice, critical accounts of this device are usually sporadic and ad hoc. In particular, Kidder notes the difficulty that parentheses pose for readers of Cummings's poems, and as one of seven rules for the process of "disentangling" Cummings's poems, he aptly suggests: "Treat parentheses carefully" (13). John Berryman, reviewing *95 Poems* in 1959, makes an explicit, insightful though hardly comprehensive reference to the poet's "obsession with parentheses" in that book. He notes simultaneity, inextricable relation, offhandedness and informality as part of the meaning, and adds: "I wonder whether they do not constitute also a sort of instinctive defense invoked by his talent against one of its worst faults, a hollow rhetoric" (91). David Perkins offers a rich and illuminating one-paragraph discussion of Cummings's use of the device, which has in condensed form many of the functions fleshed out here, though divided differently (44-45). Friedman writes that "Almost every poem that Cummings has written contains a parenthesis, but his use of the device is frequently quite conventional" (*Art* 116). I hope to prove him wrong.

⁶ Lennard's book progresses chronologically with a penultimate chapter on the "Modern Range," which includes, among other modern and contemporary poets, a few sporadic paragraphs on Cummings that do not do the poet's use of the device justice. On parentheses in Nabokov's *Lolita* see Duncan White. On parentheses in Borges, following Lennard's research, see Robin Fiddian. On parentheses in Charles Olson see Susan Vanderborg (25-30). For a poetic example of sustained use of nested parentheses see Raymond Roussel's 1932 *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*.

⁷ The following classification of parentheses' categories of usage is not meant to be exhaustive. Indeed, given the scope of Cummings's production, such a claim would be highly hyperbolic. Rather, I am here investigating what I consider to be the most interesting as well as prevalent usages.

⁸ This poem excerpt and all other poems and excerpts are reprinted from *Complete Poems 1904-1962* by E. E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage. © 1991 by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust and George James Firmage. With permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. *Complete Poems* is hereafter referred to as *CP*.

⁹ Lennard shows that earlier poets have also made fairly similar use of the typographical dimension, like Marvell in "The Definition of Love" where the parentheses form a "graphic conceit" with the word "plainsphere," and most notably Coleridge, who used them when trying to represent the special form of the moon he is depicting, the two crescent moons on both sides of disc forming a ring, in "Dejection: An Ode" (59-60, 130-34).

¹⁰ Richard Cureton names "inclusion" as a spatial icon: "Cummings often places a word or phrase in the middle of a larger syntactic unit in order to indicate the thematic inclusion of the referent of that word or phrase in some larger entity" ("Iconic Syntax" 192). Quite often, though by no means always, the physical representation of "inclusion" is achieved with the aid of parentheses, as in the example Cureton provides: "fits(my head)in your Brain" can be read as saying "my head fits in your brain" in which case the line visually portrays what it says (193).

¹¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this paper for suggesting this last point to me, as well as for making numerous insightful additional suggestions that have improved and enriched this paper.

¹² Barry Marks, in his discussion of the poem, remarks that the punctuation is "odd," but does not address the parentheses. He does, however, try to explain the comma at the beginning of the line ",has the naughty thumb," and one of the possibilities he provides is that it may be a "visual image" of the prurient philosopher's poke (70). This is an example of how other punctuation marks can work iconically. For illuminating examples of other marks of punctuation used iconically and otherwise in both poetry and prose by Joyce, Shakespeare, Sterne, and Cummings among others, see Levenston (66-78, and throughout).

¹³ David Johnson in a discussion of "Song of Myself" points out that "Depending on context, the speed with which we read the parenthetical material is either accelerated or slowed down; the tone is usually raised or lowered" (55). Alan Helms looks at an instance of parentheses in Robert Herrick and insists that "The parentheses are especially effective in retarding the voice" (179-80). Of course a physical tonal shift in the pace, timber, or amplitude of the voice of readers is subject to empirical verification that has not been attempted, but the idea that parentheses mark a boundary that is manifested, among other ways, in tone (whether actual, contemplated, or metaphorical) seems entirely plausible. More on this see in category 7.

¹⁴ There is another possibility: the placement of the parenthetical material in the sentence also allows for directly connecting eliena to “the most mysterious,” since if we disregard the first parenthesis “most mysterious” becomes a qualifier of her, and another layer of meaning is revealed. This is another function of parentheses, discussed under category 6.

¹⁵ I consider Cummings’s most famous poem, “l(a)” (*CP* 673) to be the prototypical exemplar of parentheses used as layer creators. For discussions of this poem, see Dilworth, Kidder (199-201), Marks (21-26), Williams (63-66), Cureton (“Visual Form” 265-66), and Friedman (*Art* 171-2). More often than not the crucial role of the parentheses is downplayed in discussions of this poem (one notable exception is Marks 23; Williams uses the poem to make brilliant observations about parentheses). Levenston discusses Cummings’s “un (bee) mo” which likewise intertwines two statements, though there the interconnections between the layers are downplayed (26).

¹⁶ Friedman reads “go(perpe)go” and “swi(” as layered poems (*Art* 117-18, *Growth* 83-84). Likewise, Marks reads “a)glazed mind layed in a,” in which the parenthesized “i” at the end can be read in conjunction with the “a” of the first line, suggesting that Cummings is saying that the person depicted in the poem is “a. . . i,” a “real man” (98-99). This is a good example of an ad hoc insightful treatment of a framed poem, but to the best of my knowledge there has been no systematic treatment of them as a group.

¹⁷ Projection is highlighted by psychoanalysis, and has affinities with Eliot’s “objective correlative.” On the influence of Freudian ideas on Cummings’s production see Milton Cohen.

¹⁸ As part of his practical advice on deciphering Cummings, Kidder writes that “On some occasions . . . we must ignore the parentheses” (14). The point must be made that the fact that meaning sometimes exists when the parentheses are ignored does not mean that they should be ignored in an analysis of the poem.

¹⁹ Framed poems too end with an unclosed opening parenthesis. But unlike what we are considering here, the framed poem respectively has a solitary closing parenthesis that lacks the opening one at the beginning of the poem. This structure, which in itself subverts the conventional use of parentheses, allows for a resolution brought about by adding together the two parts, as we have seen in category 4.

²⁰ Perkins finds in “twi-” (*CP* 351) another instance of parentheses, “c(h)luck / (l)ing,” that “create a portmanteau word” that unpacks into various words, some onomatopoeic in context (44). Onomatopoeia created by parentheses is another way of essentializing language.

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