

## Cummings and Temporality

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Over the past fifteen years, I have developed a *temporal* poetics that suggests an account of poetic form in terms of the qualities and componential organization of rhythm. The aim of this paper is to apply this theory of poetry to Cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond" (CP 367) to see what it might have to contribute to the study of Cummings' poetry.

The major claim of temporal poetics is that poetic forms are organized into quadratic paradigms that follow the qualitative texture of the four components of rhythm—what music theorists call meter, grouping, prolongation, and theme—and the four temporalities that they engender, what I like to call cyclical time, centroidal time, linear time, and relative time. I organize and present the qualities of the rhythmic components in what I call the *temporal paradigm* (Appendix 1). I summarize the formal paradigms that result when these temporalities play themselves out in Cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled" on pages 23-24.

Temporal poetics has many intellectual sources—Northrop Frye's theory of the literary genres, Hayden White's historiography, Barbara Herrnstein's Smith's typology of discourse types, Kenneth's Pike's "tagmemic" linguistics, Stephen Pepper's typology of metaphysical systems, Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl's account of the rhythms of Western Tonal Music, and others. In the end, the theory has a strong resemblance to both Hegelian dialectics and various contemporary accounts of form in physical, organic, and cultural development: chaos theory, spiral dynamics, Maslovian psychology, and others. (Bibliographic details on these sources and my own publications on temporal poetics may be found in the Works Cited list.)

In a nutshell, temporal poetics provides a new way of accounting for what goes with what in poetry—how sound relates to meaning, prosody to syntax, tropes to schemes, and so forth. It claims that the many formal "correspondences" that are so central to poetic expressiveness are temporal rather than spatial and in doing so provides a new account of the organization of poetic themes, genres, textures, and styles.

Temporal poetics might be especially suited to contribute to our understanding of Cummings' poetry. Cummings had both an unusually full and

conflicted psychology and an unusually diverse and creative array of poetic techniques. Both of these are difficult to describe, interpret, and evaluate, but they are especially difficult to relate closely to one another. The claim I would like to make here is this: Cummings' poetic rendering of his view of a healthy psyche as a cycling holarchy (Be (reborn) & See! Love & Grow! Dare & Die! Dream! And Be (reborn) & See! Love & Grow! Dare and Die! Dream! And Be (reborn) and See! Love & Grow! Dare & Die! Dream...) is best viewed in temporal terms, as a holarchical cycle of temporalities. Temporal poetics provides a metaphysics and stylistics that can contribute to our understanding of how Cummings triangulates (i.e., relates, analogizes, connects, etc.) language and world with this view of mind.

Consider Cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" (CP 367):

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

In “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond,” a speaker wonders (in awe and appreciation) at his responsiveness to his lover’s gestures, looks, wishes, and textures. His lover’s “intense fragility” opens him; her “most frail gesture” encloses him; her wish closes him; and her “slightest look” uncloses him. This opening in response to his lover’s fragility, the speaker tells us, is like the opening of a flower, “petal by petal,” when it is “touch[ed]” “skilfully” and “mysteriously” by spring. This enclosing by his lover’s gesturing is so much a part of him that it is too near for touch. This closing in response to his lover’s wish is like the beautiful and sudden closing of a flower when it is covered by an autumn snow. And this unclosing in response to his lover’s look is like the opening out of the fingers of a hand. As we might expect, the speaker does not know what causes this strong and varied responsiveness to his lover, and we assume he doesn’t want to know. He only feels this influence, and by this feeling, understands.

In its temporal qualities, this thematic cycle from opening, to enclosing, to closing, to unclosing (and back to opening again) runs the full gamut of the temporalities—from cyclical to centroidal to linear to relative—expressing a sensibility that is unusually broad and balanced, albeit highly conflicted. To the speaker in “somewhere i have never travelled,” his lover is—simultaneously—goddess, bride, queen, and muse. As goddess, the lover opens him up, gives him life itself, makes him feel reborn, like a flowering spring. As bride, the lover encloses him, makes him feel a part of a larger whole, not one who is half two but two who are halves of one (CP 556). As queen, the lover closes him, making him die with her every wish so that, in that dying, he can become more. And as muse, the lover uncloses him, gives him that more: poetic knowledge, timeless, transcendent vision.

When opened by his goddess lover, the speaker is “glad” and “intense,” “all,” “first,” and “always.” His senses are alive, especially touch. When enclosed by his bride lover, the speaker is “deep” and “mysterious,” warmed at heart, emotionally complemented, gentle like petals, flowers, and rain. When closed by his queen lover, the speaker is “skilfully” “compelled” and held, like the fingers in a closed fist. And when unclosed by his muse lover, the speaker is “fragile” and “frail,” “small” and “slight,” “sudden” and “beyond,” “nothing” and “nobody,” “beautifully” “imagin[ing],” “know[ing],” and “understand[ing],” like the

snow “carefully everywhere descending.”

The poetic challenge that Cummings answers in “somewhere i have never travelled” is to express such a capaciously various and conflicted sensibility in some complex of compelling poetic forms—rhythmic, linguistic, rhetorical, and symbolic. Despite the variety of textures that need to be expressed and their high conflict, to be successful, this poetic form cannot be a jumble of a-rhythmic lurching, ungrammatical gibberish, rhetorical posturing, and unresolved paradox. The conflicting temporalities / sensibilities that the speaker claims are all simultaneously relevant to his lover’s influence over him must be ordered and blended into elegant and intelligible poetic expression.

One way Cummings does this is by crafting phrases that either intensify or blend the four temporalities. Some phrases combine emblems of the same temporality and therefore intensify the expression of that one temporality—for example, “your eyes have their silence” (relative time), “or which I cannot touch because they are too near” (cyclical time), “your slightest look” (relative time), “i have closed myself as fingers” (linear time), “as Spring opens / (touching,” (cyclical time), “if your wish be to close me” (linear time), “beautifully,suddenly” (relative time), “the heart of this flower” (centroidal time), “imagines / the snow” (relative time), “everywhere descending” (cyclical time), “which we are to perceive in this world equals” (cyclical time). Other phrases blend emblems of all four of the different temporalities into one coherent expression—for example: “somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond,” “whose texture / compels me with the colour of its countries,” “rendering death and forever with each breathing,” “the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses,” and “nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands.”

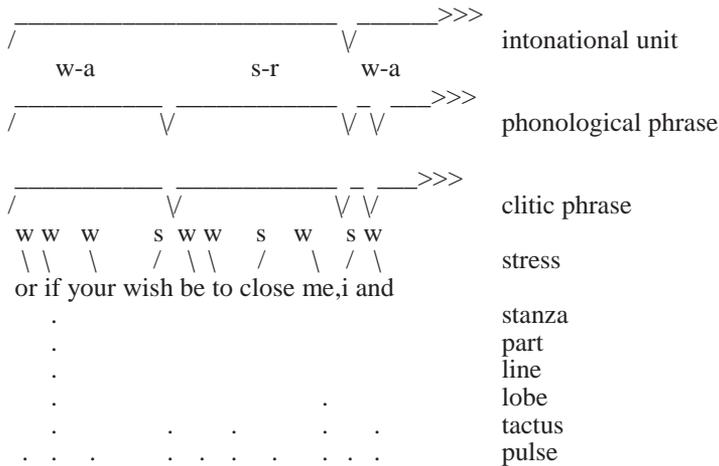
Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relative
touch(ing)	heart	close(d)	eyes
near	flower	fingers	silence
spring	somewhere	your	slightest
opens	colour	travelled	look
everywhere	breathing	countries	beautifully
descending	deeper	death	suddenly
perceive	roses	voice	imagines
equals	rain	hands	snow
world			beyond
gladly			never
compels			texture

forever  
all  
such  
even

each  
eyes  
small  
nobody

It is significant, I think, that the first and last lines of the poem are among these temporally blended phrases.

Cummings also blends the temporalities by creating unusual balance among the poem’s rhythmic forms, both within and among the rhythmic components. “[S]omewhere i have never travelled” is written in iambic pentameter, the paradigm lyric/centroidal meter used for emotive expression, but this is not at all obvious, and many readers, I suspect, might miss this entirely. Cummings mutes this pentameter in every which way—including loose. Only one line has ten syllables (line 9, “or if your wish be to close me,i and”), but this line is one of the lines that readers are most *unlikely* to read as a pentameter. It starts weakly (“or if your”). It is severely out of balance, having a phrasal break after the eighth syllable (“or if your wish be to close me, // i and”). It places two consecutive primary stresses (“close” and “i”) off the beat, surrounded by unstressed syllables (“to,” “me,” “and”), one of which (“close”) is not even preceded by a phrasal break. It ends by syncopating the last beat in the line (“i and”). And it is strongly enjambed into the next line (“i and / my life”). [See Appendix 2 for an explanation of the terms and markings used in rhythmic analysis.]



Cummings also masks the pentameter at line ends. In the poem, only five lines (1, 4, 8, 18, and 20) do not have feminine endings, muting the naturally up-beating motion of the pentameter with falling and waved mo-

tion. In fact, at low levels of phrasing, the four different sorts of phrasal motion (falling, lilted, rising, point), which correlate with the temporalities (cyclical, centroidal, linear, and relative, respectively), are unusually balanced. Among clitic phrases, which group syllables with weak stress around those with primary stress, just about the same number of each contour appear, creating a rhythmic analogue to phrases we have just mentioned that blend meanings from all four of the four different temporalities.

**Falling/Strong-Initial Clitic Phrases**

w	w	w	s	w	w	w
			some.	where		
			tra.	velled		
			glad.	ly		
			a.	ny		
			ges.	ture		
			slight.	est		
			ea.	si.	ly	
			al.	ways		
			pe.	tal		
			o.	pens		
			touch.	ing		
			skil.	ful.	ly	
			ve.	ry		
			beau.	ti.	ful.	ly
			su.	dden.	ly	
			flo.	wer		
			care.	ful.	ly	
			e.	ve.	ry.	where
			no.	thing		
			e.	quals		
			ren.	der.	ing	
			brea.	thing		
			on.	ly		
			some.	thing	in	me
			ro.	ses		
			no.	bo.	dy	
			e.	ven		

**Rise-fall/Centered Clitic Phrases:**

w	w	w	s	w	w	w
	i	have	ne.	ver		
		ex.	per.	i.	ence	
		their	si.	lence		
	which	en.	close	me		
	will	en.	close	me		

w	w	w	s	w	w	w
		as	fin.	gers		
		you	o.	pen		
		by	pe.	tal	my	self
		mys.	ter.	i.	ous.	ly
	be	to	close	me		
		de.	scend.	ing		
		the	po.	wer		
		fra.	gi.	li.	ty	
		whose	tex.	ture		
		com.	pels	me		
		with	the	co.	lour	
	of	its	coun.	tries		
	and	for.	e.	ver		
		that	clo.	ses		
		and	o.	pens		
		is	dee.	per		

### Rising/Strong-Final Clitic Phrases

w	w	w	s	w	w	w
		be.	yond			
		your	eyes			
	in	your	most			
		are	things			
	or	which	i			
		can.	not			
		be.	cause			
	they	are	too			
though	i	have	closed			
		my	self			
		as	Spring			
		her	first			
or	if	your	wish			
	and	my	life			
		will	shut			
as	when	the	heart			
		of	this			
		the	snow			
which	we	are	about	to	per.	ceive
		in	this			
of	your	in.	tense			
		with	each			
	i	do	not			
	what	it	is			
	un.	der.	stands			
		the	voice			

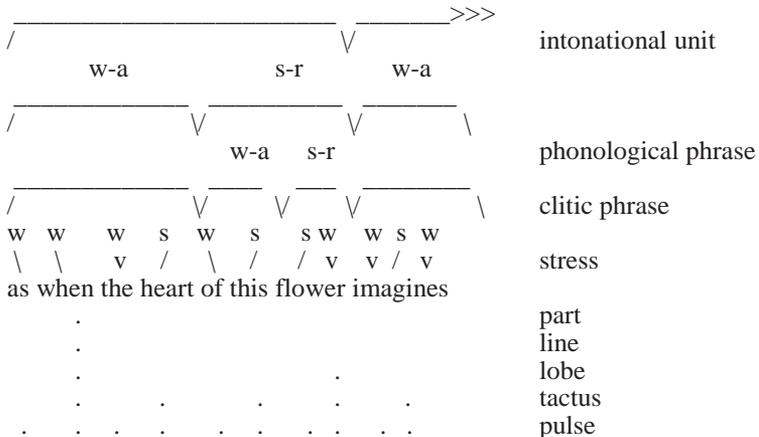
w	w	w	s	w	w	w
	of	your	eyes			
		than	all			
		the	rain			
		has	such			

**Monosyllabic/Point Clitic Phrase**

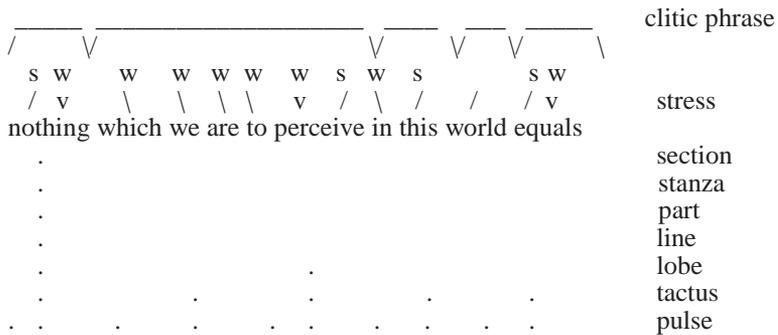
w	w	w	s	w	w	w
			have			
			frail			
			touch			
			near			
			look			
			rose			
			i			
			world			
			death			
			know			
			not			
			small			
			hands			

Some of the densest patches of falling and liting motion that Cummings uses to balance the rhythmic reflexes of the temporalities are mesmerizingly physical and emotive, as in lines 11 and 12: “as when the heart of this flower imagines / the snow carefully everywhere descending,”

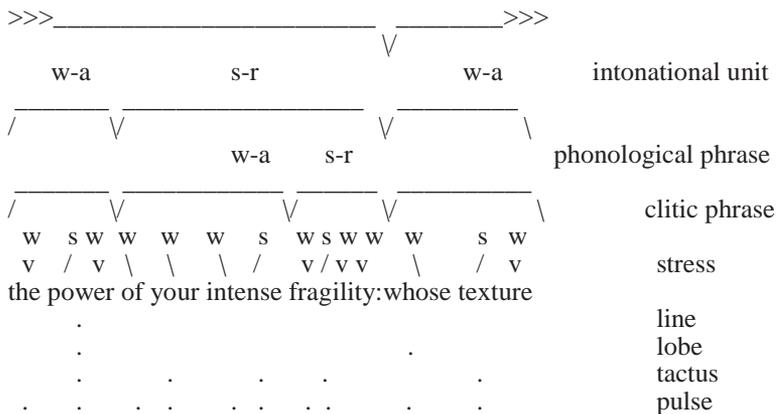
**Line 11**







**Line 14**



In one place, Cummings even redistributes the lines visually in order to mask the pentameter, something more characteristic of free verse and relative time. Visual line 6, “though i have closed myself as fingers,” has only nine syllables, while visual line 7, “you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens,” has sixteen. As such, neither can be read as a pentameter, no matter how tight or loose. But if the first three syllables of visual line 7 are read as the end of metrical line 6, this unmetricality is repaired—and felicitously so: both redistributed lines end with “open(s),” with metrical line 6 having twelve syllables and metrical line 7, thirteen, right around the norm for the poem as a whole.

**Visual Lines 6 and 7**

though i have closed myself as fingers,  
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens





including chiasitic movement: anticipation, arrival, departure, extension. A particularly frequent combination of grouping and prolongation (e.g., at levels 4, 8, and 9) is rising but extensional, which combines a linear grouping with a cyclical prolongation. Triple movement, a centroidal pattern, is especially frequent at the third level, the level of the phonological phrase.

somewhere / i have never / travelled /  
gladly / beyond / any experience, /  
your eyes / have / their silence: /  
i / and my life /will shut /  
nothing / which we are to perceive / in this world /  
equals / the power / of your intense fragility: /  
(i do not know / what it is / about you /

There are also some prominent triples within phonological phrases, among clitic phrases, two in the final line.

in your most / frail / gesture /  
not / even / the rain /  
has such / small / hands /

The triples at higher levels of phrasing pick up on this denser triple movement at lower levels.

carefully / everywhere / descending / (level 4)  
your slightest look / easily / will enclose me / (level 5)  
you open / always / petal by petal myself / (level 5)  
as Spring opens / (touching skilfully, mysteriously) / her first  
rose (level 5)  
as when the heart of this flower / imagines the snow / care-  
fully everywhere descending (level 5)

Higher levels of grouping and prolongation combine all of the temporalities into a complex but smoothly integrated texture.

Syntax and rhetoric also contribute to this fullness and blending of the temporalities, albeit less intensively and extensively. In many ways, the syntax and rhetoric of “somewhere i have never travelled” is traditional for a love lyric and is expressed in standard lyric/centroidal forms. The poem is in the first person (“i,” “me,” “myself”) and present tense (“is,” “are,” “has,” “understands,” “compels,” “closes,” “opens,” etc.). The speaker praises his lover with an extended synecdoche/blazon that enumerates her

parts/qualities, building up the whole (“your most frail gesture,” “your slightest look,” “your intense fragility,” “the colour of its countries,” “whose texture,” “each breathing,” “what it is about you,” “the voice of your eyes”). And some of these parts/qualities are described with adjectives (“slightest,” “intense,” “deeper,” “small”) and relative clauses (“things which...,” “or which I cannot...,” “nothing which we are to perceive...,” “whose texture...”). In many ways, what the speaker considers in the poem, his lover’s influence over him is also traditional for the love lyric and is conveyed in standard linear forms. The speaker addresses his lover directly (“your,” “you”) and enumerates the many things things that his lover’s powers over him will do, expressed in future time references (“will unclose,” “will shut”) and transitive verbs (“have,” “enclose,” “touch,” “unclose,” “close,” “open,” “open,” “close,” “imagine,” “perceive,” “equal,” “compel,” “render,” “know,” “have”).

But as with his semantic and rhythmic blendings, Cummings does not merely give us this traditional texture of centroidal and linear forms. He fleshes out the syntax and rhetoric with significant strands of cyclical and relative forms, too, especially the latter. Cyclical qualities come primarily from the poem’s dense use of metaphor (e.g., “the heart of this flower imagines,” “the colour of its countries,” “the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses,” “not even the rain,has such small hands”), symmetrical, duple phrasing (“closes and opens,” “skilfully,mysteriously,” “i / and my life,” “beautifully,suddenly,” “carefully everywhere,” “death and forever,” “nobody,not even the rain”), asyndeton (“skilfully,mysteriously”; “beautifully,suddenly”; “carefully everywhere”), and apposition (“nobody,not even the rain”). Syntactically, relative qualities come from adverbs (“somewhere,” “never,” “sadly,” “beyond,” “most,” “near,” “too,” “easily,” “skilfully,” “mysteriously,” “very,” “beautifully,” “suddenly,” “carefully,” “everywhere,” “even,” “always,” “only”), the perfect aspect (“have . . . travelled,” “have closed”), negation (“never travelled,” “cannot touch,” “nothing,” “do not know,” “nobody,” “not even the rain,” “unclose”), disjunction (“or which...,” “or if...”), disjunct adverbials (“though i have closed myself as fingers,” “if your wish be to close me”), shifts in time reference (“have,” “are,” “cannot,” “will unclose,” “will shut”; “rendering,” “descending”), and shifts in person (“your,” “you”; “i,” “myself,” “me”; “her,” “whose,” “they”; “nobody,” “something”).

Rhetorically, relative qualities come from parentheticals:

(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)

as Spring opens

(touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose

Discontinuity also produces relative qualities:

your slightest look **easily** will uncloset me

you open **always petal by petal** myself

as Spring opens / **(touching skilfully,mysteriously)**her first  
rose

the snow **carefully everywhere** descending;

nobody,**not even the rain**,has such small hands

And the peripheral positioning of adverbials and function words are  
relative as well, e.g.,:

**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 uncloset **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;

With its discontinuous syntax and frequent enjambment, the poem also has  
a pervasively rising intonation, another reflex of relative time.

/ /  
somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond

/  
 any experience,your eyes have their silence:  
 /  
 in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,  
 / / / /  
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens  
 / /  
 (touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose

Cummings' broad but conflicted psychology has long been recognized, as has his remarkable competence across the arts (literature, painting, music), the literary genres (drama, prose, poetry), and a range of poetic forms (songs, sonnets, prose poetry, concrete poetry, free verse, iconographic verse, aleatory verse, etc.). But for whatever reason, a full recognition of the consequences of this psychology for the imagistic, rhythmic, linguistic, and rhetorical textures of his best poems has been less fully noticed. By providing an explicit theory of the relations among rhythmic, linguistic, rhetorical, and semantic/symbolic forms, the temporal poetics that I have developed can help us with this unfinished task.

Cummings' conflicted psychology is not at all unusual, given his historical moment. The other great modern poets—for example, Frost, Williams, and Stevens—have psychologies that are equally broad and conflicted and therefore equally deserving of closer study with a temporal poetics. Frost's mastery of songs and sonnets, in addition to narrative and dramatic verse, is unprecedented; and his best verse often appears in revisionary and blended forms that closely resemble Cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" in their formal complexity—rhythmic, linguistic, rhetorical, and imagistic. Williams' objectivism and Stevens' naturalism are similarly conflicted in this way. Over his life, Stevens' verse tends toward the full and balanced sensibilities of *The Man With the Blue Guitar*, while Williams' *Paterson*, with its collage of genres and languages, and *Kora in Hell*, with its surreal syntax and imagery, might be among some of the most extreme instances we have of such formal, and therefore psychological, conflict.

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## Appendix I: The Temporal Paradigm

<b>Temporal Features</b>	<b>cyclical</b>	<b>centroidal</b>	<b>linear</b>	<b>relational</b>
event-event relation	similarity	difference-in-similarity	similarity-in-difference	difference
temporal figure	occurrence repetition succession	correspondence prominence proportion	transition direction implication	connection distinction simultaneity
subject-subject relation	participation	obligation	cooperation	freedom
subject-event relation	subjective	objective-in-subjective	subjective-in-objective	objective
semiotic relation	icon	emblem	index	symbol
cognitive process	reaction passive	affection reciprocal	creation active	exploration improvisatory
clock time: orientation	past	present	future	relative
relational scope	proximate	local	regional	global
event position	initial	medial	final	peripheral
curve of energy/stability	fall	rise-fall	fall-rise	rise
structural volatility	fixed	constrained	volatile	free

## Appendix II: Rhythmical Terms

The concepts, terminology, and scansional formalisms I use here derive from my 1992 book, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*. In my rhythmic theory, rhythm is componential. The scansions I present in the paper represent three of the four components of rhythm: *meter*, *grouping*,

and *prolongation*. The fourth rhythmic component, *theme*, is more complex and cannot be formalized in this way. The three components represented in the scansion are hierarchical. Rhythms in each of these components are established by corresponding *prominences*.

*Meter*, a physical pulsation, is represented by the dot matrix at the bottom of the scansion. Each column of dots represents a *beat*. Each layer of dots represents a level of beating. The taller the dot column, the stronger the beat. Three levels of beating form a *measure*. Measures are always strong-initial. The most basic level of beating is the *tactus*, but there are often sub-tactical and hypermetrical / hyper-tactical levels of beating, too. The lowest level of beating is the *pulse*. Between the pulse and the *tactus*, there can also be a *sub-tactus* and a *super-pulse*. Higher levels of beating define metrical *lines* and *stanzas*, parts of lines (what I call *lobes*) and parts of stanzas (what I call *parts*). Stanzas are then built into even larger measures, what I call *sections* and *forms*. Meter is limited to about eleven levels of beating in both music and poetry.

The two other components of rhythm, grouping and prolongation, are represented by the labeled bracketing at the top of the scansion. Grouping divides the text into parts based on informational interest/significance/centrality. Each group has one strong unit (or *peak*, marked “s”) and up to six weak units (marked “w,” which create prosodic *valleys*). At low levels, grouping follows the contours of the *prosodic hierarchy* in language, which includes *clitic phrases*, *phonological phrases*, and *intonational units*. As in syntax, phrases in the prosodic hierarchy group *syllables* into larger units, forming a constituent hierarchy, albeit one that resists overlapping, recursion, and back-shifting in ways that syntactic hierarchies do not. *Clitic phrases* group syllables with secondary (“^”), tertiary (“v”), or weak stress (“v”) around syllables with primary stress (“/”). *Phonological phrases* group clitic phrases with tight syntactic connections (e.g., in the same syntactic phrase). *Intonational units* group phonological phrases into informational units separated by pauses and marked by significant tones and tunes. Grouping also works beyond prosody—up into syntax, and then to the limits of the text as a whole. Unlike meter, the vertical scope of grouping is unlimited. *Prolongation* defines linear motion across the vertical movement within groups, feelings of anticipation (“a”), arrival (“r”), and extension (“e”). Much of the distinctive effect of *enjambment* is prolongational, although enjambment involves grouping as well. The scansions mark enjambment with arrows (“>>”) at the ends of metrical lines. The distinctive

“feel” of a rhythm depends, in part, on interactions among these three rhythmic components.

The fourth rhythmic component, *theme*, is more discontinuous. Thematic rhythms are formed by networks of linkages among related but different forms of all sorts, the most important being networks of meaning. Thematic rhythms favor formal peripheries rather than formal centers and often create rhythmic textures that are recognized as unified but variational (“theme-and-variation”). For instance, in this line, the odd placement of the two conjunctions, *or* and *and*, at line peripheries is significantly thematic. The *or* at the beginning of the line “or if your wish be to close me,<sup>i</sup> and” is linked thematically to the *or* at the beginning of line four. The *and* at the end of this line is linked thematically to the *and* in the middle of line sixteen and the *and* at the beginning of line eighteen. *Close* in this line is linked thematically by hyponymy, synonymy, and antonymy to *enclose* (line 3), *unclose* (line 5), *closed* (line 6), *open* and *opens* (line 7), *shut* (line 8), *closes* (line 17), and *opens* (line 18). Instances and variants of *i*, *me*, and *your* appear throughout the text, forming a thick web of thematic relations.

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