Cummings and Temporality

Richard D. Cureton

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
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 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

the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses
snow “carefully everywhere descending.”

The poetic challenge that Cummings answers in “somewhere i have never travelled” is to express such a capiciously 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.”

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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, lilting, 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

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### Rise-fall/Centered Clitic Phrases:

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Rising/Strong-Final Clitic Phrases

be. yond
in your most
or which i
can. not
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 tense
with each
i do not
what it is
un. der. stands
the voice
Some of the densest patches of falling and lilting 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

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\text{w-a} & \text{s-r} & \text{w-a} \\
\text{w-a} & \text{s-r} & \text{w-a} \\
\text{w-a} & \text{s-r} & \text{w-a} \\
\end{array}
\]

intonational unit

phonological phrase

clitic phrase

stress

as when the heart of this flower imagines

part

line

lobe

tactus

pulse
As with the phrases that blend meanings associated with the different
temporalities, some of the lines in “somewhere i have never travelled” have
all four types of phrasal contouring at these low levels, melded into smooth
patterns—for example: “rendering / death / and forever / with each / breathing,” “(touching / skilfully, / mysteriously) / her first / rose,” “in
your most / frail / gesture / are things / which enclose me,” and “your
slightest / look / easily / will unclose me.”

Cummings also masks the pentameter by upsetting the balance be-
tween syllables and stresses. In their matching of phrasing with meter, most
of the pentameter lines in “somewhere i have never travelled” are “loose”
in one way or another, containing 12-14 syllables. These extra syllables—
sometimes in anacrases (as in metrical lines 3 and 4), sometimes with extra
syllables at line internal phrasal breaks (as in metrical lines 1, 6, 8, 14, and
20), sometimes in other places—give the pentameter in “somewhere i have
never travelled” a continuous, linear motion that emphasizes larger sweeps
of voicing than the counting and matching of syllables and stresses, as in
most pentameter verse. This tendency to a looser and more prosaic motion
is aided by lines with very weak stressing and therefore many metrical pro-
motions, as in lines 13-14: “nothing which we are to perceive in this world
equals / the power of your intense fragility:whose texture”:
nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals

Line 14

the power of your intense fragility: whose texture

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
Metrical Lines 6 and 7

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

Line 6

/ w-a w-r s-e \ intonational unit

/ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ phonological phrase

\ w \ w \ s \ w \ s \ w \ s \ w \ w \ s \ w \ / / / / / v \ / / v

though i have closed myself as fingers, you open

. . . . . . . . . .

Line 7

/ w-a s-r s-a w-r \ intonational unit

/ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ phonological phrase

\ s \ w \ s \ w \ s \ w \ s \ w \ w \ w \ s \ s \ w \ / / / / / v \ / / v \ / \ / \ / \ / v

always petal by petal myself as Spring opens.

. . . . . . . . . .

Despite this linear loosening and relativistic breaking and rearranging, the rhythm of “somewhere i have never travelled” as a whole retains its lyric depth and physical intensity. Many of the stresses in the poem occur off the beat, syncopated or demoted, a rhythmic organization more characteristic of cyclical and centroidal time. The memorable opening and final lines, “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond / any experience,” and “nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands” are good examples. The opening line of the poem is syncopated at the beginning (“somewhere”), at the phrasal beak in the middle of the line (“gladly”), and
across the enjambment at the beginning of the second line (“any”). The final line opens with a syncopation (“nobody”) and demotes primary stresses at “not” and “small.” The final line also has two extra unstressed syllables.

**Line 1**

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{w-a} & \text{s-a} & \text{w-r} & \text{w-a} & \text{s-a} & \text{w-a} \\
\text{w-r} & \text{s-a} & \text{w-a} & \text{w-a} & \text{s-a}
\end{array}
\]

intonational unit

phonological phrase

clitic phrase

stress

Line 2

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{w-r} & \text{w-a} & \text{w-a} & \text{s-r} & \text{w-a} & \text{s-a}
\end{array}
\]

intonational unit

phonological phrase

clitic phrase

stress

Grouping and prolongational rhythms at higher levels are also mixed. Grouping structures regularly rise at low levels and high (levels 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10). But prolongational structures at these levels are primarily extensional at levels 4, 8, and 9 and anticipational at levels 5 and 10. Phrasing at levels 6 and 7—levels of phrasing congruent with distichs and stanzas in the meter—is much more various, combining falling, rising, and point contours, often worked into intricate patterns of reversal and chiasmus. Prolongation at these levels is also varied, with the most complex pattern again
including chiastic 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 / carefully 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 un-close," "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 un-close," "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 unclose 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 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;

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.

—University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Appendix I: The Temporal Paradigm

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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 (“\"”), 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, i 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.

**Works Cited**


