"And death i think is no parenthesis": 
An Analysis of Death Motifs in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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The works of E. E. Cummings have been accused by critics as bearing "marks of permanent adolescence" and "a refusal to accept death."¹ A careful analysis of the death motifs in Cummings' poetry has, for this author, proven that the exact opposite is true. Cummings has dealt with death as an underlying theme in his poetry throughout his career. He does not refuse to accept death; he embraces it as wholeheartedly as life. Perhaps what some critics fail to perceive is that Cummings does deal with death in his poetry, but his approach is unique. Cummings admits his view of death differs from that of "mostpeople."² The unique death motifs Cummings has expressed in his work will be the basis of this study.

A study of death in Cummings' poetry is a large undertaking because death is an underlying theme in the majority of his work. Sometimes subtly, sometimes obtrusively, always honestly, the theme of death is found in poem after poem. The subject of death in Cummings' poetry will be covered in this paper through the analysis of four reoccurring motifs associated with death in his work: personified death, mostpeople, love, and natural cycles. This analysis is by no means exhaustive nor is it definitive. It is hoped that identifying and analyzing the death motifs in Cummings' work will provide insight towards a better understand of his poetry.


² The term "mostpeople" was used by Cummings in his "Introduction to Collected Poems" (1938). The term will be used by this author, without quotation marks, as a general heading and noun indicating those people that Cummings would consider "unliving" or "dead" while alive.
Cummings wrote twelve books of poetry in his lifetime (see Appendix A). In 1954, ten of the twelve books were published under the collective title Poems: 1923–1954. Any poems published in this collection will be referenced with the page number of the poem immediately following the poem title. Poems from Cummings' last two books, 95 Poems and 73 Poems will be footnoted.

Before beginning a study of individual death motifs in Cummings poetry, an inherent aspect of all but one of the motifs should be noted. The concept of transcendental thought strongly permeates the motifs of most people, love, and natural cycles. Accepting the fact that Cummings was a transcendentalist and analyzing his motifs with that in mind, clarifies many of the ambiguities that seem to confuse many readers. As stated by William Heyen, "We cannot in any logical way argue with the transcendental assumptions that make Cummings' world what it is and his poems what they are." Studies of Cummings' work by Norman Friedman, Norman Mailer, and Charles Stetler confirm that Cummings was a transcendentalist. Since death and transcendentalism are so closely linked in Cummings poetry, this author finds it necessary to accept Cummings "transcendental assumptions" for this analysis as well.

Cummings' early work, primarily Tulips and Chimneys and present a very traditional personified death image. In the

1 For an excellent analysis of the transcendental thought in Cummings' work, see A Study of the Transcendental Poetry of E. E. Cummings by Charles Stetler, University Microfilms, Inc., 1966.

sonnet "this is the garden: colours come and go," (154) death is the traditional reaper with his scythe where "lie many a flower curled," and in "o Thou to whom the musical white spring" (153), the personae praises his love for teaching spring to "bravely fling/Implacable death's mysteriously sable/robe from her redolent shoulders." In "who's most afraid of death? thou," (157) the speaker tells his love he wishes to be present when death comes to take her life.

and truly i would be
near when his scythe takes crisply the whim
of thy smoothness, and mark the fainting
murdered petals, with the caving stem.

Although all three sonnets have a definite Cummings' flair, the use of archaic language and traditional death images causes the poems to bear more resemblance to Shakespearean love sonnets than to much of Cummings' later works. The personified death motif is not original and reflects Cummings' early, less developed style.

A similarly personified death is present in two poems from the "Amores" section of Tulips and Chimneys, but the poems are not in sonnet form. The speaker in these poems is fascinated with the idea of a sexual, romantic death being his love's lover. He imagines death rising from his ashes after he dies and coming to his lover in the poem "if i believe" (33). He says to death,

thou wilt rise and thou
wilt come to her and brush

the mischief from her eyes and fold
her
mouth the new
flower with

thy unimaginable
wings, where dwells the breath
of all persisting stars
The poem, "i like," (36) presents the same romantic, sexual image of death coming to a lover, this time as a lord "of his own land" which gives the image a medieval feel. The originality of the image lies not in the fact that death is a lordly lover, but that the speaker feels he has the authority over death to speak for him to his love. The speaker asks,

if that he come receive
him as your lover sumptuously
being
kind
because i trust him to
your grace, and for
in his own land

he is called death.

Although these poems are not modeled around Cummings' transcendental thought as most of his later poems are, they do reflect a feeling of attraction and fearlessness towards death.

Death becomes a more casual yet still romantic personified figure in two more poems from &,, "suppose" (83) and "gee i like to think of dead" (101). In "suppose" we read

young death sits in a cafe
smiling, a piece of money held between
his thumb and first finger

In the next stanza the speaker comments to his lover on the oldness, tiredness, and the "always crying" of the old man named "Life" who carries flowers on his head. He asks her if "death" will buy any of the old man's flowers. She hesitates, then,

...my love slowly answered I think so, But
I think I see someone else

there is a lady, whose name is Afterwards
she is sitting beside young death, is slender;
likes flowers.
So death in this poem is still a lover, debonair compared to life, and the one with the money. Death's image in this poem contains a new twist, however. A lady named Afterwards is with him. The flowers of the old man represent life and she likes them. The speaker's lover thinks Death will buy them for her. Death buying new life for Afterwards is a seed of the rebirth after death idea that will grow in later motifs while the older more traditional personified death becomes less frequent as an image in Cummings' poetry.

Cummings image of death changing from the traditional to his own style is apparent again in "gee i like to think of dead" (101) from &. Although death still appears in the poem in a personified romantic manner, Cummings' whole style has begun to change. Death is not referred to as death, but rather as "dead" by the poem's apparently young female personae. "Dead has a smile like the nicest man you've never met" indicates that its smile is nicer than any man she has ever met. "Dead" is sexual—when it talks behind her back it makes her neck feel "pleasant and stoopid." It makes her "feel all again/all over the way men you liked made you feel when they touched you." "Dead" exceeds the touches of other men, however, because with it she can also feel "what you made, men feel when, you/touched them." "Dead" wants to dance with her and she wants to dance with it. Death dancing presents a lively image. By personifying death in this manner Cummings is beginning to introduce the death/living paradox that typified his later work. "Dead" defies the regiment of parents or teachers who make the girl take music lessons. Finally, death is extremely inviting.
dead says come with me he says (and whyever not) into the round well and see the kitten and the penny and the jackknife and the rosebug and you say Sure you say (like that) sure I'll come with you you say for I like kittens I do and jackknives I do and pennies I do and rosebugs I do

This last stanza could be interpreted as representing the girl's acceptance of death and her ability to dance with death through life. She understands death's cleverness dead's clever too like PDF goes the alarm off and the little striker having the best time tickling away everybody's brain so everybody just puts out their finger and they stuff the poor thing all full of fingers

She will not spend her life like "everybody" with their fingers stuffed in their ears fearing the "POF" of death's alarmclock as the striker tickles their brain. She will accept death, and by doing so she will see everything that life has to offer starting with rosebugs and kittens.

A motif that began developing in Tulips and Chimneys and employs the concept of people who are alive in a physiological sense, but dead emotionally and spiritually. Cummings believed that "natural order is gained through freedom from static society ideas or limitations. It is higher than man's reason or logic."¹ An individual can be one with this natural order by "delighting in the here and now, not hedonistically, but for timeless and spiritual values."² Cummings existed in the "timeless world of the eternal present."³ Living in this natural


² Ibid.

world requires living, dying, growing and loving. Cummings makes it very clear in his "Introduction to Collected Poems" (331) that he lives in this spiritual world, but most people do not.

--it's no use trying to pretend that most people and ourselves are alike. Most people have less in common with ourselves than the square root of minus one. You and I are human beings; most people are snobs.

... What does being born mean to most people? Catastrophe unmitigated.... Most people fancy a guaranteed birthproof safety suit of nondestructible selflessness. If most people were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying--

you and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves. You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming. Life, for eternal us, is now; and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything, catastrophic included.

Life, for most people, simply isn't. Take the so-called standard of living. What do most people mean by "living"? They don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science, in its finite but unbounded wisdom, has succeeded in selling their wives....

Cummings' response to most people in his poetry often verges on spiteful. This resentment towards most people is justified by the Cummings' assessment that they are not alive. They are not individuals, they are a mob\(^1\) which exists in an ordinary world bound by conformity, socially imposed restrictions, time (clocks in particular) and a fear of death. Cummings "looks to most people like a ghost because he doesn't live in what they:

\(^1\) Friedman, p. 8.
consider to be the real world.\textsuperscript{1} Cummings poetry makes it clear that he is very much alive, and mostpeople are dead. Although the term "mostpeople" did not develop as a motif until No Thanks, the concept of people being dead while alive (which is in essence the same as mostpeople) appears as early as Tulips and Chimneys. The third sonnet of the "Chimneys" section, "ladies and gentlemen this little girl," (59) describes a girl dancer who "wishes you/with all of her fragile might to not surmise/she dreamed one afternoon." A girl—or anyone—who forbids herself to dream is a prime candidate for becoming a mostpeople. This girl is, in the Cummings' sense, dead, absolutely positively dead, like Coney Island in winter.

The alive but dead paradox is cleverly expressed by the scrambled spelling of absolutely and positively. The girl is not absolutely positively dead. She is just mixed up concerning life. The image of "Coney Island in winter" is a good one. In the wintertime an amusement park that should be filled with life and laughter and excitement is dead. The girl is equally dead, but Cummings believes in rebirth, and by mentioning winter he also suggests that there will be a spring. Coney Island will come alive and the image suggests the possibility that the girl will come alive too.

The possibility of rebirth seems less likely, for a second group of mostpeople that Cummings chose to depict in his early poems. They are the prostitutes who have been unlucky enough to get trapped serving an age old function that offers very little opportunity for living in the Cummings' sense of the word.

\textsuperscript{1} Friedman, pp. 88-89.
The poem "the waddling" (86) describes the scene inside a crowded bar where

under the window walk
the unburied feet of
the little ladies more than dead

The same line, "little ladies more/than dead..." (97) is the first line of another poem in the same section. The poem uses repetition of that line and the repetition of lines in French that the individually named prostitutes use to entice prospective customers to indicate the sad staticness of their lives. Although mentioned as individuals, "Mimi," "Marie Louise Lallemand," and "Lucienne" all say primarily the same thing. There is little originality. The monotony of their situation and their subsequent deadness is emphasized by the continual "little ladies more/than dead exactly dance...precisely dance...accurately dead...ladies skillfully/dead precisely dance...precisely dance in my head/ladies carefully dead."

Probably the most poignant depiction of a prostitute's living death is "raise the shade" (88).

raise the shade
will youse dearie?
rain
wouldn't that

got yer goat but
we don't care do
we dearie we should
worry about the rain

huh
dearie?
yknow
i'm
sorry for all the
poor girls that
gets up god
knows when every
day of their
lives
aint you, oo-oo. dearie
not so
hard dear
you're killing me

This poem could easily be interpreted as a simple comic
demimonde portrait, but the subtext of the poem suggests much
more than a picture of a prostitute complaining about the
weather and feeling sorry for "respectable" working girls.
Cummings' carefully chosen line ends, "we don't care do," and "we dearie we should," indicate that she cares about the
rain more than she admits. The short rhythmic lines are also
a clue to what she is really like behind her simple words.
William Heyen provides this analysis:

...the poem becomes a wide psychological portrait in
a few words and a brilliant example of dramatic irony...
She thinks of their (the girls) routine as hard and
dreary, but speaking in Cummings' chosen rhythms she
reveals the monotony of her own affairs: 'oo-oo,
dearie//not so/hard dear...' In these terms 'you're
killing me' becomes a kind of prayer for any light
on this wasteland. But it is raining, of course, and
her partner is not sufficiently interested in her
slow death even to say one word.

Although the words "death" and "dead" are not mentioned in
the poem, the feeling of this woman's doom is whispered subtly
throughout.

The last poem to be analyzed from this early mostpeople
stage in Cummings' writing is about a poor little dead person
named "Effie" (95).

1Heyen, p. 139.
here is little Effie's head
whose brains are made of gingerbread
when the judgment day comes
God will find six crumbs
stoo~ing
by the coffinlid
waiting for something to rise
as the other somethings did--
you imagine His surprise
bellowing through the general noise
Where is Effie who was dead?
--to God in a tiny voice,
i am may the first crumb said
whereupon its fellow five

cried the third crumb, i am should
and this is my little sister could
with our big brother who is would
don't punish us for we were good;

and the last crumb with some shame
whispered unto God, my name
is must and with the others i've
been Effie who isn't alive

just imagine it I say
God amid a monstrous din
watch your step and follow me
stooping by Effie's little, in

(want a match or can you see?)
which the six subjunctive crumbs
twitch like mutilated thumbs:
picture His peering biggest whey

coloured face on which a frown
puzzles, but I know the way--
(nervously Whose eyes approve
the blessed while His ears are crammed

with the strenuous music of
the innumerable capering damned)
--staring wildly up and down
the here we are now judgment day

cross the threshold have no dread
lift the sheet back in this way.
here is little Effie's head
whose brains are made of gingerbread
Effie represents a person who was dead while alive. Her head is made of gingerbread crumbs. It is judgement day and little Effie has been brought before God for judgement. God waits for Effie "to rise/as the other somethings did--". Effie does not rise, however, because her whole being is made of six little crumbs named "may," "might," "should," "could," "would," and "must." The crumbs cry out to God, "we were good" which is a true statement since they were not bad. From Cummings point of view, however, Effie never existed at all because Effie never experienced life. "Would," "should," "could," "may," "might," and "must" are words that express the possibility of something happening but no actual action--no "being." Only "must" feels any shame for having "been Effie who isn't alive."

The image of death as being a loud busy place with people being directed to "watch your step and follow me" and God checking Effie's coffin and finding six gingerbread crumbs is a comic one. Someone offers Him a match to look into the coffin and when He looked He saw six crumbs "twitch like mutilated thumbs." God frowns and is puzzled. This is His big day and He does not know what to do. He is supposed to "know the way" and "approve/the blessed," but all he knows is that he is nervous and the damned are making too much noise dancing.

God's final decision for Effie is rather ambiguous. What does God do with Effie?

cross the threshold have no dread
lift the sheet back in this way.

To which threshold is He referring--hell or heaven? What is the sheet that is being lifted back? Could it be a cookie sheet?
Where Effie is going seems unclear, but the most important point in relation to the death motif is that Effie is the same as she was in the coffin before God saw her. Someone else still must "lift" her for she still is not alive. Her brains remain the same dead gingerbread that they were. Effie will not live after death anymore than she did during life.

The term "most people" and the concept of the majority of people in the world being dead crystalizes as a motif in No Thanks.

The poem "most people" (295) follows the same line of thought as "here is little Effie's head," but the concept is expanded to include everyone in the world who is dead because they are afraid to live.

most people
simply
can't)
won't (most
parent people mustn't
shouldn't) most daren't
(sortof people well
youknow kindof)
aint

&
even
(not having
most ever lived
people always) don't
die (becoming most
buried unbecomingly
very
by
most people
This image of dead mostpeople has crystalized into a point. The poem lacks the compassion of "raise the shade" (80) or the ambiguous humor of "here is little Effie's head" (95). The word choices are relatively unambiguous. Mostpeople have not lived because they are programmed by parents, teachers, bosses, and governments to think that they "can't," or they "won't" or they "mustn't," "shouldn't," "daren't" or "ain't." The array of parenthesis support the feeling that mostpeople are boxed in and closed off from life by their programmed excuses of "can't" and "shouldn't." Cummings' use of parenthesis gives the enclosed phrases a whispered, under-one's-breath, or behind-one's-back tone which would be an appropriate image to associate with mostpeople. Finally, the parenthesis are placed so that the words outside of the parenthesis provide an even clearer picture of mostpeople. The words outside of the parenthesis read as follows:

most...won't...most daren't...
aint/\&/even...don't/die...people

The strongest image is found in the last six lines of the poem. Without parenthesis or line ends the lines read:

people always don't die becoming most buried unbecomingly very by most people

The picture of people not dying, but still being buried by more of their kind is not only "unbecomingly," but also gruesome. In light of Cummings' transcendental thought, the lines also take on a second meaning. The dead are "becoming most buried," but they are not transcending. They are not becoming something else. They are "unbecomingly." Finally, the whole image is broadened by the last line which suggests that the whole futile
process of mostpeople being buried "unbecomingly" is really a cycle that will always be continued by another generation of "most)people."

The deadness of mostpeople because of conformity is even stronger in the poem "worshipping Same." (314) In addition to providing a detailed description of mostpeople, Cummings contrasts the image with a picture of the perfect individual. Mostpeople are depicted as

worshipping Same
they squirm and they spawn
and a world is for them, them; whose
death's to be born)

In this one stanza Cummings incorporates many of the causes of mostpeople's deadness. The poem "worshipping Same" shows their religious attitude toward conformity. The word "spawn" in the second line could be considered an affrontal attack on the sex of mostpeople. Although they "spawn," they do not love. The third line could be interpreted as meaning that mostpeople think the world is for them, and their massive numbers support their belief. Finally, the cutting line of attitude is "whose/ death's to be born." These people are dead in the Cummings' sense at birth.

In contrast, the individual dreams "a thousand dreams thick," he laughs "a million griefs wide," his shoulders are "a hundred joys high." He defies the traps of mostpeople by refusing to exist in their world. He lives in paradoxes of "white darkness" and "black light." He lives in the transcen-
dental world

dancing isn't on why, digging bridges with mirrors
from whispers to stars;
climbing silence for ifs
diving under because)
By providing this picture of his ideal "human being," Cummings has also strengthened the negative image of most people. The beauty, strength, and life of the individual works to make most people's existence appear even more dead.

The poem, "worshipping same," presents a theme of the individual towering over dead most people. This concept of conformity causing death is also a motif in "kumrads die because they're told)" (296). In the poem, Cummings not only condemns "kumrads" for conforming, but he also condemns governments for trying to tell men what to do. Governmentindoc trination, like communism, kills the individual and therefore kills the men:

kumrads die because they're told) kumrads die before they're old

The sing-song rhythm of the poem and the mispelling of "comrades" adds a condescending tone to the speaker's attitude. This condescending tone makes people look stupid who would die and dance and hate because a government told them to do so. They are not feeling their lives out for themselves and are, therefore, dead.

We have established some basic characteristics of dead most people up to this point: (1) they are afraid to live and are programmed with "can't" and "would" and "could" and "should," (2) most people are conformist "squirming in same" so that they can follow in others' footsteps rather than having to live and die following their own feelings, and (3) most people are "killed" by governments and manmade limitations that tell people what to do and keep them from living their own lives.
A fourth characteristic of dead mostpeople is that they consider thinking more reliable than feeling. This concept is clear in poem 23 of No Thanks (292) which begins

he does not have to feel because he thinks
(the thoughts of others, be it understood)

Cummings' subject is a man named Smith who thinks he knows how things should be. When analyzing the situation of Mr. Jones owing him money he comes to the logical conclusion that Jones should pay him "what he knows he owes." Since Smith refuses to feel, however, an understanding of the problem is beyond him. The poem reads:

because he cannot understand, he drinks
(and he drinks and he drinks and he drinks and)

He drinks until he is "dead." The speaker asks "Life, dost Thou contain a marvel than/this death named Smith less strange?"

Smith is an example of mostpeople "dead" in a man who refuses to feel.

The clearest example of feeling prevailing over thinking in relation to death exists in "dying is fine)but Death" (431). Although mostpeople are not directly mentioned, the poem is clearly divided into two attitudes towards death--Cummings' and mostpeople's.

dying is fine)but Death

?o
baby
i

wouldn't like

Death if Death were
good:for
when (instead of stopping to think) you
begin to feel of it, dying
's miraculous
why? be
cause dying is
perfectly natural; perfectly
putting
it mildly lively (but
Death
is strictly
scientific
& artificial &
evil & legal)
we thank thee
god
almighty for dying
(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death

"Dying" in the poem is flowing and natural. One can only experience the miracle of death when one allows himself to feel. Unfortunately, there is a whole world of mostpeople who "stopping to think" came up with the notion that "Death is strictly/ scientific/ & artificial &/ evil & legal)." The speaker thanks God for his ability to die, then asks that He forgive those who worship "the sin of Death." The contrasting images are cut and dry in this poem. In the "dying" section words flow into each other while "Death's" descriptions are short and cold. Even the sound of the word "dying" is more pleasant to the ear than the shorter, harsher word "Death." "Dying" is for human beings, "Death" is for mostpeople.

By analyzing the mostpeople motif, we discover Cummings' unique paradoxical use of "dead" and "death" in regards to people who are really still alive in a physiological sense. As we
study the love motifs and natural cycle motifs of Cummings' works, we will find that physiological death as we see it in the "ordinary" world does not really exist in Cummings' works. His images of death are transcendental. He considers death spiritually in his poems. This is especially true in the motif of love transcending death.

Love is the key to Cummings' world. Pure love is seen as "simply perfect givingness" and is the sort of passionate, spontaneous act that enables one to transcend death. Love is the "axis of the universe" and if one can walk in love, unselfishly and with confidence in his life as an individual, one would be able to see both sides of the universe--life and death. When one can see both life and death and can see that all in the natural world is eternally living, dying, and being born again, then time loses all significance. Through love one has transcended life and death into timelessness--the ultimate transcendental state of existence.

A short simple love poem in 95 Poems expresses this love motif economically and yet passionately.

why from this her and him
did you and did i climb
(crazily kissing)till
into themselves we fell--

how have all time and space
bowed to immortal us
if in one little bed
she and he lie(undead)  

1 Friedman, p. 10.
2 #73 of 73 Poems by E. E. Cummings (1963).
3 ibid.
4 #22 of 95 Poems by E. E. Cummings (1958).
Lovers who have just made love transcend "her and him" and become "immortal us." There in their little bed "her and him" have died and "she and he" have been reborn. Now they lie there--"(undead)."

A more ambiguous love sonnet written earlier in Cummings' career contains the same love motif of transcendence of death. The poem is titled "that which we who're alive in spite of mirrors" (279).

that which we who're alive in spite of mirrors
(have died beyond the clock)we, of ourselves
who more a part are (less who are aware)

than of my books could even be your shelves
(that which we die for; not when or unless
if or to prove, imperfectly or since
but through spontaneous deft strictly horrors

which stars may not observe; while roses wince) that which we die for lives (may never cease views with smooth vigilant perpetual eyes

each exact victim, how he does not stir)

O love, my love! soul clings and heart conceives

and mind leaps (and that which we die for lives

as wholly as that which we live for dies)

To understand the development of the love motif, one must watch the gradual growth of the thought that begins "that which we" in line 1, and grows to "that which we die for" in line 5, and becomes "that which we die for lives" in line 9, and concludes "and that which we die for lives/as wholly as that which we live for dies)." The poem is describing "the sense in which love lives." ¹

¹ Edith Everson, #55, Explicator, March, 1974.
Edith Everson explicates the poem in the following manner:

The words 'may never cease' point out that love is indeed eternal, but not in the manner of permanent fixed values. The dynamic word 'perpetual' is used to describe love's aliveness, suggesting an unlimited capacity for self-renewal. To the notion of 'dying' then, must be added the concept of renewal so that dying and rebirth together define the motion which characterizes love. ¹

This is an intelligent analysis of a difficult poem, but it fits directly into the design of Cummings' love motif regarding death.

A third example of the love motif captures the essence of what love and transcending death are to Cummings—joy!

The great advantage of being alive (instead of undying) is not so much that mind no more can disprove than prove what heart may feel and soul may touch—the great (my darling) happens to be that love are in we, that love are in we

a billion brains may coax undeath from fancied fact and spaceful time—no heart can leap, no soul can breathe but by the sizeless truth of a dream whose sleep is the sky and the earth and the sea.

For love are in you am in i are in we

The concept being expressed in the love motif is not complicated. To be alive, as opposed to "undying" or "dead," to always follow the heart and the soul rather than the mind, and to be in love, joyously in love, are the keys to timelessness and therefore deathlessness.

Timelessness, deathlessness, and eternity are also inherent aspects of the natural cycle motif. We see in Cummings' work that seasons, stellar systems, and especially the growth of flowers all indicate the existence of a natural

¹ ibid.
world surrounding the "ordinary" world of men. Inherent in this natural world are cycles of being born, growing, dying, and being born again. This process has been happening to the sun, the moon, seasons, and flowers since time began. Cummings sees these cycles as continuing on till the end of time. Through an awareness of the natural world, one can transcend the static ordinary world and become a part of the natural cycle. The images in "when god lets my body be" (13) are simplified forerunners of the images that eventually materialized into a basic principle of Cummings' transcendental thought. It reads:

when god lets my body be

From each brave eye shall sprout a tree
fruit that dangles therefrom

the purpled world will dance upon
Between my lips which did sing

a rose shall beget the spring
that maidens whom passion wastes

will lay between their little breasts
My strong fingers beneath the snow

Into strenuous birds shall go
my love walking in the grass

their wings will touch with her face
and all the while shall my heart be

With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea

In this poem Cummings very literally makes the dead speaker a growing, living entity in nature even though he is in the "ordinary" sense, dead. His eyes sprout trees, a rose grows between his lips, and his heart is with "the bulge and nuzzle of the sea." The image of death is alive. When the speaker envisions his death, he pictures himself becoming just another living part of the earth.
Cummings often incorporated the natural cycle motif by providing an analogy or reference to the seasons. A distinct autumn/winter theme underlies the first eight lines of "am was. are leaves few this. is these a or" (354). The "am" has changed to "was." The leaves are scarce whereas they used to be "-ful." The sky reflects "how colding hereless." The image is similar to "like Coney Island in winter" in that he describes the air as being "immense live," but there is no action happening right now, it is alive "without every dancing." The image of life and spring begins with the lines

\[
gone snow gone \quad yours mine \quad \text{We're}
\]
\[
alive and shall be: \ldots \]

Spring has arrived and rebirth begins. The speaker can see that ordinary people are not a part of the rebirth; their cities kill the grass, and men and women are devoured by reasoning. In the meantime, the speaker and his love are free from the ordinary world and are a part of the natural world. They digest the greenness of spring.

The key thought regarding death is found in the last two lines which read:

\[
such freedom such intense digestion so much greenness only dying makes us grow
\]

The speaker has summarized the essence of being as a part of the natural cycle. After one continues digesting greenness for a period of time, the action becomes static. The growing has stopped. Only by dying can one continue changing—"only dying makes us grow."
An analogy of seasons to a man's death is applied in "enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh." The persona sees "one/dead leaf stirring makes a crash" and knows that "autumn has gone." Rebirth, symbolized by "april," lies "far away" and the persona wonders "will winter never come?" The speaker feels that his old age ("autumn") is over and he knows that rebirth ("april") will not come before winter. He asks for death by calling for winter. He sees himself in "perpetual roaming whyness." He is ready to grow by dying.

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The stars, the moon, and the sun are also important images in Cummings' natural cycle motif. The moon disappears and is reborn every month. The sun rises and descends every day. Stars, in a very unscientific, Cummings' sense, are eternal. If man is willing to try to become one with these eternal phenomenon, he, too, "adventures deathlessness." This concept is brilliantly expressed in "noone and a star stand, am to am" as well as many other Cummings poems.

One poem stands out among Cummings' works as employing all three of Cummings' transcendental death motifs. "Anyone

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1 #67 of 73 Poems.
2 #49 of 95 Poems.
3 ibid.
lived in a pretty how town" (370) provides a perfect micro-
cosm where motifs of mostpeople, love, and natural cycles all
intertwine.

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain
In this microcosm we see our Cummingsesque hero, an individual named "anyone" who sings and dances whether things "did" happen the way he wanted them to happen or "didn't" happen as he would have liked them to happen. "Anyone" lives in a "how" town. The term "how" is rather ambiguous, but in the context of Cummings' mostpeople motif, it could mean a town where folks pretty much do things they know "how" to do, things they have been told "how" to do, putting themselves in a rut that they don't know "how" to get out of. These people "cared for anyone not at all." He was an individual singing and dancing while "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same." The monotony of mostpeople's existence is very clear.

The love motif begins in the third stanza. Luckily for "anyone," "noone" fell in love with him. She experienced his joys and his sadness with him. While in the town "someones" and "everyones" were getting married and killing their hopes by saying their "nevers" and sleeping their dreams, "anyone" and "noone" were experiencing the seasons, the trees, the leaves, and the stirrings and stillness of nature. Cummings gives children credit for understanding "anyone" and "noone's" love, but unfortunately, as the snow well knows, children forget to remember the truths they see through innocent eyes when they are young.

The natural cycle motif is found in the reoccurring, yet always changing expressions "spring summer autumn winter" and "sun moon stars rain." As the poem progresses on the page, the seasons are changing. "Sun moon stars rain" also appear
and change order throughout the poem. The repeating yet subtle changing of these two lines adds a rhythm to the poem that captures the essence of the cycles of nature. The final line also indicates that the cycle will continue even after the poem has stopped.

The explanation of death in the microcosm is found in the seventh and eighth stanzas. "Anyone" died and "noone"'s spirit joined him in death. The "busy folk" were blind to the love between "anyone" and "noone" when they were alive and they continued to be blind after they buried "them side by side." Therefore, they miss the miracle of rebirth that Stetler describes in the following manner. "Anyone" and "noone" "...have changed their comparatives into superlatives. They have converted a tentative into a positive. They have not ceased to be. They have merely graduated into the present tense."¹

The last stanza wraps up the poem. We see again the repetitive backwards world of the women and men in the "how" town, the continuing cycle of the seasons, and the eternal constance of "sun moon stars rain."

In conclusion, the statement that Cummings' works are marked "by a refusal to accept death" should be re-evaluated. After establishing Cummings' use of these four death motifs: personified death, mostpeople, love, and natural cycles, one can find an awareness and acceptance of death in the majority of his poems. His poems do reflect, however, that he simply refuses to accept death as the end of living. He refuses to

¹ Stetler, p. 80.
strip death of its mystery. He does not think death can be neatly organized into "the syntax of things."

This short poem from is 5 (208) serves as an appropriate closing.

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis
Appendix A

A Chronological List of the Poetry of E. E. Cummings

1923  Tulips and Chimneys
1925  XLI Poems
1925  & (and)
1926  Is 5
1931  W (viva)
1933  No Thanks
1938  Collected Poems
1940  50 Poems
1944  1 x 1
1950  Xaipe
1958  95 Poems
1963  73 Poems
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