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 everything, catastrophic included.
THEMATIC CONFIGURATION

Poetry bears testimony to the poet's \textit{weltanschaung}, his sense and sensibility, his dreams and reveries. In order to understand all the structures of signification in Cummings' poetic discourse, one needs to reflect on the thematic spectrum of his poetry, his view of life, 'the why' of his work. It is quite evident from our earlier discussion that Cummings has sincerely and persistently trampled down all those conventions that impede the precise and vigorous rendering of his poetic impulse. His stylistic technique is a direct consequence of his personal conviction - that of an individualist and a protestant who protests against all restrictions and regimentations. In this chapter we shall probe into Cummings' artistic imagination and aesthetic values by examining the thematic configuration in his verse. In the process we shall explain the nature and variety of the different kinds of poems Cummings has written as a result of his having a particular kind of world-view.

At the heart of Cummings' most characteristic verse is a keen sense of the cosmic dichotomies; Love and death, the natural and the artificial, "I" and the "mostpeople". Unlike many poets of his time, he is not the inhabitant of 'the ghost-town of solipsism' nor he trots along
the 'brink of nihilism'. Lampooning against all those things he loathes, he is always at the forefront to celebrate and affirm the individual human spirit. Cummings often displays his faith in the beneficence of pure emotional being; he has relentlessly fought against everything that devitalizes genuine human emotions and feelings. The singular subject, the first person 'I', in Cummings' verse, reveals a propensity to stretch itself out, in a rapturous expansion of consciousness that embraces life, in all its hues, finally to dissolve in a simultaneous celebration of several things, a merging into Creation at large. An Emersonian emphasis on individualism - self-reliance - has remained the dominant theme throughout Cummings' career. The poet adores the man who

( would rather make than have and given than lend
being through failures born who cannot fail

having no wealth but love, who shall not spend
my fortune (although endlessness should end)

For Cummings, self-realisation is the supreme motto of life, the sole motive for his artistic pursuits. His poetic persona always argues that the blind submission to mass life always hinders man's true response to the prevalent reality. His poetry is always in search of a
complete man - a man apart from men, a man who feels and lives without pretension and hypocrisy. The poet finds immense pleasure in everything truly alive. He scoffs at those people who yield to rules and regulations, sordid customs and norms, the New England puritanical heritage, behaving like mere automatons. As an artist, he maintains unquestionable fidelity to himself and the life he is endowed with. One of his characters says:

my specialty is living said
a man (who could not earn his bread
because he would not sell his head)
squads right impatiently
replied two billion public lice inside
one pair of trousers (which had died)

(No.11, New Poems)

Cummings' romantic individualism has affirmed that true life is revealed only when the individual is free. Only in his freedom, the individual can raise his voice defiantly in his transcendental affirmations. William Heyen notes that 'Cummings' transcendentalism explains his unconcern for consistency, his glorification of intuition, his optimism, even the undercurrent of satirical instruction...'. Oneness, the individual, the first person 'I' - gets prominence in Cummings' poetic world. The following lines illustrate this recurrent theme: "we're
wonderful one times one", "there is nothing as something as one", "not all matterings of mind/equal one violet", "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one". Quite often the poet, by identifying himself with "noones" and "anyones" as opposed to 'someones' and "everyones”, discovers his own self, and explores the mystery of life. Cummings' poetic persona asserts that "life is more true than reason will deceive". Like D.H. Lawrence, Cummings denounces the fribbling interventions of intellect, and yields to the dictates of his personal dream and passion. He refuses to conform with the will of the mob. Stephen E. Whicher writes that 'Cummings' “I” is a sort of enchanted garden apart from the crowd where the self can wall out what it dislikes and hug its uniqueness. His poems thus fall into two parts, "innocent" hymns to the life of the self and rough satires on "mostpeople". Cummings is a great defender of his instinctive self when he sings his songs of love, and when he celebrates the beauties of the natural world - moon, spring, stars, birds, flowers, snow. For the poet, the instinctive self of the individual is always in harmony with the nature, by responding to it through intense and genuine feelings. Again and again, in several poems, Cummings hoots at the stereotypical, analytical power of the mind which, according to him, is detrimental to the individual's spiritual growth. He always strives to retain the purity of his vision apart from the prescriptions and
prohibitions of society. In the Epicurean sense, all his pursuits are
directed towards achieving selfhood. Like Wordsworth or Whitman,
Cummings has mostly striven to incorporate his own personal
development in his poetic achievement. ‘Freshness of response and
accuracy in its expression’ are the qualities, he has always sought and
often achieved.

In his entire body of poetry, ‘love’ has always got the sharpest
focus. For Cummings, only through the vision of love, one can perceive
the whole, because wholeness is not the property of the empirical world
per se; it is the result of one’s weltanschauung. For the poet, ‘love’ is the
virtue “that strolls the axis of the universe”, it is the very essence of
existence. In the unworld of mostpeople, this virtue is negated. But in
the poet’s world, the lover is the “citizen of ecstasies’. Synthesizing
opposite modes of vision and transcending them, the lover is
paradoxically “foolishwise’ and “proudhumble” who gets the free access
“into the beauty of the truth,” and encounters a timeless world far
beyond that of either life or death:

...............  
he is free into the beauty of the truth;

and strolls the axis of the universe
- love. Each believing world denies, whereas
your lover (looking through both life and death)
timelessly celebrates the merciful
wonder no world deny may or believe

(No. 73, 73 Poems)

‘Love’ has always been Cummings’ most favourite theme. In this poem (No. 42, 50 Poems) the poet is neither platonic nor carnal but frankly and sincerely human in depicting the paradoxical nature of love:

love is more thicker than forget
more thinner than recall
more seldom than a wave is wet
more frequent than to fall

it is most mad and moonly
and less it shall unbe
than all the sea which only
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
less never than alive
less bigger than the least begin
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly
and more it cannot die
than all the sky which only
is higher than the sky

It is a carefully crafted lyric in which the semantic parallelisms, based on antonymy, are judiciously employed. The structuration of the poem significantly lies in the pairings of opposites such as thicker-thinner, forget-recall, seldom-frequent, mad-sane, moonly-
sunly, bigger-littler, alive-die, sea-sky, always-never, deep-high and more-less. In the epigrammatic manner of Catullus, by a series of witty and hyperbolic statements, the poet here seizes upon the essence of love amidst the whole variegated pageant of physical and psychic phenomena. Cummings' uninhibited reflection on love, through a set of subtle poetic images, leads him to make some assertions concerning the salient characteristics of love; Love is beyond the ordinary mental machinations, it is exceptional in its essence, by nature rare and unpredictable (in strophe one); it poses a threat to the human rational intellect, as a passion it is always there, it is unfathomable (in strophe two); it underrates every other victory, it is a victory by itself, more permanent than life, more fundamental and basic than the smallest beginning, more profound than mere pardon (in strophe three); it always stands to the supreme reason, it kindles life with hopes and aspiration, in sum it is above everything (in strophe four).

In his first volume, *Tulips and Chimneys*, the treatment of love as a theme, has an echo of popular romantic notions, reflecting an exuberance about the physical aspect of love. Poems, published during the later period, indicate an awareness of love as the force that perpetuates life and existence beyond death through a kind of
transcendental communion with the forces of the universe. Later poems treat love with a didactic thrust, suggesting that it is the supreme agent of the highest transcendence and the poet is its ardent disciple. Cummings seems to be a great believer in the Christian conception of love as God. As R.M. Kidder (1979:236) observes: ‘it is this sense of God that Cummings’ poems of praise have celebrated, this sense that his satires have sought to protect. It is this sense that Cummings, whose entire body of work is finally an image of himself, would have us to see as the source of his own being’. In his earlier love poetry, when one finds few instances of witty depravity and a sensual cynical flippancy, in his later poetry one finds a brilliant blend of pagan and Christian strains, a vision extending its range beyond hedonistic reflection and platonic platitude. Hardly any poet has expressed the joy of love, at once with such intensity and such elevation. One who loves is truly alive and carries the whole universe within himself - the poet asserts:

(his briefest breathing lives some planet’s year,
his longest life’s a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)
Cummings' doctrine of love does not presuppose any conscious altruistic move, it only underscores the fundamental principle of life - 'fidelity to self'.

His plural, heterogeneous, poetic world is peopled by generals, presidents, famous 'fatheads', Cambridge ladies, salesmen, the tramps, the outcast, the underprivileged and "most people". For Cummings, "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". Cummings is always at loggerheads with the unworld of most people. He hurls his vitriolic satire at "all unfools of unbeing" who "set traps for his heart, / lay snares for his feet'. In the unworld of most people, the attempts to live are provisional, clownish, pathetic, meaningless, and absurd. In Cummings' dream-world, the attempts to live, and to enlarge and intensify life, fill up at every point with triumphant meaning. In his vision, one finds a rare repertoire of all untried possibilities:

such was a poet and shall be and is
- who'll solve the depths of horror to defend
  a sunbeam's architecture with his life:
  and carve immortal jungles of despair
  to hold a mountains' heartbeat in his hand

(No. XXII, LXi)
Cummings' poetic persona advocates the philosophy of extreme self-determinism, in a way supporting Nietzschean free-will. One can easily trace a sort of prelapsarian morality in his vision of life. As Friedman points out, 'man, for Cummings, is still noble, virtuous, and not just potentially in a state of grace'. This transcendental affirmation has its roots in the unitarianism which Cummings has been exposed to during his childhood. Most of his later poems epitomize the essential tenets of 'transcendence' which permeates his poetic vision and his personal ideology — to him, transcendence signifies freedom, a disciplined freedom of course and freedom is the key to self-discovery. In his *i: six nonlectures*, he proclaims:

I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries, and that nothing measurable matters "a very good God damn": That 'an artist, a man, a failure" is no mere whenfully accreting mechanism, but a givingly eternal complexity - neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal nor any un-understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automation, but a
naturally and miraculously whole human being

— a feelingly illimitable individual; whose only
happiness is to transcend himself, whose every
agony is to grow.

On the thematic ground, Cummings' verse can be broadly divided into two main lots: poetry celebrating love and nature with their accompanying metaphysical implications and poetry condemning and satirizing in unmistakable terms all that which stifles the spontaneity of the individual human spirit. In his trenchant but brilliant satirical forays, one finds a fusion of humorous ribaldry and the strident scorn against group conformity and commercialism.

Cummings early love poems are explicitly and blatantly erotic; the vast bulk of his sensual poetry suggests his inherent tendency to shock the puritanical sensibilities of his time. However, it must be noted that a careful assessment of the imagery in his early love lyric reinforces the qualities of spontaneity, aliveness and beauty which the poet always cares for. Referring to some of his sensual poetry, Kidder comments that 'while they are obscene, ironic, and often very witty, they are hardly to be written off as the graffiti of a goatish mind'. In his volume &}, there are
many poems, which the reader may find a bit repulsive due to their 'surfeit of sensuality'. Consider the following stanza:

```
o it's Nice to Get Up In, the slipshod mucous kiss
of her riant belly’s fooling bore
When the Sun Begins To(with a phrasing crease of hot
subliminal lips, as if a score of youngest angels
suddenly should stretch neat necks
just to see how always squirms
the skillful mystery of Hell) me suddenly

grips in chuckles of supreme sex.
```

(Sonnet-Realities, No.1, &)

It would be absolutely wrong to suggest that all his love poetry is poetry of plain venery; there are ample instances where the poet admires his lady for her erotic qualities by taking recourse to wonderful natural imagery by way of comparison: rain, flowers, twilight woods, birds etc. - as in the following piece:

```
i have found what you are like
the rain
    (who feathers frightened fields
with the superior dust-of-sleep, wields
easily the pale club of the wind
and swirled justly souls of flower strike

And the coolness of your smile is stirring of birds
between my arms; but
i should rather than anything
have (almost when hugeness will shut
quietly) almost,

your kiss
```
In the later phase of his poetic career, his poetic persona is viewed as the embodiment of love's creative power. The speaker in the poem extols his lady for the transcendental values rather than carnal qualities. Moving from prurience to spirituality, the poet declares that "love is the every only god" and 'love's function is to fabricate unknownness/(Known being wishless; but love, all of wishing)". In his swift and crisply flexible style, Cummings has unabashedly focused on the supreme virtues of love and lovers which miraculously transcend 'death' and 'time'. Thus the dream world that love creates, is the real world for the poet, where the creative imagination begins to yield its secrets. It is the world where the faces of things are transformed and the facts are replaced by values. For the citizen of this world, time is timeless and the nature revolves at his bidding:

_{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 am in we_

Cummings' exalted vision of life and love, is suggestive of that final silence, the unspoken afterbeat, beyond which the human mind is helpless. The lover in Cummings' verse embodies the metaphor of self-inquisition, the need to redeem the man-made order, by submitting himself to the natural order. The love as the speaker in Cummings'
poetry advocates is not easily attainable, nor is it available to those 'who merely relax into a sensual swoon'. One can achieve it only through surrender and sacrifice:

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"deep in dark least ourselves remembering love only
rides his year.
All lose, whole find"
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Cummings' matter and manner blend well in most of his romantic poems to form and strong a harmonious mood. The lucid, passionate manner, catching at the world by tufts of metaphor, is the aesthetic manifestation of the poet's philosophical affirmation, his artistic eagerness, his need for absolute conviction. At the centre of Cummings' creative output is a keen sense of the mysterious and miraculous nature of life. In his volume *is 5*, he writes:

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"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"
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Here the narrator, with a beautifully persuasive analogy, asserts that "life is not a paragraph", i.e. it is not like a clearly and cohesively composed expression with a marked beginning, a judicious development and a well-planned completion; nor death is a parenthesis, i.e. death cannot necessarily interrupt and restrict the mysterious movement of life.
these lines, the poet figuratively demonstrates that life is not a predictable well-ordered phenomenon and 'death is no dispensable insertion but an unavoidable fact' of this ephemeral world. Hence the narrator in this poem, urges his lady "to laugh, leaning back in my arms" - a wonderful image of love, faith and liberation - and abandon all anguish over the inevitable constraints of the physical world. Cummings cannot be treated as a romantic in the nineteenth century sense of the term; sometimes his commentators have called him a 'neo-romantic' because for Cummings heart and soul are more competent cicerones than mind:

three wealthy sisters swore they'd never part:  
Soul was (i understand)  
seduced by Life; whose brother married Heart,  
now Mrs. Death Poor mind.

Mind, when segregated from heart and soul, pushes the man into an alienated corner of stasis, where nothing stirs, everything is still and sterile. Mind seems to be the satanic agent which severs the link between man and all his natural instincts; it prevents him to go beyond the dictates of the past, it compels him to submit himself before the temporal authority of intellect, and the tyranny of the majority - in consequence the individual man is cut off from truth and reality, and his capacity for an authentic life is severely impaired. For Cummings, the
dominance of mind results in automatism, the burial of the delicate feelings and subtle impulses. As Friedman writes, 'if Mind is the dehumanized Satan of Cummings' universe, Love is its humanized Christ'. There are, indeed, several strands in Cummings' love poetry. In his artistic scheme, he resolves the mystical paradox by stating that "love is more than love" and "love is the whole and more than all". His love lyric has covered a wide spectrum, from blatant sentimentalism to a well-assured position of transcendence, epitomizing the poet's spiritual odyssey, revealing the power of his astringent mind and penetrating imagination.

The truth about Cummings' verse is that it is an ingenious collage of an extraordinary range of themes, which evades a clear-cut classificatory scheme. However, it is quite clear that the chief purpose of his poetry is to discover "himself's own self; his very him". What is easily noticeable in his conceptual vocabulary, is a series of philosophical notions which constitute the typical core of his aesthetic design: "a world of made" vs. "a world of born", oneness vs. sameness, affirmation vs. analysis, fact vs. truth, yes vs. if, I vs. they, am vs. was, fear vs. courage, self-reliance vs. group-conformism and known vs. unknownness.
There are very few poets who can match Cummings in the dexterity with which he handles his satirical compositions. His satirical barbs are most often directed at the ‘collective pseudobeast’ of society, the ‘scientific land of supernod’ and man ‘as the animal without a heart’. The subjects that constitute the main butt of his scorn and ridicule are generally the following: bureaucracy, do-goodism, bandwagoners, bigots, politicians, generals and admirals, so-called celebrities, chauvinists, politics and politicians, scientific commercialism, war and utopian proclamations. Cummings’ vehement satirical views have caused some commentators to accuse the poet of misanthropy; however that could not deter the poet in any way from writing what he has got to write. His sophisticated sense of sarcasm, invective, and nose-thumbings are quite responsible for his unique popularity. In Cummings' satirical ventures, one finds an artistic mingling of the frivolous and serious, which is in no way accidental. It is a result of the deliberate selection of the subject and style on the part of this great master of wit.

Consider the following lines which produce the effect of cant:

obey says toc, submit says tic
Eternity’s Five Year Plan
In Cummings' satirical compositions, people of all types figure. His feeling of revulsion has circled out from Stalin and his "Kumrads" to little Effie and the sterile Miss Gay. "Mostpeople" is a favourite subject for his scorn and ridicule. For Cummings, 'it is a huge and collective pseudo beast, a busy monster, an incredible unanimal':

```
these people socalled were not given hearts
how should they be? their socalled hearts would think
these socalled people have no minds but if
they had their minds socalled would not exist.
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Cummings has had the chance to go to Russia in 1930s and felt that it is a country racked by fear and suspicion. Communists, living under the shadow of Stalin, have become the target of Cummings' satire. For him, these "kumrads" are the 'bigoted defenders' of a social system which mars the growth of the individual spirit. One of his poems states:

```
every kumrad is a bit
of quite unmitigated hate
(travelling in a futile groove
god knows why
and so do I
(because they are afraid to love
```

Cummings has always lashed out at the politicians. In his volume IXI, he writes: "a politician is an arse upon which everyone has sat except a
Reformers and crusaders have also not escaped from his ‘circle of aversion’:

then up rose pride and up rose pelf
and ghibelline and guelph
and ladios and laddios
(On radios and raddios)
did save men from himself

As a satirist, the poet neither fears nor pities the people whom he ridicules. He has detested the salesmen of every type. According to him, “a salesman is an it that stinks .... Whether it’s in lonjewray / or shrouds is immaterial” - a salesman in shrouds here refers to anyone who is in favour of joining the World War II on Stalin’s side. In contrast to these “mostpeople”, he admires the people who believe in the basic premise of human dignity. In Cummings’ poetic world, as Friedman points out, ‘Man as lord of the universe, man as technician, man as salesman, man as weight-lifter and record-breaker are images in direct opposition to man as individual, man as lover, man as artist, man as man’. In the past, many readers of Cummings have found him an egocentric scoffer, especially during his early career, but it is only due to his supreme conviction in the nobility of the human spirit and the free will of the individual that he can scoff at the prevalent tyranny in the
unworld of the majority. Cummings satirical pieces demonstrate some of his original stylistic techniques: 'movement, incongruity and surprise'. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements, quite often, achieves humorous effects. Consider the following lines:

pity this bury monster, manunkind,  
not. Progress is a comfortable disease:  
your victim (death and life safely beyond)  

.................  

A world of made  
is not a world of born-pity poor flesh  
and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this  
fine specimen of hypermagical  
ultraomnipotence.  

.................

Here the poet, in a humorous tone, draws our attention upon the fabricated world of science and technology which is a 'dead world of nonfeeling and nonloving'. In this poem, incongruity operates not merely at the level of content but also in the treatment of language. When at the thematic level, the poet argues that 'progress is a comfortable disease', at the expressive level, he combines colloquial phrases with the pseudo-technical construction - as in "hypermagical
utraomnipotence" -to produce a humourous tone in the poem and also
to reinforce its satirical thrust.

Cummings' poetic vision seems to have been greatly influenced
by the popular entertainment culture of his time - especially burlesque,
circuses, amusement parks, comic strips, movies, and animated
cartoons. As P.B. Mullen (1971: 517) observes, for Cummings, all these
art forms 'demonstrate qualities of aliveness, spontaneity and beauty'.
Humour which is the central element in all forms of popular
culture, has also been an important ingredient in many of his poems. The
incongruous and paradoxical qualities of the art of burlesque have
appealed to the poet's sense of the ridiculous. In the foreword to is 5,
Cummings mentions: "Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally
fond of that precision which creates movement." Hyperbolic
statements, grotesquerie, and mock praise are some of the chief satirical
devices which Cummings uses quite often to amuse, delight, and
provoke his readers:

LONG LIVE that Upwardlooking
Serene Illustrious and Beatific
Lord of Creation, Man:
at a least crooking
of Whose compassionate digit, earth's most terrific
quadrupade swoons into billiard Balls!
A thorough inquiry into the kinds of responses around which Cummings most artistically organizes his poems, would reveal that his poetic persona is surprisingly engaged in a wide variety of activities. In contrast to the popular opinion that Cummings has written only love songs or satires, his work exhibits an enviable range and variety; if there are poems of praise and eulogy and satire, there are also poems of persuasion, reflection, description and proposition. In his first two volumes, *Tulips and Chimneys* and *,* one finds several poems which are descriptive in nature; in these poems the poet portrays the salient 'quality in a character, object, scene, place or event' with absolute precision and accuracy. In his descriptive verse, Cummings depicts the Nature in all its colours and his transcendental world of love and fulfillment. Sun, moon, star, night, sunset and twilight are his major aesthetic signifiers which stress the affirmative romanticism of the poet. In addition to his dream world, the poet also responds to the obscene, brawling and blaring world of whores, lesbians, nightclubs, and restaurants. Urban and rural scenery pieces, the beauties of the natural world - seasons, birds, flowers, snow, and even such little creatures as goldfish, grasshopper, chameleon and porcupine, occupy significant positions in Cummings' descriptive poems. Similarly, people who have fascinated the poet, are the odd and out of the way lot; a scissors -
grinder; a tatter-demalion; an old flower man; a person grinding a scythe-blade or ladies in the park. In contrast to the "mostpeople", he admires the people who possess a unique individual self: his father, Peter Munro Jack, Picasso, Buffalo Bill, Joe Gould, Paul Draper, a Breton sailor, Negroes, Krassin, Jimmy, Savo, Chaucer, a scissors-grinder and more importantly all the lovers in the world. Cummings’ poetic persona also sings the songs of praise for beauty, spring, nature and several natural objects. However, in his poetic world, love gets the first place among all the feelings. Love, in all of its manifestations, constitutes the essential core of his avant-garde aesthetics. Cummings’ best compositions are those in which there is a typical Cummingsesque combination of delightful sensuality and a sense of transcendence.