E. E. Cummings’ grammar, E. E. Cummings’ ungrammar or, speaking plainly, E. E. Cummings’ grammar of deviations is inseparable from his poetry and is one with his style.

The essence of poetry is ungrammaticality. Not only does poetic language essentially differ from ordinary language, as stylistics has tended to demonstrate; but the poetic line by definition interrupts the linearity of language. The movement of the line contradicts and thwarts that of the sentence. Interestingly enough, Cummings wrote few prose poems, and even when composing prose poems, he could not help spacing out and splitting words and clauses. Poetry in general can be regarded as an ungrammatical practice of language. E. E. Cummings’ poetry stems from a grammatical intuition and stands as an exploration of poetic difference. Far from disregarding classical prosody, as some critics have argued, E. E. Cummings exploits the potentialities of poetic form and plays on linguistic differences, either maximalizing or minimalizing them – always dramatizing ungrammaticality.

My thesis here is that ungrammaticality constitutes a strategy of renewal of American poetry. E. E. Cummings is well-known to the public for his typographical eccentricities, especially after his friend William Carlos Williams first drew attention to his esoteric typography and convincingly related it to his poetic language, immortalizing him as “lower case cummings”.¹ Cummings’ diminutive typography, as described by Williams, stands as the objective correlative of his grammar. The fact that his poetic works

should sometimes be reduced to such a minor device as the lower case is no misunderstanding and is perfectly consistent with his poetic grammar. T. S. Eliot declared that he liked E. E. Cummings’ poetry except for his typography, which he obviously did not appreciate it at all.

The concept of grammar should be made clear. By ungrammaticality, I mean the poet’s idiosyncratic typography as well as syntactic irregularities. Grammar, according to Cummings, means writing in all the meanings of the term: writing in the etymological sense of the graph – the Greek word gramma originally means an engraved letter, a letter and a text – and in the usual sense of the rules of combination of linguistic units. Indeed, letters lie at the heart of Cummings’ grammar, which originates in the lower case “i”. A grammarian poet, E. E. Cummings is a poet of the letter.

This definition of grammar, however, does not rely only on a far-fetched etymological basis; as E. E. Cummings’ poetry constantly demonstrates, the two dimensions are interrelated. His visual poems, the poems he calls “poempictures”, as well as his syntactic poems result from the same poetic logic. For typography serves and guarantees syntax, serves as syntax’s assistant. By silently redoubling its latent order, it makes it possible for the reader of a written text to distinguish among meaningful linguistic units and utter them intelligibly.

What E. E. Cummings does with and to syntax is to manipulate and transform signs and units. Meaning, or what Cummings calls “unmeaning” in one his late poems, “Beautiful”2 lies in the accidents, contingencies, and counterpoints of his ungrammatical grammar. “Ungrammar”, a word coined by the poet himself in his notes, and taken up by Irene Fairley in her study entitled E. E. Cummings and Ungrammar,3 should not be distinguished from the concept of “Unmeaning”. Cummings’ grammar of deviations results in deviations of meaning.

Cummings experiences the sensitivity and sensibility of the printed sign. It is no coincidence that his literary career actually began after the First World War with the purchase of a typewriter. Cummings’

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