

Richard Grey: On "Corsons Inlet"

A. R. Ammons exposes a further, crucial way in which much of recent American verse has removed itself from formalism: by dispensing, not only with conventional metres and 'signatory' language, but with the 'symbolic forms' of narrative closure. Revitalising the earlier American interest in 'organic form', Ammons is one among many current writers who want the radiant energy they perceive at the heart of the natural world to become the energy of the poem, 'spiralling from the centre' to inform every line. A poem like 'Corsons's Inlet' dramatises the details of this commitment. It opens in a characteristic way: 'I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning to the sea'. Few human beings appear in Ammons's work, apart from the omnipresent 'I': who is there, however, not to impress but to observe. Ammons is preoccupied with what he calls 'amness', the intrinsic identity of things -- which includes himself, of course, but also 'stairs and paperclips' -- and, in order to know this 'amness', he has to pay attention, 'losing the self' when necessary 'to the victory / of stones and trees'. In this instance, he tells us, the walk on which he embarks liberates him -- from himself, as usual -- and 'from the perpendiculars, / straight lines / of thought / into the hues, . . . flowing bends and blends of sight'. In particular, it releases him into knowledge of the inlet mentioned in the title. Watching its fluid, changing shape and the microscopic lives that animate it, Ammons perceives in it, not a symbol, but an example of what an appropriate form should be. 'In nature there are few sharp lines', the poet comments, and what he sees here is:

an order held

in constant change: a congregation

rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable

as one event,

not chaos

The inlet opens up to him 'the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness': a form of knowing in which there is 'no forcing of ... thought / no propaganda', and a form of expression, an aesthetic shape that is vital and kinetic, a 'field' of action / with moving incalculable centre'.

The notion of the 'field' was one that Williams cherished ('The poem is made of things -- on a field') and that, as we shall see, Charles Olson developed. What such a notion resists, at all costs, is what Ammons calls 'lines' and 'boundaries': demarcations that exclude, hierarchies that prioritise, definitions that impose the illusion of fixity on the flux of experience. There are, Ammons suggests, 'no / ... changeless shapes': the poet-seer must invent structures that imitate the metamorphic character of things. The organisms he creates must respond to life as particularity and process; they must be dynamic, unique to each occasion; above all, they must be open. 'There is no finality of vision', Ammons concludes (with deliberate

inconclusiveness), ' . . . I have perceived nothing completely, / ... tomorrow a new walk is a new walk'. Echoing a whole series of great American texts, Ammons also speaks here for a new generation of poets: who respond to 'The wonderful workings of the world' with their own persistent workings and re-workings of the imagination. 'ecology is my word', Ammons affirms in another, longer poem. 'Tape for the Turn of the Year', ' . . . come / in there: / you will find yourself / in a firmless country: / centres and peripheries / in motion?. ?My other word is provisional,? he continues, ? . . . you may guess / the meanings from ecology / ... / the centre-arising / form / adapts, tests the / peripheries, draws in / ... / responds to inner and outer / change.? Those lines could act as an epigraph to many volumes of American verse published over the past few decades: in which the poet tries to insert himself in the processes of life, and, in turn, the reader is asked to insert himself in the processes of the work.

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