

John Elder: On "Corsons Inlet"

Natural process continually liberates Ammons from what would otherwise be the hardening circles of the mental order. In Emerson's formulation, "the natural world may be conceived as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations which apprise us that this surface on which we stand is not fixed, but sliding." The significant shift from Emerson to Ammons is in the perception that dislocations are perpetual, not "now and then," and that they make available a human fertility of imagination corresponding directly to nature's superficial instability. The Jersey shore, where Ammons lived at one time, figures in many of his poems: its constant motion of wind and sand meets the movement of his accommodating mind. "Dunes" is a brief poem staking a poetic claim in the marginal world at the continent's shifting edge, where nature's universal dislocation is easiest to detect:

Taking root in windy sand
is not an easy
way
to go about
finding a place to stay. . .

Firm ground is not available ground.

In its brevity and the directness of its closing statement, "Dunes" could be read as an epigraph for Ammons's best-known poem, "Corsons Inlet." That poem too is set at the seashore, but in its greater complexity embodies what "Dunes" says. It is like Everson's "Canticle to the Waterbirds" or Levertov's "The Coming Fall," in an inclusiveness of observation that keeps any one image or statement from becoming dominant. "Corsons Inlet" is not a self-contained poetic artifact but a terrain into which the reader may step. Verse records the scattered impressions and reflections of the poet walking by the shore. The body's motion carries the mind, alert and moving, through a world of shifting sand and waterline, minnows and wind. Instead of the conflict of stationary, opposed orders, the walk brings ordered flux. Accordingly, the poem has a journalistic quality in parts, presenting scraps of information about how the sky turns overcast, an egret stalks an unseen prey. Only in the circumambulatory integrity of the poem are these events connected.

Ammons is determined to impose "no form of / formlessness on the "millions of events"; he wants, like the bayberry along the dunes, only "disorderly orders." In the midst of this flow, in the course of his walk, the poet can say, "I allow myself eddies of meaning: / yield to a direction of significance / running / like a stream through the geography of my work." In

"Corsons Inlet," as in his other lengthy poems, Ammons's drift is celebration. And the key word for his experiences of such significance is "eddies": affirmation coalesces in a moment, and then the flow of events continues past. It is a word that recalls Whitman:

I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look under your bootsoles.

Effusions and eddies cannot be compressed into discrete orders, because they are continually merging with the larger disorderly orders of the world. Ammons's rhythms and syntax convey the world's constant reformulation. David Kaistone's analysis of this effect in "Salience" is equally descriptive of "Corsons Inlet": "Nouns are suspended in a chain of participial explosions ... you almost feel that the verbal motion is more important than the mixture of abstractions and particulars swept along." Such a dynamic vision of reality leads, in Ammons, to a certain modesty of statement, though accompanied by the broadest ambitions for connectedness and for participation in the natural order: "I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will / not run to that easy victory: / still around the looser, wider forces work: / I will try to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder. . . ." Like Berry and Pack, Ammons practices a poetry of "proud humility." But where they root their poetry in the chosen landscapes of personal experience, he finds his art among the shifting winds and dunes of process, the country where every walk must follow a wavering shore.

"Corsons Inlet" has a great deal in common with that other extended meditative poem, "Sunday Morning." But Ammons's final stanza underlines the poems' crucial difference. Stevens's natural order, after the collapse for him of the Christian system, is "an old chaos of the sun," and his tone is a mingling of nostalgia and exhilaration in the freedom that comes with submission to universal entropy: these are the complex feelings compressed into the poem's last line, "Downward to darkness, on extended wings." For Ammons, though, the emphasis is on the way in which nature and the poet alike break open old orders continually, to liberate the materials from which new orders may be "grasped." Decay is, as we have seen, a central process of human experience as of the earth, and is in both realms a renewing dynamic. Accordingly, the world of Ammons's poetry is always presented as a freshly emerging event. In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead generalizes the creative dimension of each moment in this way: "An event is the grasping into unity of a pattern of aspects." And in Ammons's poems the sequence of natural shifts and the path of human consciousness are tied into just such a pattern of coherence, in an ecologically balanced art.

Like walking, ecology is one of Ammons's chief formal metaphors. It relates to his knowledgeable fascination with nature's inter twined specifics (Sphere: "touch the universe any where you touch it / everywhere"), and it also speaks to the loose balance of poetic form and experience affirmed by the last stanza of "Corsons Inlet." In *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, Ammons develops this concept most explicitly:

ecology is my word: tag

me with that: come

in there:

you will find yourself

in a firmless country:

centers and peripheries

in motion,

organic,

interrelations!

Later on in Tape's entry of "27 Dec:" he continues his development of this aesthetic:

don't establish the

boundaries

first,

the squares, triangles,

boxes

of preconceived

possibility,

and then

pour

life into them, trimming

off left-over edges,

ending potential:

let centers

proliferate

from

self-justifying motions!

Ammons's dislike of fixed boundaries relates both to what he sees and how he says it. Unlike the majestic blank-verse stanzas of "Sunday Morning," "Corsons Inlet" presents a thoroughly irregular verse form, with the wavering left margin responding to the eddies of perception. Ammons's poetry does not line up and march but holds together in a dense, unhierarchical order of suspension, like a flock of seabirds wheeling above the surf.

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