

Paul Lake: On "Corsons Inlet"

A half century after Pound published his notes on form in "A Retrospect," A. R. Ammons published "Corson's Inlet," a now-classic poetic manifesto, which makes a similar distinction between the organic shapes of nature?and by analogy of free verse?and the more regular symmetries of traditional poetry. In Ammons' poem, the speaker walks among the sand dunes and along the shoreline of Corson's Inlet, watching sand and ocean intermingle, and musing suggestively in words that echo Pound:

. . . I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars
 straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
 of sight . . .

A few lines later, he makes similar observations:

. . . in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of
primrose
 more or less dispersed;
disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows
of dunes,
irregular swamps of reeds . . .

A sharp observer of natural detail, Ammons does note that nature has a few symmetrical, vase-like shapes close to hand, but he quickly dismisses their significance, contrasting their small, tight organization with the more sprawling, dynamic forms all around him:

. . . in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:

snail shell:

pulsations of order

in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,

broken down, transferred through membranes

to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no

lines or changeless shapes: the working in and out, together

and against, of millions of events: this,

so that I make

no form

formlessness . . .

Trained in biology, with a bachelor's degree in science from Wake Forest College, Ammons uses the vocabulary of science to elaborate his ideas. For instance, while looking over the sand dunes and clumps of bayberry, he describes the flocking behavior of a group of swallows, using scientific terms such as chaos and entropy:

. . . thousands of tree swallows

gathering for flight:

an order held

in constant change: a congregation

rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable

as one event,

not chaos . . .

Then while still musing on the birds and other "disorderly orders" he's observed around him, Ammons considers "the possibility of rule" in nature "as the sum of rulelessness."

Thirty years have passed since Ammons published "Corson's Inlet," and in that time, discoveries in science and mathematics have shed new light on the problems discussed in his poem?discoveries with immense significance for our understanding of form and content, nature and art, organic and mechanical form. In retrospect, Ammons' use of the phrase "not chaos" in his description of the swallows' behavior is startlingly prescient because, in fact, a whole new science of chaos?or "anti-chaos;" as it's sometimes called?has come into being precisely to explain such phenomena. Surprisingly, though, what the new sciences of chaos and complexity have shown is that Ammons is wrong in his conclusions about art and nature:

that the "rule" of nature is not the sum of "rulelessness," as he proposes, but is clearly derived from formal rules and principles, which can be described and even imitated by a new form of mathematics called fractal geometry. Thanks to these new discoveries, we now know that the "order tight with shape" he observes in a tiny snail shell is the same order seen in "the large view": in coastlines, weather systems, sand dunes, mountain ranges, and galaxies. That the laws governing the growth of trees?as well as of leaves, ferns, pine cones, and sunflowers?is the same law that governs the growth of human organs, snowflakes, tornadoes, bird wings?and, I will argue, the elegant, broken symmetries of formal verse.

It turns out that writing formal poetry is not at all like pouring water into a vase, but, rather, like the growth of a tree?far more so than writing free verse, which, except in special cases, is too ruleless, arbitrary, and mechanical to produce the organic integrity of a good sonnet.

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