

Bonnie Costello: On "Gravelly Run"

Ammons participates in some of the same contemporary pastoralism for which Snyder is known. Both poets intermix religious and scientific (especially ecological) discourse, though Ammons is more Emersonian than Zen-like. Both poets also attempt to combine the prophetic with the lyric voice, offering the soil as the object and model of man's intelligence. Ammons often hovers around an immanentist mode which abandons all rhetoricity in the presence of the particular, but his imagination never truly entertains the primitive. While he enjoys those moments when poetic authority is disarmed by natural presence, the submissive or natural voice is often a foil for a highly rhetorical vision. If he subscribes at all to the notion that the soil is man's intelligence, it is more as plunderer than as apostle of that soil that he displays his debt .

Early Ammons displays on the surface a great deal of anxiety about the relation between landscape and imagination. But often the result of that anxiety is a reassertion of the imagination's independent purposes.

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Ammons's "Gravelly Run" could almost be read as a narrative of Snyder's ambition and its failure. The proposed project of the imagination is the sloughing off of the self's enterprise, a yielding to the curves and rounds of external sensation, a surrender "to the victory / of stones and trees." But he does not yield to this nostalgia. At the end of the poem the pilgrim truly "look[s] and reflect[s]," and he finds no reflexivity. The air, as Stevens said, "is not a mirror ." Only later will Ammons discover in the air the "bare board" on which to project an analogous terrain of the mind. For now the air is a "glass / jail." Transparency, continuity, immanence, all such myths are undone by material sensation. "Hoist your burdens, get on down the road," he commands (Collected Poems 55-56). The road will lead ultimately to "For Harold Bloom," a sublime reworking of Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" and the figurative stance toward the landscape. But it repeatedly turns back toward the particular, and occasionally the poet mistakes the particular for his destination.

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