

Stephen Cushman: On "Corsons Inlet"

. . . from the late fifties or early sixties on, Ammons's work demonstrates an awareness of Williams, whether in its use of the rigorously enjambed, short-line stanza, which is one of Williams's trademarks, or in its deepening commitment to the minimally noted fact--what Bloom calls "Ammonsian literalness"--or in direct quotation and allusion, as in this passage from "Corsons Inlet":

the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness:

the "field" of action

with moving, incalculable center:

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 [of]

 formlessness.

Commenting that "in a difficult transitional passage, the poet associates the phrasal fields of his metric with the 'field' of action on every side of him," Bloom either ignores or does not recognize Ammons's direct reference, signaled by his use of quotation marks, to the title of Williams's important essay "The Poem as a Field of Action" (1948). Among other relevant remarks, that essay argues that "our prosodic values should rightly be seen as only relatively true." Furthermore, if in doubt about the presence of Williams in "Corsons Inlet" and in the period of Ammons's life from which it comes, one has only to look to the piece that precedes it in the chronologically arranged *Collected Poems*. Titled "WCW," this short poem exults:

"What a / way to read / Williams!" Even the most skeptical antagonist of influence theory, let alone its chief formulator, would have a difficult time ignoring these signs.

The transitional passage from "Corsons Inlet" is difficult, but it bears directly on "The Ridge Farm" and on a larger discussion of form. In the lines "this, / so that I make / no form of / formlessness," the antecedent of "this" appears to be "the working in and out," recalling "the coming and going," "of millions of events," each reflecting some degree of order. This working in and out, then, reveals itself to the "I" of the poem, informing and instructing his poetic procedure ("so that I make"). The question is, What do these lines mean? Do they mean that having been instructed by the events of Corsons Inlet, the "I" will not attempt to impose a form on an overall, subsuming formlessness, a kind of undifferentiated plenitude that transcends the polarities of form and no form?

At least one statement from Sphere could be enlisted in support of this reading: "The shapes nearest shapelessness awe us most, suggest / the god." Formlessness, then, is an attribute of what is too large and remote to be trapped into shape, call it the god, the Most High, the One, or Unity. But although this reading may persuade locally, it presents two problems for "Corsons Inlet." First, Ammons admits quite explicitly, in terms that suggest his differences with Emerson, that "Overall is beyond me," and "Scope eludes my grasp." In other words, the working in and out of millions of events does not lead Ammons toward the apprehension of transcendent formlessness, even though forms nearest an ideal formlessness may awe him most. Instead, they reveal to him the contours of form in a natural landscape where "terror pervades" because a controlling form appears to be missing. But he refuses to fasten himself to the limited forms he can recognize ("I ... will / not run to that easy victory"), vowing instead to extrapolate from limited forms to larger, more inclusive ones. Meanwhile, he knows and celebrates the knowledge that no form he discovers can be all-inclusive.

Second, if it is true that for Ammons formlessness is an attribute of overall Unity, then there must be two kinds of formlessness with which he concerns himself. Like Stevens's two versions of nothing in "The Snow Man," Ammons's versions of formlessness imply both a condition to be aspired to and a condition to be escaped from. When he explains in "The Ridge Farm" that "one hugs form because / he fears dissolution, openness," he cannot mean that formlessness offers him order or stasis, which some would consider attributes of Unity. He means that form defends him against extreme randomness, chaos, and disintegration. The declaration of mental independence in "Corsons Inlet," "I was released from forms," is deceptive. It does not mean that the speaker now enjoys an Emersonian transparency, as he becomes one with formless Unity. It means that having shed preemptive, a priori forms of thought, he must discover or invent new forms to ward off the terror of dissolution. The search for new form is every bit as urgent as the flight from old, and it is this urgency, and the preoccupation with form it engenders, that links Ammons so closely with Williams.

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