Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 339

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers





Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 339

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Preface

amed "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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A. R. Ammons 1926-2001

(Full name Archie Randolph Ammons) American poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Ammons's career through 2009. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 25, 57, and 108.

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Ammons rose from relative obscurity to critical acclaim upon receiving the National Book Award for his Collected Poems, 1951-1971 (1972). His early writings were compared to those of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his later work to that of Henry David Thoreau. Ammons's work differed in several respects, including his distinctive use of scientific references as well as his graphic language and imagery. He has been noted for his playfulness with the constraints of poetic structure. For example, his use of adding-machine tape for the poem "Tape for the Turn of the Year" and the use of words on the page to create visual images in "Corsons Inlet" and "Sphere" have inspired comparisons to the work of Jack Kerouac. Throughout Ammons's body of work, his themes center on man's relationship with the natural world. His early works muse on the transcendental aspect of death; in later pieces, he shifts his gaze to the finality and inevitability of death, yet never abandons his faith in redemption.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ammons was born on February 18, 1926, near Whiteville, North Carolina. He was the youngest of a tobacco farmer's three children. Ammons's youth in rural southeastern North Carolina during the Depression figures prominently in his poetry. Growing up in a community in which people's livelihoods and, in essence, lives, depended a great deal on the weather fostered Ammons's appreciation of and respect for nature. His daily exposure to nature's powers of creation and destruction translated into a career-long examination and observation of the relationship between mankind and the natural world and the extraordinary in the mundane.

Ammons started writing poetry while in the South Pacific on a U.S. Navy destroyer escort during World War II. After the war, he earned a B.S. from Wake Forest University with a focus on biology and an M.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley.

In 1955, Ammons paid for the publication of his first book, *Ommateum*, *with Doxology*. By 1960, fewer than 20 copies of the book were sold. Ammons continued to write poetry while working a series of jobs over the span of nine years: principal at an elementary school, editor, real estate agent, and executive at a biological glass company that his father-in-law owned. In 1964, he became a professor of English, teaching poetry at Cornell University where he later became Poet in Residence. Ammons continued to teach at Cornell while he received increasing recognition for his poetry, not retiring from his post there until 1998.

Ammons was first recognized as a major American poet in 1972, when he received the National Book Award for his *Collected Poems, 1951-1971*. This was the first of many awards he was bestowed over his fifty-year career as a poet, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry for *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974) and *A Coast of Trees* (1981); an inaugural MacArthur fellowship in 1981; and the Library of Congress's Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry as well as a second National Book Award for *Garbage* (1993). Ammons was also the recipient of the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal, the Ruth Lilly Prize, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Ammons retired from his post as Cornell's Goldwin Smith Professor of Poetry in 1998. A longtime resident of Ithaca, New York, Ammons died on February 25, 2001.

MAJOR WORKS

Ammons's Collected Poems, 1951-1971 was published in 1972. The themes that abound in this collection are aspects of life that he explored throughout his career: creation and destruction; liberation and confinement; and the solitary life of creating poetry and the public act of sharing it with readers. The latter topic is apropos, since this book thrust Ammons into the literary limelight, winning him the National Book Award.

Just two years later, Ammons published a book-length poem, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, which presented the poet and reader with brand new imagery ripe for exploration. The sphere, in this case, is the planet Earth as photographed from space. This image was less than two years old at the time, and Ammons used the opportunity to muse on seemingly disparate elements (for example, the cosmos and the service station). *Sphere* also afforded him an opportunity to examine what he termed the one-versus-many conflict, as evidenced in his poem One:Many, from a philosophical standpoint, along with an analysis of the role of chaos in the genesis of order.

In addition to being a scientist and a poet, Ammons was a painter. The title poem of *A Coast of Trees* paints a picture of a coastline that is lovely and lush but not a livable space for people. Although the poet was middle-aged at the time of the collection's publication, many of the poems deal with old age, endings, and death. "Easter Morning," perhaps the most widely known poem in this book, involves a brother who died while still quite young and the survivor's guilt which remains a daily presence for the narrator.

Upon seeing a landfill near the Interstate 95 corridor in Florida, Ammons was inspired to write the booklength poem Garbage (1993). Ammons won the National Book Award for Garbage, receiving the prize almost 20 years after winning it the first time. Written on adding-machine tape—as was an earlier work entitled Tape for the Turn of the Year (1965)—the text in Garbage is divided into more than 100 individual sections. Having grown up on a farm, Ammons knew which items on a trash mound feed off of others. In the vein of many an Ammons piece, Garbage goes well beyond a discussion of the effects of trash and wastefulness on man and nature. The poem also delves into the creative process, even describing the process of writing a poem. Ammons deftly folds in references to biological processes, philosophical musings about death and transcendence, his prevalent theme regarding the philosophical problem of One-Many, and the seemingly unrelated concepts of diversity and unity.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ammons was largely hailed as a unique talent. Even so, much of that praise was peppered with comparison to other poets and prose writers, including Ezra Pound, Emily Dickenson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jack Kerouac, William Blake, and Henry David Thoreau. Among his champions was Harold Bloom, who asserted that "the line of descent from Emerson and Whitman to the early poetry of Ammons is direct, and even the Poundian elements in *Ommateum* derive from

that part of Pound that is itself Whitmanian." Reviewing *Garbage*, published almost four decades later, David Baker declared it "a brilliant book. It may very well be a great one . . . perhaps even superior to his previous long masterwork, *Tape for the Turn of the Year.*"

Many critics have concurred that Ammons is an innovative, creative, humorous poet, whose works exhibit an adept wit and skillful dexterity with language. Alex Albright has lauded Ammons for his experimentation in form and compared him to Kerouac, yet in the same essay he has few kind words for either poets' earlier, similar pieces that pushed the limits of poetic form. Later scholarly analyses of Ammons's poetry have contributed a broadening perspective on the significance of his place within the genre of poetry, literature in general, and American culture.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Ommateum, with Doxology (poetry) 1955 Expressions of Sea Level (poetry) 1964 Corsons Inlet (poetry) 1965 Tape for the Turn of the Year (poetry) 1965 Northfield Poems (poetry) 1966 Selected Poems (poetry) 1968 Uplands (poetry) 1970 Briefings: Poems Small and Easy (poetry) 1971 Collected Poems, 1951-1971 (poetry) 1972 Sphere: The Form of a Motion (poetry) 1974 Diversifications (poetry) 1975 Highgate Road (poetry) 1977 The Selected Poems: 1951-1977 (poetry) 1977 The Snow Poems (poetry) 1977 Selected Longer Poems (poetry) 1980 A Coast of Trees (poetry) 1981 Worldly Hopes (poetry) 1982 Lake Effect Country (poetry) 1983 The Selected Poems: Expanded Edition (poetry) 1986 Sumerian Vistas (poetry) 1987 The Really Short Poems (poetry) 1991 Garbage (poetry) 1993 The North Carolina Poems (poetry) 1994 Brink Road (poetry) 1996 Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues (prose) 1996

Glare (poetry) 1997

Selected Poems (poetry) 2006

Bosh and Flapdoodle: Poems (poetry) 2005

CRITICISM

Helen Vendler (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: Vendler, Helen. "The Snow Poems and Garbage: Episodes in an Evolving Poetics." In Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A. R. Ammons's Long Poem, edited by Steven P. Schneider, pp. 23-50. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999.

[In the following essay, Vendler finds echoes of Ammons's Snow Poems in the later book-length poem Garbage.]

Ammons's *Garbage* (1993), that great *memento mori*, seems to demand of me a return to *The Snow Poems* (1977), which I wrote about long ago. Imperfectly though I understood *The Snow Poems* at the time, I knew that I liked what I saw. With the advantage of hindsight, I hope to say more about this extraordinary document in the history of American poetry, and about its foretaste of, and differences from, *Garbage*.¹

The Ammons of The Snow Poems has literary antecedents, yes-in Williams's experiments in disjunction, in Stein's experiments with childish aspects of language, in Thoreau's wood-watching, in Whitman's broad democratic vistas, in Frost's shapeliness of form, even in the Beats. Yet none of these poets, except occasionally Whitman, rises and falls from the geophysical sublime to the ignobly ridiculous in Ammons's daring way. Williams-most notably in Paterson—arranges his poem so that it rises, repeatedly, from the basso ostinato of the communal to the flute of solo lyric: he usually distinguishes melodic personal lyric from the continuo of the social. Ammons, however, insists in both The Snow Poems and Garbage that there is a continuo of the personal—the "noise" of the everyday mind-from which the lyric rises and into which it subsides. (Ashbery later suggested something cognate in Flow Chart). This contextualizing of the lyric moment within its nonlyric "surround" is the fundamental device of the modern lyric long poem, from The Waste Land on; we distinguish among poets using this genre by their description of that surround as well as by the nature of their embodied lyrics. Ammons's context is an extraordinarily broad one, in one respect (he does not shrink from showing himself on the toilet, or telling dirty jokes, or experiencing severe, if sometimes comic, anxiety); yet in another respect, the surround of the Ammons lyric moment is narrow. Though amply extended into the natural world, and occasionally into the domestic one, it is rarely political, social, or commercial in the ordinary meanings of those words. It is even rarely literary in an overt sense (though covert literary allusions occur profusely as a form of injoke). In short, Ammons's definition of the human person is different both internally and contextually from the one we meet in the long poems of his fellow poets. And since that definition is made through poetic language, the language also defines what it is, for Ammons, to be human in this moment, in this country.

I want first to take inventory of many items in The Snow Poems that suggest principles in a poetics, and draw from each (hoping not to misrepresent the author) a poetic "commandment" that it is obeying. I then want to suggest how many of these principles have survived in the later poem Garbage, but also to point out what has been modified in the recent work. Garbage is a masterpiece of a different sort, I think, from The Snow Poems—less whimsical (though by no means entirely grave), less linguistically arrogant (though not linguistically humble), less taunting (though not without mockery), less disjunctive (though not without its own leaps and gaps). Yet Garbage is recognizably a descendant of The Snow Poems, and I want to show what Ammons has kept as well as what he has (perhaps only provisionally) discarded. I should begin by saying that all of Ammons's poems, long and short, descend from his first book, Ommateum with **Doxology** (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1955), and from its initial manifesto, which reads, in part:

These poems are, for the most part, dramatic presentations of thought and emotion, as in themes of the fear of the loss of identity, the appreciation of transient natural beauty, the conflict between the individual and the group, the chaotic particle in the classical field, the creation of false gods to serve real human needs. While maintaining a perspective from the hub, the poet ventures out in each poem to explore one of the numberless radii of experience. The poems suggest a many-sided view of reality; an adoption of tentative, provisional attitudes, replacing the partial, unified, prejudicial, and rigid.²

The modern long poem, as has been frequently remarked, is the lyric poet's cast for epic breadth. In the nineteenth century, the novel so dominated utterance that Browning competed with it by writing his lyrically perspectival long poem, The Ring and the Book. Other lyric poets (from Wordsworth to Eliot to Frost) turned to the drama as a possible arena for breadth, but experienced a notable lack of success. The lyric temperament, with its commitment to inward-reflective form, is in most cases the enemy of the social temperament, which is committed to forms and themes that permit interactions among agents (agon, dialogue, marriage, social mobility, war). It is not that lyric dialogue-poems do not exist, but they enact the inner dialogue of the mind with itself, as Arnold (to his own wincing disapproval) saw. The tensions in The Waste Land (no matter what social

metaphors they may borrow) project upon a screen not so much the social interactions of the twentieth century as the patterns of the ravaged Eliotic nerves.

By what strategy, then, can the long lyric poem, confined to the inwardly reflective as its material, achieve both breadth and depth? Each original poet answers the challenge differently. Eliot chose a farranging mental discontinuity—of scenes, of voices, of cultures, and of epochs; Williams chose to identify a man and a city as his version of the one and the many; Stevens (in Notes toward a Supreme Fiction) invented a series of allegorical personae (Nanzia Nunzio, Canon Aspirin) projecting different aspects of his own personality; Crane flung a single continental symbol (the Bridge) of his own Shelleyan aspiration over American times and places; Lowell dissected (in Life Studies) the typology of his own declining class of Boston Brahmins by means of sketches of his family mis à nu, or (in History) wrote a chronicle of his personal "takes" on famous people from Adam to Stalin; Berryman sang the Freudian self in Dream Songs that extended from his own Henry-Id to his whole generation of poètes maudits.

But these are thematic choices, and do not cover another, more exigent, requirement of the long lyric poem: that it represent contemporary language, both in depth and in breadth. Eliot's idea of depth in language was a class-stratified one (from the demotic to classical Greek, from the music-hall to Wagner) and his idea of breadth in language was historical citation (from Jerusalem to London via Athens and Alexandria). To mention only one very different instance, Stevens's idea of depth (or height) in language was a philosophical one (from instantiation to abstraction); his idea of breadth in linguistic reference was a geographic one (Europe to the United States, North to South, Rome to "the more merciful Rome beyond").

And even theme and language-range do not exhaust lyric strategy. A field of resemblance (metaphor, simile, analogy, allegory) tends to characterize any original poet, and can serve (as, for a lyric writer, narrative or agon cannot) as an organizing matrix on which the long poem can be plotted. I have mentioned how Williams "plots" the man Paterson on the matrix of the city: this is Williams's fundamental micro-macro field of resemblance, and, as he hovers over it, he makes the cataract of language equal the falls, the realm of innocent pleasure equal the park, the site of individual guilty violence the slums, and so on. Eliot's matrix of resemblance is the Dantesque one of Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell, and almost any incident in The Waste Land can be plotted against those three allegorical places. Stevens re-plots reality as resemblance: "Things seen are things as seen" (Adagia). Resemblance itself therefore becomes the originating ground of being, while "reality" (in all of Stevens's long poems) becomes a secondary derivation from an initiating resemblance perceived (or posited) by the poet.

And—to conclude this brief set of conditions of creation—the fourth consideration of strategy must be external form: What does the long poem look like on the page? The distracted forms summoned by the ruined mind in *The Waste Land* extend from the song to the heroic couplet, from free verse to metered verse, and from the continuous (the episode of the typist) to the discontinuous (scraps of language blown past the hearer). Nothing could be further from *The Waste Land*, in this respect, than Stevens's imperturbable blank-verse tercets—the emblem of his long-breathed speculative mind—unrolling down the page. And these do not resemble Lowell's phalanxes of sonnets—which by their form assert, for a considerable period, that the Procrustean bed of verse can control the mess of reality.

When we turn to The Snow Poems, what do we find to be Ammons's choice of unifying theme, linguistic depth and breadth, matrix of resemblance, and external forms? The volume, which covers a period from fall to spring, is thematically unified on the "outside" by its series of weather reports on "snow" (the word includes all hideous and beautiful Ithacan varieties of frozen water-icy rain, hail, sleet, slush, icicles. crystal, flake). Ammons's emphasis on his region of the United States explains the dedication of the volume: "for my country." The book is thematically unified on the "inside" by the author's turning fifty and by his father's death. For linguistic depth we are given a "social" scale from the rustic to the philosophic, a literary scale from the obscene to the sublime, and an emotional scale from terror to joy. For linguistic breadth we find a scientific scale extending from electrons through bacteria to galaxies (from quantum physics through biochemistry to astronomy), and a natural scale that runs from chipmunks to mountains. For a field of resemblance, we have the (mostly) visual scenes in the vicinity of Ammons's house, landscapes (from earth to sky) that are drawn on for metaphors of physical and mental dynamisms. And for external form, we have a free-verse ground (comprising 119 short-lined lyric poems, entitled by their own incipits) on which various entertainments are superimposed: small inserted lyrics, bearing their own titles; word-lists linked by sound; little doodles on the typewriter while the writer waits for his compositional impetus to cohere; double and even triple-columns; words running vertically instead of horizontally; and idiosyncratic punctuation (no periods,

just colons and exclamation points, with the odd asterisk thrown in). The book immediately says to the reader "variability," "oddity," "competing impulses," while yet showing these corralled into 119 distinct units. Ammons intends—as he remarked in 1963—a prosody in which "the movement is not across the page but actually, centrally down the page" (SM [Set in Motion], 7). More recently, in 1994, Ammons said that The Snow Poems remains his favorite among his long poems:

It seems to me in that poem I had a more ready availability to the names of things and to images of them than in any of the other long poems. The other long poems were more nearly juggling by some program.

(SM, 101)

Before I turn to *The Snow Poems* in more detail, I want to sketch a thematic and stylistic inventory for Garbage. Its unifying "outside" theme (what Ammons would call its "program") is named in its title: everything in the universe eventually loses function and is discarded as trash. The "inside" theme of the poem is the meaning (or meaninglessness) to the poet himself of his life and his art, given the certainty of personal death and the equal certainty of the eventual unintelligibility of all cultural production. The linguistic range of Garbage is narrower than that of The Snow Poems: there is less obscenity and less sublimity, and a less high-pitched (though no less moving) emotional expression: exclamation points are very rare. (In Garbage, as in most of Ammons's long poems, the usual terminal punctuation is the colon, the symbol of his commitment to provisionality of thought.) To the panorama of the natural world—Ammons's perennial matrix of resemblance-Garbage adds the terrifying vision of the landfill to which everything is eventually consigned for burning. Stevens's version of this was "the trashcan at the end of the world" ("Owl's Clover"), manifested also as a dump ("The Man on the Dump"); but those were cool approachable places on which one can even perch. Ammons's landfill is an unapproachable Florida pit where the silhouetted bulldozer, manned by its new Charon, heaves everything over the edge into a fire. In the fire, everything is cremated into smoke that rises and disperses in the air. Gulls wheel and scream over the site. In terms of external form, Garbage (a 121page poem) is comprised of eighteen "cantos": though these are of irregular length, they are all written (except for an occasional tercet or single line) in loosepentameter blank-verse couplets, which are separated by stanza-breaks that aerate the page. The impression given by the page is one of neatness, but the linebreaks are sufficiently unexpected to keep the couplets from seeming conclusive. Though a steady ongoingness (rather than *The Snow Poems*' lyric fits and starts) is felt in *Garbage*, Ammons escapes, by his waywardness of development, a Lucretian finality.

The aim of any long piece in lyric form (as of any extensive art-piece—drama, novel, opera, a paintingsequence like that of the Sistine Chapel) is to equal the world, to be a "take" on the whole world. To this end, a long poem should be (in Ammons's thinking) as unmanageable as the world. His long poems are all strictly incomprehensible (though entirely understandable): one cannot get one's (mental) arms to encompass them. Yeats wanted to pull "the balloon of the mind" into the "narrow shed" of organized metrical form: Ammons wants the balloon to stay a balloon, to remain buoyant, to hover and float and rise, alluring and evading sight. Thus the uncontainable form of the long poem represents the poet's putting out tentative feelers toward understanding a world not yet delineated:

The work of art is undertaken by the practitioner as a means of finding out and defining (if just tonally) something he doesn't already know. The elaboration of known or imaginable positions in morality, epistemology, politics, feminism needs no forms not already available to rationality and produces no surprise. In art, the form enables a self-becoming that brings up in its arising materials not previously touched on or, possibly, suspected. This confers the edge of advancement we call creativity.

(SM, 28)

Readers have succeeded in memorizing Shakespeare's Sonnets and even Paradise Lost: but only a person with an eidetic memory could learn one of Ammons's long poems by heart; even then, the digressive form of the poem would militate against his comprehending it as a unity. Ammons's way of having his poems "resist the intelligence almost successfully" (Stevens) is to have them become all-inclusive, defeating not only the mind's will-to-consequence (its dependence on cause and effect, priority, hierarchy, and so on), and the eye's will-to-mapping (its dependence on a consistency of scene and focus), but also the heart's will-to-resolution (its dependence on a stable organization of feeling on which it can repose). In this respect, he makes his long poems emblems of a world that has become so full of information that it is no longer fully graspable (unlike, say, Milton's world as Milton portrays it, mastered by himself and by God).

To come to the particulars of *The Snow Poems*: the first thing to be said is how shocking a book it was in diction and tone and self-presentation (at least to this habitual reader of lyric) when it appeared. It was not that I was unacquainted with surrealism or futurism or the Poundian experiment of the *Cantos*, but those ver-