

Introduction

A. R. Ammons's canonization by major academic critics during the 70s and 80s has been a mixed blessing. He resisted affiliation with movements and manifestoes, and this has meant that his poems are typically read through transhistorical frames these early champions provided: he is a "nature poet," a transcendentalist, and so on. Ammons's innovations and astonishing range tend to get short shrift, as does his close (if idiosyncratic) relation to contemporary poetics and art practice. This issue aims to contextualize his position in the postwar American tradition and to broaden the critical terms around his work.

The issue is divided into three sections: "Essays," "Unpublished Poems," and a "Historical Portfolio." The essays, by four leading poet-critics, attest to Ammons's continuing significance among working poets. Three of the four essays engage long poems, a signature genre for Ammons. Susan Stewart's discussion of *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) places its typewriter-era procedural experiments at the vanguard of "international developments in process art" more commonly identified in the American scene with figures like John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. Embracing material constraints and the hiccups of daily composition, the poem resists ideals of finished form. John Wilkinson sees a similar formal resistance in *Garbage's* (1993) violation of Modernist aesthetics that still dominate Anglophone poetry and criticism. The poem's topic is waste, Wilkinson argues, but its most significant substance is the form of motion circling representation itself: it is about aboutness. Simon Jarvis's ten compacted vignettes or "asteroids" illuminate *Sphere* (1974) by glancing off its elliptical boundaries: the poem is "among those topics that can be stuck to strictly, only by deviating from them." The essay's deviations include, to name only a few, Ammons's peculiar notions of identity, his distrust of institutions, and the "new verse sentence" Ammons employed to write a long poem in an "epoch of acute public distaste for verse." Andrew Zawacki's essay complements these pieces on longer

works, considering the vantage points of Ammons's speakers in the early collection, *Expressions of Sea Level* (1963), as prefigurations of many tenets of ecopoetics. Yet Zawacki finds the terms of ecopoetics wanting: taking the position of sea level, he argues, might allow us to understand both the prominence of the ego and its frequent erasure in Ammons's lyrics as expressions of its "shared vulnerability" with the natural world.

The unpublished poems included here span Ammons's career, from the mid-50s to the late 80s. They were winnowed from among hundreds in Ammons's extensive archive at Cornell University. Some of these poems exist in different versions or include handwritten revisions on the typescript (Ammons almost always typed his poems, from the draft stage forward); we have followed the latest versions and have incorporated marginal revisions when they are clearly indicated. We have also made a selection from *How to Find Wisdom in Writing and Painting*, one of the most interesting items in the archive. Apparently written during the 70s, the sequence comprises 175 numbered sections of verse, aphorisms, lists, and prose. Many of the sections were published as individual poems in *A Coast of Trees* (1981) and *Worldly Hopes* (1982). Apart from the first six sections, which appeared in an art exhibition catalog (see notes to poems), those printed here have not been published.

The historical portfolio mostly focuses on the period preceding Ammons's withdrawal from the larger poetry world to the relative isolation of Ithaca, New York. It begins with a reminiscence of a visit to one of Ammons's acknowledged masters, William Carlos Williams, and an interview with Ammons conducted by Mike Erwin and Jed Rasula in 1973. (The transcription of the interview lay unpublished among Rasula's files until last year, when he offered it to us for this issue.) Roger Gilbert's essay on Ammons's brief editorial stints at the *Nation* and an ill-fated society magazine called *Country Club Woman* draw a striking picture of how Ammons's catholic taste (and political naivete) made it difficult to navigate the red lines of the poetry world. Kevin McGuirk's essay and our selections from Ammons's correspondence with Denise Levertov and Jonathan Williams show Ammons reaching out, at least for a time, to the Black Mountain circle during the early 60s, searching for fellow writers who "speak the fire

and understand the purchase,” as he puts it in a letter to Levertov.

Like many literary relationships, these were charged with extraordinary intimacy and intellectual exchange. They were also marked by occasional quarrels. The growing chill evident in the later letters cannot be fully explained by Ammons’s friendship with “establishment” poets like Howard Nemerov and Josephine Miles. The disagreements ran deeper than that, and Ammons often took disagreements personally. Although Ammons corresponded sporadically with Levertov and Williams throughout his career, the tone of their letters was increasingly businesslike. His main energies as a correspondent turned to others, such as Harold Bloom, the recipient of some of Ammons’s most sophisticated writing on his craft in the 70s. If a poem like “Scarcities” (1986) can be taken as an accurate record of Ammons’s habits and writing practice, he may have thought of intellectual community as something derived equally from poems, reference volumes, and chance interlocutors. In this long view correspondents are, like long poems, equally “a place anyone’s obsession can be / found lost in” and “an ongoingness too reliable to / conclude.” This issue hopes to present Ammons himself in such a long view.