

Archie Randolph Ammons

February 18, 1926 — February 25, 2001

In 1963, Archie Ammons—an editor of a magazine for businessmen and a former executive of a chemical glassware firm—was invited to Cornell to give a reading of his poetry during the summer session. Poetry readings were popular events in those days, whether the poet was famous or not; this one, held in Willard Straight Hall, so crowded the room that some members of the audience sat on the floor. Ammons, who then was relatively unknown as a poet, probably never expected so many auditors, and may have been painfully shy. With its gentle North Carolinian accents, his voice was engaging; but it was so soft that some listeners had to cup a hand to an ear to capture the words. Oddly enough, the concentration required of everybody to hear the poems abetted their effect. The reading so impressed the writers in the English Department's Creative Writing Program that they hoped Ammons would renounce his business career to teach with them at Cornell. To Cornell's good fortune, he did, and soon became one of the writers most revered by students in creative writing.

At the time of his first reading at Cornell, Ammons' single volume of poetry was *Ommateum*. Published in 1955 by Dorrance & Co., it had received little attention. In 1964, Ohio State University Press published his *Expressions of Sea Level*, poems that had appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and other magazines. Soon after he moved to Ithaca, his productivity was such that a series of books quickly followed, all of them published by Cornell University Press: *Corsons Inlet* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, both in 1965; *Northfield Poems*, 1966; and *Selected Poems*, 1968. Beginning with *Uplands* in 1970, W.W. Norton became his publisher, and remained so for the rest of his career. His numerous books included *Collected Poems 1951-1971*, published in 1972; *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, 1974; *The Snow Poems*, 1977; *A Coast of Trees*, 1981; *Lake Effect Country*, 1983; *Sumerian Vistas*, 1987; *Garbage*, 1993; *Brink Road*, 1996; and *Glare*, his final book, 1997.

The awards and honors bestowed upon Ammons became almost as numerous as his books. He won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1966-67; a Traveling Fellowship of the American Academy of Arts & Letters in 1967-68; and the Bollingen Prize in 1973-74. He won the National Book Award on two occasions, for *Collected Poems 1951-1971* in 1973, and for *Garbage* in 1993. He was a MacArthur Prize Fellow in 1981, the first year those awards were given. In 1982, he won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Coast of Trees*. He was the recipient of the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry in 1992; the recipient of the Frost Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Poetry over a Lifetime in 1994; and in 1998, recipient of the Tanning Prize, a \$100,000 award for “outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry.”

Long before his death at his home in Ithaca at the age of 75, Ammons was recognized by such eminent critics as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler as one of the major poets of the twentieth century, an inheritor of the tradition defined by Emerson, Whitman, and others. Phyllis Janowitz, a poet in the Cornell program who had a particularly close association with Ammons over the years, has said that, given the complexity of his character, it is nearly impossible to say anything about him that is not contradicted by an opposing view. If he indeed is a poet of nature in the transcendental tradition of Emerson, he also is one who acknowledges the finality of death as well as the indifference of nature to human desires or aspirations. During an interview with a reporter for the *Cornell Daily Sun* in 1993, Ammons said that it seemed to him that

“the dynamics that caused nature to be there became part of the dynamics that produced us.... If you’re angry, or you don’t like certain people, you can take a walk and then the impersonality and indifference and loveliness of things quiet you down.”

And yet, as his acquaintances and students knew, he was generous and friendly, a person who thrived on conversation. For years, he was the center of a group of students and faculty members who regularly met in the Temple of Zeus to talk about poetry and everyday topics. His office door was always open to students and others. Kenneth McClane, a poet and essayist in the English Department, was, as undergraduate, one of those students who came to Ammons’ office for advice, and later became his student in a writing class. He feels that what he and the other students learned from Archie was that “we had something precious to relate, if only we could honor it.” From his presence, “we could sense that poetry was the highest calling.... It was wonderful to be taught by an elder who saw us as knowledgeable, sacred, in-process, and gifted.”

As McClane and many others have noted, Ammons’ conversation was closely allied to his poetry, which often has the quality of a person expressing and developing (and sometimes contradicting) his thoughts. In conversation as in his poetry, he could be succinct, making some unexpected analogy or insight as lyrical as it was profound; but he also could be playful or ironic, his language sometimes intentionally outrageous, as if he realized that anybody’s transcendent impulses and social or intellectual refinement need to be balanced against, say, the awareness of biological imperatives.

Ammons’ unique contribution to American poetry is best revealed in his longer poetry. In their very length—many of them constitute books—these poems are reminiscent of Whitman; and reminiscent of him, too, in their inclusiveness as well as their democratic or egalitarian bias. (Ammons grew up on a small farm in North Carolina, his family’s struggle to earn a living taking precedence over everything else, including reading.) In other ways, though, his long poems are distinct from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. They are humbler, in that the poet never

calls attention to himself as one containing multitudes; and yet they are far more complex and philosophical, often moving from details to abstraction. Two of his book-length poems—*Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Garbage*—were composed on rolls of adding machine tape; they were preceded by *Sphere*, which achieves some of the same self-imposed discipline through narrow margins, the end of a line dictated by the typewriter bell. The effect of such poems, as Ammons' younger colleague Roger Gilbert has said, is that “of an endlessly unspooling meditation” in which the reader is listening in on a fascinating mind in dialogue with itself as the poem is in the process of creation.

Garbage—the title itself is outrageous—was set in motion by Ammons' sighting of a huge mound of refuse as he was driving along Interstate 95 in Florida. The poem becomes a lengthy, often self-ironic and moving meditation on nature and transformation, ambition and mortality, memory and dissolution. In an interview published in the November 1993 issue of *The Bookpress*, Ammons makes a remark that is as applicable to this just-published poem as it is to everything that precedes or follows it. He says that any structure the poet may create—as in a sonnet, or in his own characteristic use of short lines—is “arbitrary; it has the indifference of nature, the quality of being imposed. It's a very great feeling.” The arbitrariness, though, is part of a more encompassing artistic process: “I am always in search of unity, and frequently, so frequently, correspondences come up that are startling.”

Ammons is survived by his wife, Phyllis, of Ithaca; a sister, Vida Cox, of North Carolina; his son, John Ammons, and daughter-in-law, Wendy Moscow, and two grandchildren, Matthew and Jasmine, all of California. Since his poems reveal his presence to a remarkable degree, any reader of them will have at least some awareness of the loss that his family members have experienced. It is some solace to know that, through his poetry, that presence endures.

Phyllis Janowitz, Kenneth McClane, James McConkey