
Who Put the Wisdom in the Hidden Parts?

Roald Hoffmann

When I think of Archie, I think of a whirlwind in full motion, yet held stock still. By the only constraint that could bind the ultimate motion. A human being's word.

Whirlwinds are ornery, and he sure could be; just get him started about his teeth. Or Yeats. Or religion. Literally still? That he wasn't——this was the special joy that those sitting with him in the Temple of Zeus gained. But in him the grace of a Southerner, hardly the one born to wealth, blended with the nature of a philosopher. He was a natural philosopher——not the clever thinker all happy with himself, but the observer, at peace with the restless universe.

The figure of the whirlwind rises in many of Ammons' poems. Here are two short ones:

Bottommost

We circle the sinkhole
the coil spins in:
when the speed is close and sufficient,
a tube of nothingness
opens down which
attracted objects mill exodus.

and

Planes

The whirlwind lifts
sand to
hide holy
spun
emptiness or erect a
tall announcement
where formed
emptiness is to be found

The first poem includes a "we" that is (just like a "you") I think pretty unusual in an Ammons poem. Part of the quietness of his poems, the contemplative stance, is achieved by eschewing the overly personal. The "I" is most certainly there, but think about how different, how less bombastic but no less effective in drawing us in, that "I" is in Ammons compared to, say, Whitman.

His poems move from whirlpools and dark holes to whirlwinds, if not tornadoes. The

figure is natural, but the questions are deeply metaphysical: How is nothingness to be defined; how are we to reconcile one of the essential tensions, the quietude sculpted by impelled motion?

"Planes" also reveals another characteristic of great poetry that comes naturally to Ammons. I will call it clumsily "heightening by backtracking" or "turning back to climb higher" or "resonance in reverse." Look at the "holy" in line 3 of "Planes". It carries the weight of ambiguity of holiness or the quality of having holes, plus the third enriching acrophonic similarity to wholeness; as we puzzle out whether Archie is getting religious (impossible), the "emptiness" bounces us back. "Holy" becomes the center; the poem bounces back and forth around that word, like a laser beam amplified by mirrors.

Incidentally "Planes" is a 1983 version of a slightly different poem published in *The Really Short Poems* of A. R. Ammons, and retitled there "Hollows." It appears on a card which Archie sold at Baxter and Sherry Hathaway's Ithaca House Gallery. An important place for many of us. Perhaps he retitled the poem because he had another one for which he wanted the "Planes" in the title:

Substantial Planes

It doesn't
matter
to me
if
poems mean
nothing:
there's no
floor
to the
universe
and yet
one
walks the
floor.

These short poems are so much more than cleverness, they are deeply philosophical. Their span is cosmic, from tempest, to weed, to universe, and their philosophic range commensurably immense. Take "Substantial Planes": A question is asked, about the meaning of poetry—asked, even if it is distanced from the poet, who will dismiss it. The query is answered by a deft deflection that is metaphysical. Human beings create the foundation, call it worry, from which poetry will surely rise like a mad vine.

Rise, in Ammons' craft, to help us understand the hidden parts. When a long time ago, people needed a place from which an answer could be given to Job, they chose the whirlwind. The same motion that Ammons poetry, quietly, returns to time and time again. The universe, in all its parts—from piddling puddles to reeds, weeds, and spiraling galaxies is accepted. By Archie, for us.
