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The Peculiar Use of Punctuation in A.R. Ammons'

"So I Said I am Ezra" ^{*}

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Abstract

In his poem "So I Said I am Ezra," A.R. Ammons employs a peculiar no-punctuation strategy to represent his speaker's unique terms of association with the natural elements. This kind of punctuation marks, we argue, allows for two opposed, yet interdependent, interpretations of the poem. While the one interpretation underscores the speaker's progressive but eventual isolation from Nature, the other explains his growing sense of belonging and resulting mutuality. We trace this ambivalent attitude to Nature in the poem's appropriation of the Romantic mode of poetic meditation and showcase how a twofold standpoint for thematic interpretation can be yielded by the special use of punctuation. Following from a scholarly interest in the significance of punctuation in Ammons' poetry and in the contemporary American lyric, we bring attention to Ammons as a contemporary poet experimenting with the poem and the possibilities of meaning and form.

Keywords: A.R. Ammons, alienation, American poetry, punctuation, stylistics.

Introduction

It is often the tendency of some poets to draw our attention to the peculiarities of their style, form, and language. Lack of punctuation marks, for instance, is one peculiar feature which few American poets, especially modern and contemporary, tend to accommodate for different purposes. Often, we see the American poet Emily Dickinson "omit commas, semicolons, and periods" because she "refuses to an extraordinary degree to allow the rules of grammar to regulate and order her language" (Wolosky, 2001, p.25). Also, the American modernist poet William Carlos Williams occasionally invites his readers to "take clues from the very graphic layout itself—from the line breaks primarily, rather than the old formalities of comma or dash" (Oliver, 1994, p.72). In Williams'

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poetry, this occasional lack of punctuation "contributes to the sense that it is not a poem with its attendant rules [...] but a hastily scribbled note, a snatched moment of intimacy" (Morley, 2012, p.262). The lack of punctuation in the experimental poetry of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and E.E. Cummings, is an "intentional strategy on the part of modernist writers to elicit reader interactivity" (Pressman, 2014, p.52).

These modernist strategies influenced the career of the postmodern American poet A.R. Ammons whose often light punctuation "designates the poem's (take *Sphere: The Form of Motion* as an example) structure as an ongoing process and indicates an evolution of development of the subject matter" (Conte, 1994, p.33). What is said about this long poem also applies to his shorter poems. In his "So I said I am Ezra," Ammons' idiosyncratic no-punctuation strategy is more than a graphically appealing choice or only an indication of a progression of poetic moments. It is rather thematically tied to the speaker's ambivalent association with Nature, this ambivalence designating two conflicting, yet complementary, interpretations made possible by the poem's strategic lack of punctuation. Following from this critical attention to the function of punctuation in modern American poetry, we propose that Ammons' no-punctuation strategy in "So I Said I am Ezra" is thematically significant and strongly tied to the speaker's meditative tone and his ambivalent relationship with Nature. Evidence of this ambivalence can be detected in the speaker's contemplative tone and in the poem's lack of punctuation. Thus, we argue that this lack of punctuation strategically embodies two opposing states of mind, the one of alienation, the other of connectedness.

Literature Review

Many critics of Ammons have commented on the latter's minimal use of punctuation. For example, David Perkins remarks how Ammons' stylistic minimality, among his many other notable idiosyncrasies, allows the poet to "subordinate climax to values of vital spontaneity and continual transition" (1987, p.615). A similar remark has been made by David Lehman and John Brehm regarding Ammons' nuanced use of the colon to emphasize transition and non-closure: in their view, Ammons "uses the colon as an all-purpose punctuation mark, with the effect that closure is continually postponed" (2006, p.727). In light of this spontaneous flow of images uninterrupted by punctuation, Nick Halpern also remarks that Ammons' minimality, his light punctuation, "holds our attention by allowing us to watch him try to put his whole mind on the page" (2001, p.13). George Hart also aligns Ammons' minimality and spontaneity with Whitmanesque "nonhierarchical" rhetoric of poetic freedom, poetic representation, and self-expression (2017, p.686). In William Klink's view, this freedom in Ammons' poetry is thematically maintained in the

"remarkable symmetry between stylistics and content," in Ammons' choice of a minimal and distinct punctuation style that mirrors his own "liberation" as a contemporary poet (1990, p.226). Engaging with this trend in stylistic minimalism in American poetry and proposing fresh insights into the understanding of the mutual relationship between content and form, we interpret Ammons' minimality, his distinct punctuation style, as a marker of an ambivalent gesture of affinity with, and separation from, Nature.

Significance and Methodology

The current study contributes to the scholarship on A.R. Ammons and his use of minimal punctuation to explore ambivalent possibilities of meaning. Being the postmodern poet that he is, Ammons' interest in the peculiarities of punctuation as a defining part of the meaning of his poems brings to light his engagement with an Anglo-American postmodern poetic tradition that champions radical experimentations with form and style and that extends the modernist strategies of self-representation and poetic meditation. The discussion below situates Ammons' minimality within a modern/postmodern literary tradition which appeals to modes of self-expression that simultaneously depart from, and engage with, the Romantic tradition of poetic contemplation. This ambivalence is made possible by the introduction of a minimal, odd punctuation that demonstrates Ammons' postmodern susceptibility to non-fixities of meaning and interpretation. To underscore this individual peculiarity, we discuss Ammons' ambivalence in two different, yet complementary, interpretations of his poem. The discussion below attends to fundamentally textual and oftentimes contextual clues and highlights the major differences between the two readings. As one reading explicates the poem's representation of the theme of alienation and detachment from the natural world, the other elucidates the speaker's emotional attachment and his feeling of oneness with creation.

Discussion

In an interview cited in Zofia Burr's *A.R. Ammons Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues*, Ammons responds to why some of his poems use colons and semicolons while others do not use punctuation:

it's absolutely conscious of course, I think. I have read many explanations for it. The truth is just about that complex. I think poems look good without any punctuation... It enables me to go ahead with the poem. And also leaving out the punctuation is just an arbitrary piece of perversity that I happen to have a chance there to indulge, and I do it. It's not answering up to... sort of what is expected of you in terms of conventions of punctuation. Gives me a chance to be weird, a little weird. (1996, p.53-54)

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This deliberate perversity speaks to Ammons' conscious desire to dismiss the standard conventions of punctuation and to indulge in idiosyncrasies of his own. Arguably, however, this perversity provides two interpretive possibilities in relation to the special bond between the speaker and Nature. In "So I Said I am Ezra," this perversity becomes more than a chance to indulge in weirdness; it reveals two possible opposing states of mind.

To this end, we believe that this poem is an apt example of Ammons' special use of punctuation in relation to the speaker's ambivalent tones and the intoned states of mind. For ease of reference and to showcase the peculiarities of Ammons' poem, which we use to explore the multiple meanings generated by the text's lack of punctuation, it is necessary to cite the entire poem:

So I said I am Ezra
and the wind whipped my throat
gaming for the sounds of my voice
I listened to the wind
go over my head and up into the night
Turning to the sea I said
I am Ezra
but there were no echoes from the waves
The words were swallowed up
in the voice of the surf
or leaping over the swells
lost themselves ocean ward
Over the bleached and broken fields
I moved my feet and turning from the wind
that ripped sheets of sand
from the beach and threw hem
like seamists across the dunes
swayed as if the wind were taking me away
and said
I am Ezra
As a word too much repeated
falls out of being
so I Ezra went out into the night
like a drift of sand
and splashed among the windy oats
that clutch the dunes
of unremembered seas (Ramazani, Ellmann, & O'Clair. 2003, p.290)

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Here, the speaker fails to impress Mother Nature with what he takes to be a peculiar stamp of his own identity—his name. The wind is only playfully responsive to his confident self-proclamation as Ezra, a name that must be by now so intrusively familiar to the wind and underserving of any serious—but only casual—attention. In what we take to be an overfamiliar occasion, the wind reacts only uninterestedly, serving as the regular assisting medium of articulation for the speaker's dull act of self-presentation: "and the wind whipped my throat/gaming for the sounds of my voice." Here, the wind does not show interest beyond the "sounds" of this name, only possibly allowing the speaker to listen to the many changing intonational chants of the same sound.

This weakening affinity between the speaker and the natural world is implicated in the lines that follow. At first, the wind at least acknowledges Ezra's "vocal presence," but as he turns to the ocean for more self-validation, his familiar words—I am Ezra—are soon "swallowed up in the voice of the surf," or they simply "lost themselves oceanward." Worse, these same words "fall out of being" across "the bleached and the broken fields." His vocal presence has now relegated into vocal and physical absence. To the reader, "So I said I am Ezra", as a statement, does not stand out as an important attribute of character or as an intriguing example of distinction or personal achievement. We are though made aware of the "unremembered" side of this typical self-representation: Ezra, it seems, has always been recognized and known to the world, and he is basically "clutching" to a lost memory about himself, when he once was in a stronger affinity with the world. As the poem implies, he now deplores the apparent lack of uniqueness in this relationship with the world, and he desires to reinvent himself and his lost connection. As a self-proclaimed gesture, "So I Said I am Ezra" defines him (as an important figure), his personal history and memory. Lacking in the recognition he once enjoyed, he is reduced to anonymity and feels alienated: he speaks of himself as a "drift of sand" splashing "among the windy dunes/of unremembered seas."

In what seems to be a dramatization of a moment of grief over the loss of one's connection to the world around, the poem describes in one burst of breath (with no punctuation marks added) the story of Ezra, whose affinity with Nature (the wind, the ocean, and the fields) has significantly weakened and become emotionally uninspiring. The speaker contemplates the loss of this experience of inspiration, spelling out in a soliloquy the current ineffectiveness of a unique human register of experience intoned in the refrain "I am Ezra." Ezra is reduced to a tone of voice, an absence only heard and mirrored in a flow of sounds and images rather than in a sequence of punctuated sentences, hence the poet's choice not to include punctuation marks. These flowing, unpunctuated lines bring into relief, as it were, the speaker's nominal rather than physical presence,

suggesting an effaced identity and an alienating experience. These lines describe an emotional state of falling out of being, of memory, of history, and, as it were, of common punctuation rules as well, bringing focus to a specific moment of increasing effacement and transition and not to a sequence of events designated typographically by time periods. It is as if Ezra were drifting endlessly among "the windy oats" and far beyond the "unremembered seas." His experience of alienation is beyond the capacity of inter-sentential and intra-sentential periods and commas to register. Ezra exists only nominally as voice "swallowed up" by other natural voices, his presence and memory steered across the lines by natural forces rather than by punctuation rules. He is thrown across dunes, splashed among windy oats, and swayed and taunted by the wind. He is only Ezra; his presence is now punctuated by alienation, grief, and overfamiliarity.

While this reading emphasizes how punctuation is used to imitate the speaker's sense of alienation and self-effacement, Ammons' peculiar use of punctuation yet inspires another possible reading which explores the speaker's connectedness rather than his estrangement. Because the text of the poem has no punctuation marks at all and because Ammons views punctuation as an object to use rather than a rule to follow (Burr, 1996, p.54), it is also possible to read such a poem as a celebration of the speaker's feeling of wholeness rather than alienation and self-effacement. From its beginning, Ammons' poem introduces the speaker as a dynamic figure that is emotionally connected with the motion of nature. His throat is "whipped" by the wind that is "gaming for the sounds of [his] voice"; simultaneously, he is listening to it. Then he actively turns to the sea and spells out his name, "I am Ezra". The sea's waves do not echo the speaker's voice, and his "words" are outmatched by "the voice of the surf"; nevertheless, he is not down. The speaker is still active and feels like he is part of that environment. Undeniably, the speaker is apparently ignored by Mother Nature so far, but he is not "cut off from [its] dynamism and interactivity" (Cooke, 1984, p.438), a paradoxical state that empowers his will to keep actively interacting with such natural figures.

Ignored by the Sea, the speaker moves his feet and turns again to the wind saying: "I am Ezra". The wind is indifferent to the speaker again, but he feels "swayed as if the wind is taking [him] away". The wind seems unconcerned about the speaker's presence and activity, but the speaker himself is emotionally touched by the wind, thus feeling "swayed" by that natural force. This feeling basically embodies the speaker's involvement in the wind's natural motion, which has no identifying demarcations. Such sort of paradox represents a "manifestation of a major phenomenon of the romantic period in England and Germany, namely, the poising of the individual yearningly between annihilation and omnipotence" (Cooke, 1984, p.436). The speaker is depressed, but he is still

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lively. He is completely ignored by Mother Nature; nevertheless, he is connected to Nature, thus losing neither his attachment to her nor his belief in his own being and existence.

The speaker's insistence to talk to Mother Nature who has ignored him reflects his "sense of oneness and wholeness that...is discovered not by rational reflection and scientific method, but by a total immersion in one's deepest and most intense feelings" (Guignon, 2004, p.51). In the last five lines of the poem, the speaker "went out into the night" imitating "a drift of sand/and splashed among the windy oats/ that clutch the dunes/ of unremembered seas". It is true that the speaker's tone sounds sad as he views himself like a "drift of sand"-a silly or worthless object; nonetheless, he is still active and interested in maintaining his instinctual connection and interactivity with Mother Nature. The fact that Mother Nature does not respond to what the speaker in the poem says does not eliminate his emotional association with the wind and the sea or his belief in himself. This sort of activity and insistence to express the self ("I am Ezra") suggests that for Ammons "the self is the highest and most all-encompassing of all that is found in reality" (Guignon, 2004, p.51). Mother Nature's ignorance of the voice and presence of the speaker may indicate the speaker's vulnerability and inferiority to Nature; however, his insistence to introduce himself reflects his perception of himself as an integral part of it, if not its fulcrum.

Obviously, the lack of punctuation marks in Ammons' "So I said I am Ezra" is to reflect the speaker's sense of wholeness, as explained earlier. Also, it is to embody the genuineness of the relationship between the self and Mother Nature. Relying on Almass' viewpoint that "the center is what we call the sense of self" (1997, p.93), one can understand why even when Mother Nature does not openly respond to the speaker or echo his voice, the speaker's self's connectedness to Nature does not vanish or die. Basically, the speaker's self is the center of Mother Nature; not the opposite. Thus, the speaker is inseparable from his surroundings.

Moreover, one can claim that the lack of punctuation marks in Ammons' poem is to reflect the speaker's emotional equilibrium and state of harmony rather than emotional paradox. Thus, the repetition of the statement, "I am Ezra", does not necessarily reflect the speaker's state of despair and self-effacement; rather, it indicates a state of eternal self-assurance. This is obvious in the last part of the poem where the speaker clearly states that "I am Ezra" is "a word too much repeated" that is still able to "[go] out into the night...and [splash] among the windy oats". That is to say, "I am Ezra", as a word, does not go unremembered but is capable of touching the dunes' oats of "unremembered seas".

Whether the "unremembered seas" are part of the speaker's past or future, the identifying epithet of the speaker has the power to reach them. It is a fantasy journey into the Otherworld that has no temporal demarcations or limitations. In other words, the lack of punctuation marks in "So I Said I am Ezra" imitates the speaker's journey back and forth in time without being challenged by any segregating marks or borders. Through its lack of punctuation, "So I Said I am Ezra" views its narrative persona as an integral component or force of Mother Nature that is basically composed of unrestrained powers like the Wind and the Sea.

Conclusion

The lack of punctuation marks in "So I Said I am Ezra" is a textual strategy which contributes to the complexity of the poem's meaning, thus allowing for two different interpretations. The first interpretation explains how the lack of punctuation in "So I Said I am Ezra" serves as a mirror image of the persona's innate state of dissociation from Mother Nature. Also, this odd no-punctuation strategy reflects the speaker's agony and lack of self-recognition. By not using punctuation marks, Ammons, as is already made clear, emphasizes the speaker's inability to connect with Mother Nature, aka, his alienation.

The second reading shows that by excluding punctuation marks, Ammons successfully mirrors Ezra's emotionally and intellectually spontaneous journey in memory and history as well as his interconnectedness with Mother Nature. The lack of punctuation marks in the poem is a way of imitating Nature's "irresistible power of sublimity," which is always associated with "thought and emotion" (Costello, 2012, p.22). In fact, the consistent repetition of the epithet "I am Ezra" throughout the poem indicates the rootedness of Mother Nature in the speaker's mind and heart, which nourishes his being and provides him with emotional and intellectual sustenance.

تفرد أسلوب الترقيم في قصيدة "أنا عزير" للشاعر أ. ر. أمونز

مالك زريقات وفيصل رواشدة، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن.

ملخص

يوظف الشاعر أمونز في قصيدته "أنا عزير" إستراتيجية الترقيم المتفردة لتقديم الارتباط المتميز للمتكلم بمكونات الطبيعة. وعليه، فإن مثل هذا الأسلوب الترقيمي يفسح المجال لقراءة القصيدة بطريقتين متداخلتين مختلفتين ستكونان مداراً للنقاش في هذه الورقة البحثية. أما القراءة الأولى فتركز على ديمومة عزلة الشاعر عن محيطه الطبيعي، وأما القراءة الثانية فتركز على نمو شعور المتكلم بالانتماء لمحيطه للطبيعة. نتتبع في هذه الدراسة طبيعة العلاقة بين المتكلم والطبيعة ونجدها أسلوباً رومانظيقاً قائماً على التأمل الشعري، فنقدم الحالة التفسيرية المزدوجة للقصيدة والناجمة عن استخدام إستراتيجية الترقيم المتفردة تلك. وانطلاقاً من اهتمامنا الأكاديمي بأهمية أسلوب الترقيم في الشعر المعاصر، فإننا نسلط الضوء على أمونز بوصفه شاعراً معاصراً حاول إحداث تغيير في القصيدة وما ينجم عنه من احتمالات على مستوى الشكل والمعنى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أ. ر. أمونز، الاغتراب، الشعر الأمريكي المعاصر، الترقيم، الأسلوبية.

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