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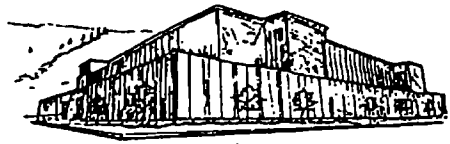
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THE UNIVERSE IS SHAPED EXACTLY LIKE THE EARTH:

THE TAPE POEMS OF A.R. AMMONS

by

Adam Phillips

B.A. University of Idaho 1999

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

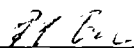
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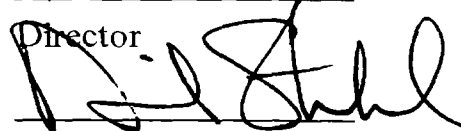
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Dean, Graduate School

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The Universe is Shaped Exactly Like the Earth: The Tape Poems of A.R. Ammons

Director: Robert Baker *RB*

This thesis examines the primary poetic concerns of A.R. Ammons as they are played out within the extended unit of the “tape poems,” five long poems written on adding-machine tapes fed through his typewriter. In the first chapter of this thesis I explore Ammons’ efforts, in the early short lyrics, to escape the unnatural restrictions of poetic form. Failing to devise an acceptable solution, he turns to the tape, first seen in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, as a means of actualizing the projection and flow he seeks. In the second chapter I examine Ammons’ efforts to imbue the body of the tape poems with the same properties he witnesses operating in the world at large, in an attempt to create a self-sustaining, poetic universe. Within this discussion, I focus on the properties of cyclical motion, inclusiveness, and repeating symbolism one observes permeating and defining the full rondure of the tape poems. I extend a particular focus to the poet’s creation of a new angelic hierarchy within this construction, incorporating such unlikely organisms as the vulture and the fly. I conclude this section with a closer reading of the poem most perfectly exemplifying the aforementioned tenets, *Garbage*. In the third chapter, I undertake an extensive examination of Ammons’ Whitmanian conception of death and subsequent dispersal as emancipating and glorious. I track the evolution of Ammons’ philosophy regarding such, paying particular attention to the changes that occur as the poet’s own death draws nigh. In examining how, finally, the poet views death, I focus on the final installment of the tape poems, *Glare*.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
1. DISSOLVING THE RESTRICTIONS OF FORM	6
2. CREATION OF A SELF-SUSTAINING POETIC UNIVERSE	27
3. FINAL ROTATION OF THE TAPE	48
WORKS CITED	80

ABBREVIATIONS

- CP Ammons, A.R. *The Collected Poems 1951-1971*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972.
- TP Ammons, A.R. *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1965.
- SP Ammons, A.R. *The Snow Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977.
- GB Ammons, A.R. *Garbage*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- GL Ammons, A.R. *Glare*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- SM Ammons, A. R. *Set in Motion*. Ed. Zofia Burr. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996.

INTRODUCTION

In the body of critical work devoted to A.R. Ammons, it is an eccentric article that elects not to deal, in some form, with the issue of the One and the Many. This is the poet's central, consuming concern throughout the succinct installments of *Ommateum*, just as it is in the closing lines of *Glare*, some thirty-four years later. Much, if not most, of the voluminous oeuvre connecting the two provides a relentless interrogation of this particular issue. The centrality of this theme can be observed in the installment of the *Modern Critical Views* series devoted to Ammons. Bloom devotes most of his introduction to the poet's relentless quest for Unity, and in the volume's lead-off essay, Richard Howard immediately describes Ammons' primary struggle as involving a desire to "search out immersion in the stream of reality without surrendering all that is and makes one particularly oneself" (34). Each chapter of this thesis addresses the issue in one form or another.

In Ammons' painstaking and extended examinations of nature, we observe love for the individual organism, as well as gaping awe in the face of the whole. Though such constant observation has inspired the poet to understand that everything is in flux, and that all things are provisional, this very property of impermanence has led him to certain definite conclusions. All things are in motion, and in a universe of shared, transferred, and recycled energy, all things are connected. As a result of such circulation, within every thing lies an element of every other thing. In this monadic conception of the universe, reiterated frequently in the long and short poems alike, we cannot help but acknowledge the Romantic concerns with which the poet so deeply identifies. In this age

of saturating irony, of discomfort in the face of the transcendent or deeply emotional, of distrust of appeals to the “natural,” a Romantic reading of Ammons brings with it certain risks. Linda Orr is not alone when she says that this “universal metonymic order” with its “metaphorical connections that bring together such entities as mind, universe, plants, animals, language, and ‘reality,’ make me nervous” (Bloom 141). In my examination of Ammons’ work, I do not share a similar anxiety, and tend to side with David Kalstone as he states that Ammons “has always had a gift for recalling romantic promises as if there were fresh ways for them to be fulfilled” (Bloom 100).

It is in fact an unabashedly Romantic orientation that simmers beneath and fuels much of Ammons’ poetry, and gives the impetus for much of my discussion. A unique and thrilling aspect of Ammons’ poetic quest as it extends through five decades involves an intensely relentless pursuit of an impossible goal. Jerome Mazzaro says that the poems of A.R. Ammons “exceed literary considerations and like the considerations of a Robert Creeley become important to an understanding of what possibilities may exist for unity, knowledge, and being in the world” (Bloom 118). Accordingly, as Ammons attempts to fracture and dissipate the very notion of form, this is done with every intention of, somehow, enacting a similar release from identical restrictions separating the poet from his universal truth of amalgamated Unity. To Ammons, poetry represents simply another localization of the universal store of energy, and as such, it possesses currency. It is therefore possible for that which is enacted on the page to have implications in the physical world.

With the book-length poem *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, published in 1965, Ammons begins what will become a procession of long poems written using an

innovative method, involving a spool of adding-machine tape fed through the poet's typewriter, thus creating a long thin canvas. My work will primarily focus on these "tape poems." In his introduction to *Complexities of Motion*, Steven Schneider identifies, chronologically, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965), *The Snow Poems* (1977), "Ridge Farm" (1987), *Garbage* (1993), and *Glare* (1997) as having been composed in such a manner. I believe it is appropriate, considering the poet's conception of the universe, where nothing truly ends and all things eventually cycle back, to view the various tapes as a loosely connected flow. Albright, too, views the tape poems as manifesting a continuity, asserting that *Tape* and *The Snow Poems* "are simply different versions of the same notion [...] And they must be looked at together," and that, "*The Snow Poems* presages in both theme and imagery *Garbage*, 'Ridge Farm,' and *Glare*" (Schneider 100).

In the first chapter of this work, I will focus on the roots of the poet's often desperate search for the freedom of dispersal inherent in the fracturing of restrictive poetic form, what others have termed Ammons' quest for transcendence. I will examine the fledgling impulse for the fracturing of form as it appears in the very earliest poems. Even in these concise, self-contained blocks of verse Ammons strains to project himself indefinitely beyond the final line, into a diaphanously conceived space without limiting detail or definition. These somewhat incompletely realized attempts demonstrate the fervent desire to move beyond the confines of closure, and an accompanying yearning toward dispersal and Unity. With the implementation of the adding-machine tape in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, published in 1965, Ammons hits upon an exciting new medium through which to further his attempts at exploding the restrictions of form and defying closure.

With the tape's properties of literal motion and projection, Ammons is able to produce a verse subject to the same constant cyclical motion he observes defining the universe.

Having achieved this, his ambition expands, and the poet begins to construct a verse elaborately embodying all of the same principles that comprise and maintain the Ammonsian universe at large. This is the extended pursuit of creating the "heterocosm, a second nature in his poetry" for which Harold Bloom praises him so effusively (5). In chapter two, I will examine the three primary tenets of the universe that Ammons tries to recreate in the full rotation of the tape poems. To complement the ceaseless circular motion provided by the tape, Ammons undertakes the production of a type of poetry demonstrating extreme inclusiveness, where high and low, inner and outer, coexist simultaneously in a verse containing everything. In this, his poetry is to mirror the coadunate universal principles of multeity and shared nature. The poet achieves this goal by breaking down the usual hierarchies one traditionally expects to see operating within serious poetry. Most ostentatiously in *The Snow Poems*, though certainly elsewhere as well, Ammons takes pains to create poetry demonstrating a supreme cosmic democracy, including even the most seemingly insignificant and distasteful detail, placed right alongside moments of soaring transcendence. Completing this intricately devised poetic universe, Ammons employs a relentless cycle of repeating symbols in order to demonstrate the circular universe's organizing principle of repetition. In doing so, he imbues certain favored symbols with the status of religious icons, again demonstrating his sense that the world's true miracles take place among rot and decay, as the organisms Ammons chooses to elevate are scavengers, denizens of the graveyard and garbage dump. On this final note, chapter two finishes with a focused examination of religious reverence

in *Garbage*, experienced by the poet as he beholds the miracles transpiring around the monolithic heap of refuse.

In the earliest poems, Ammons identifies that the desired freedom of dispersal can be obtained, without exception, through death and the accompanying processes of decomposition and regeneration. In the face of this miraculously efficient system, the poet, echoing Whitman, often tells us that death is to be celebrated, emphatically embraced by the individual, as one's return to the soil in order to fuel future life more or less represents a glimpse of the face of God. As we observe the poet age throughout over forty years of brutally honest, personally revealing verse, we see him often struggling with this philosophy. In a universe in which everything runs its brief course, then surrenders its store of the collective energy to be rejuvenated elsewhere, how willingly does Ammons concede the tiny ephemeral store of energy that is his own? It is this progression, central to each of the tape poems, carried out over a lifetime's work and culminating in the final moving scenes of *Glare*, that I will examine in the third section of this work.

1.
DISSOLVING THE RESTRICTIONS OF FORM

In 1955, A.R. Ammons embarks upon his long, impassioned poetic quest with the grandiose claim issued in *Ommateum*: “So I said I am Ezra.” Ammons thereby declares himself arbiter of language, and dispenser of the truth that is to be found therein, as the biblical scribe whose identity the poet claims as his own is generally credited with “the determination of the books hallowed as canonical among the Jews” (Catholic Encyclopedia 3). Ezra’s accomplishments with the word were immense: “According to Jewish traditions, he restored from memory—an achievement little short of miraculous—all the books of the Old Testament [...] he likewise replaced, in the copying of Holy Writ, the old Phoenician writing by the alphabet still in use [...] and [he is] the inventor of the Hebrew vocal signs” (3). Just as Ezra determined what was to be included and omitted in handing down the guidelines with which the people were to shape their lives, on multiple later occasions he would be called upon to right those straying from the course. When the Jews of Jerusalem “had grown indifferent and unobservant of the Law,” intermarrying with forbidden sects, it was Ezra who traveled to the Holy Land in order to “use his authority as a priest and interpreter of the Law to restore things to a better condition” (6). In later years, as the people of Jerusalem once again began to stray from the prescribed course, Ezra performed a public reading of the Book of the Law, which ultimately inspired the populace to strike a covenant recommitting “the community to the observance of the Law, the abstention from intermarriage with heathens, the careful keeping of the Sabbath and of the feasts, and to

various regulations agreed to for the care of the Temple, its services, and the payment of the tithes” (6).

Throughout the scribe’s career, he is depicted as establishing the guidelines by which the people are to live, then enacting the return of those who stray from within these prescribed boundaries. The adoption of this persona by Ammons, in light of the immediate undermining and dissolution of such that occurs as the poem “So I Said I Am Ezra” goes on, provides a singularly appropriate starting point for the extended poetic project Ammons hereby engages. In many of the early poems, we encounter a persona insisting that all things exist as entirely discrete entities, immiscible and permanently separate. All the while, the content and movement of the poem itself, seemingly unbeknownst to the persona, demonstrates a world constantly in flux, with amalgamation as the unifying rule. Most often, this discrepancy between the poet’s assertions, and the evidence presented in the poem, centers around the discrete unit of the persona himself, and his relation to the environment around him. As we have seen, Ezra might best be described as both an author and enforcer of prescribed boundaries. The fate of this adopted persona is perfectly demonstrative of the difficulties facing those who would insist on separate and individual existence within the poetry of A.R. Ammons.

No sooner has Ammons announced his identification with this immense authority than it is torn away, dispersed by a wind that takes no notice whatsoever of the proclamation, heedlessly continuing into regions beyond his range of observation, “over my head and up into the night” (CP 1). When the undaunted poet repeats his assertion to the sea, he again finds his voice dispersed, lost among the vast expanse of an unresponsive nature. Upon the third repetition, again warranting no notice from his surroundings, the poet

realizes that his proclamation has been disseminated into senselessness, “As a word too much repeated / falls out of being” (1). Just as a word undergoing such a transformation loses its meaning, thus its identity as a cohesive, discrete unit, so too with the poet’s adopted persona. Ammons/Ezra desists from his assertion of individual existence, and in so doing surrenders to the processes of dispersal and amalgamation, as he is spread throughout the night “like a drift of sand.” Ammons immediately characterizes the wind as ubiquitous and timeless, since it is responsible for arranging the selfsame landscape over which he is now spread, this “wind / that ripped sheets of sand / from the beach and threw them / like seamists across the dunes.” Further exploding the scope, the poet is cast “among the windy oats / that clutch the dunes / of unremembered seas.” In establishing a sense of immediate contact with a geologic past forgotten to man, not only have the restrictions of time been breached, but the poet projects himself into unknown, vaguely defined, unlimited space.

In this premier poem, Ammons establishes the proposition that will remain one of his primary obsessions for the remainder of his life. How are we to expand, to render permeable and pliable, the restrictive parameters of discrete form? How is Ammons to realize, and represent, the Universal Truth he so vividly senses spinning about him, all things contained within and flowing through every other, if his only means of doing so is, itself, self-contained and finite, sculpted into the very units he wishes to dissolve? It is a difficult paradox, poetry being by nature succinct, with traditionally the greatest emphasis placed upon the concluding thoughts and final lines. Though Ammons frequently displays great affection for the particular, the beauty and importance therein can only be considered a partial truth, a fleeting pause in the system of flux and synthesis.

Throughout the early verse, this struggle can be observed in the poet's repeated attempts to project himself beyond the poem's ultimate line, thus averting the inevitable moment of closure. Oftentimes, this movement is conceived as a journey into diaphanously adumbrated space, without limit or restricting definition.

In "Some Months Ago," after bidding farewell to the variegated faces of nature, the poet is last seen "stepp[ing] out into the great open" (5). By resisting any speculation concerning what may lie out there, beyond the familiar, Ammons allows the space into which he projects himself to remain interminable. Similar instances of projective non-closure can be observed permeating much of the early verse.

After bearing witness to the atrocities carried out "In Strasbourg in 1349," the poet, unable to continue his macabre watch, "rose and walked out of the world" (3). Of this mystical alternative space into which he crosses, we know nothing. Further instances of ongoing movement beyond the poem's final line, lacking specific detail or destination, can be observed in the closing lines to "Bees Stopped" ("so I went on sometimes whistling"), "Interval" ("so I rose and walked on"), and "Mountain Talk" ("so I went on / counting my numberless fingers"). In the former two of the aforementioned verses, Ammons establishes the depth and complexity of the metaphysical dilemma at hand by portraying the poem's speaker as obstinately resisting the very amalgamation and diffusion which his own ongoing movement beyond the confines of the poem is designed to represent. In "Bees Stopped," we first encounter the poet absorbed in a dissection of nature's minutiae, centered upon "headparts and wings" and the tiny "plants that grow flat on rocks / and people never see / because nothing should grow on rocks" (6). As soon as the scope is widened, the panoramic view "out over the lake / and beyond to the

hills and trees” is no sooner adopted than it is immediately abandoned, due to an accompanying sense of solitude and desolation resulting from the fact that “nothing was moving.” Only after returning focus to the particular does the poet, reassured that “life was everywhere,” continue on his way. Thus, an accentuating tension is created, as the poet’s eschewal of the far-sighted view, through which individually delineated objects blend together, seems to belie the very dispersal of form he repeatedly attempts.

In “Interval,” we again find the poet dissecting, his focus tending toward ever finer distinctions, as evidenced by the recollection “I sat down on a sunny hillock / and leaned back against a pine / and picked up some dry pineneedle bundles from the ground / and tore each bundle apart a needle at a time” (36). Following this individuation of each needle, the tree undergoes an analogous process of separation from its fellows, as the poet begins speculating as to which species it might belong. He then receives an oracular feather that attempts to correct his misguided attempts at separation and classification, explaining the true and complete nature of the universe as “all is a circle / and nothing is separable,” a succinct explanation that Ammons will continue to reassert throughout his long career. Further describing the ultimately indistinguishable overlap and amalgamation of all elements comprising the universe, the feather explains the poet’s shared essential nature with the tree against which he is leaning. The poet reacts with foolish misunderstanding based on an overly literal interpretation of the feather’s commentary, lamenting “Oh if trees are blind / I do not want to be a tree.” Again, the poet’s misguided assertion of discrete individuation as representing the essential nature of the universe is severely undercut by his own endlessly projected movement beyond the

form of the poem. Through this continuation of movement, Ammons subverts the very sense of containment he simultaneously declares inescapable.

An entirely self-conscious, full rendering of the Truth that the poet so religiously seeks to represent is laid forth in “Hymn” as Ammons addresses the poem to a “you” that can best be thought of as the all-inclusive organizational principle and fueling spirit of the universe. Ammons acknowledges the stakes of succeeding in his ongoing quest, declaring “I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth / and go on out” travelling “up farther than the loss of sight / into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark” (39). Here again we have the journey into indefinable space, where the scope of expansion has grown so immense as to blur the existence of individual objects and temporal changes enacted upon the landscape. Attainment of the discovery he so fervently seeks will involve a simultaneous extreme contraction, described as he further acknowledges:

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
 inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
 trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
 coelenterates
 and praying for a nerve cell
 with all the soul of my chemical reactions
 and going right on down where the eye sees only traces
 (39)

Here we see the poet’s overwhelming appreciation of the particular as a glorious, if ephemeral, representation of the sprawling whole. The poem closes with a summarized reiteration of these sentiments, as Ammons reverently declares, “and if I find you I must go out deep into your / far resolutions / and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves.” To know the essential nature, and scope, of reality is to simultaneously perceive both cosmos and individuated atom.

In "Terminus," Ammons hits upon a solution to the restrictive imposition of barriers, identifying a process through which the individual may infallibly and directly gain the desired state of dispersal and unity. Encountering the furthest reach of a narrow canyon, the poet is received with the discouraging edict "comers here turn and go back" (68). Electing instead to sit and ponder the predicament, Ammons is ultimately rewarded, as the solid rock opposing his progress splits, and he is admitted. This entry into the unseen interior of the earth, however, has come at a price, as Ammons recalls that during the period of waiting "every leaf fell / from my bush of bones." Unity and amalgamation, then, are to be achieved through the natural processes of dispersal that take place upon the death of the individual.

This solution, such as it is, represents a primary current, flowing through much of the earliest verse. Most frequently, it is the poet's own death and resultant dispersal that is depicted. We see this in "Rack," as Ammons mourns the insignificance of his own eventual posthumous contribution: "for I am broken over the earth— / so little remains / for the silent offering of my death" (5). In "Chaos Staggered Up the Hill," he imagines himself "dissolving" to be spread about, nourishing fresh life, as death/chaos personified "had rhizobia with it / to make us green some other place" (6). In this acceptance of individual death in service to the whole, which will become a primary theme in the later long poems, Ammons vividly brings to the forefront his philosophical debt to the Romantic poets, most prominently the Whitman of "Song of Myself" who cries "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (54).

As dependable as this path to admittance seems to be, understandably, the poet will continue searching out some less final means through which unity with one's surroundings might be actualized. In the landmark early poem "Gravelly Run" he imagines the realization of just such a union:

I don't know somehow it seems sufficient
to see and hear whatever coming and going is,
losing the self to the victory
of stones and trees,
of bending sandpit lakes, crescent
round groves of dwarf pine:
(CP 55)

The self, once surrendered, is dispersed so thoroughly it establishes contact with each far-flung corner of the universe, encountering entities both immense and small, and all that lies in between: "for it is not so much to know the self / as to know it as it is known / by galaxy and cedar cone." This imagined self now exists in the desired state of universal unity the poet so earnestly seeks, all barriers of individual definition dissolved, disseminated throughout time and space "as if birth had never found it / and death could never end it" (56). The dissolution thus achieved is reflected in the landscape, permeated by an undifferentiating universal energy through which all things are blended beyond distinction, as represented through the personification of both organic and non-organic elements:

the swamp's slow water comes
down Gravelly Run fanning the long
stone-held algal
hair and narrowing roils between
the shoulders of the highway bridge:
(56)

Ammons then cogitates upon his observations a moment further, and in so doing precipitates the sudden collapse of the system he had so eagerly strained to comprehend:

“so I look and reflect, but the air’s glass / jail seals each thing in its entity.” Once again, though the poet ostensibly reverts to understanding the world as a series of immiscible, self-contained forms, the poem’s movement and content seem to undercut this conception, representing the dual nature of the universe while rendering the poet’s insistence ironic. In the initial line of the couplet just quoted, Ammons evokes an image harking back to a Romantic monadic view of the universe, a philosophy the poet frequently identifies with, in which the entirety of nature is present within each and every seemingly individual element. In such a system, all things exist as an irrevocably interconnected nexus sharing equally of the universal energy and matter. Nature is most frequently represented as a vast field of mirrors, wherein “each monad, of every degree, is ‘a perpetual living mirror of the universe,’ possessing within itself the simultaneous perception of everything, everywhere” (Abrams 202). The poet simultaneously “looks” and “reflects” having become both observer, looking out into nature, and the mirror in which nature views herself.

The poet, seemingly unaware of this, continues to deny the existence of such overlapping unity, returning each thing to a solitary existence within established barriers of separation:

I see no
god in the holly, hear no song from
the snowbroken weeds: Hegel is not the winter

yellow in the pines: the sunlight has never
heard of trees:

(CP 56)

Not only has the door been shut on Ammons’ attempted dissolution of self and form, further attempts are discouraged by an unreceptive environment, as described in the

poem's final lines: "surrendered self among / unwelcoming forms: / stranger, / hoist your burdens, get on down the road." Having offered up the self for amalgamation, and been denied, the poet reluctantly returns to the familiar device of an indefinite projection past the poem's final line, moving off into whatever may lie beyond familiar ground "down the road."

In "Jersey Cedars," we encounter a nature that reciprocates the poet's desire for some sort of interchange and common ground, as the cedars crippled by the heavy burden of snow seek reassurance that the seasons will indeed change, and that they will be freed. Though Ammons explains that, of course, the dependable cycle of climatic changes will indeed remove their burden, the cedars "splintering in that deep soft day / could not herd / their moans / into my quiet speech" (58). Communication has failed since the trees cannot understand the poet on his own terms. Realizing, then, that the trees cannot come to him, so to speak, Ammons attempts to manufacture some mutual understanding by assimilating himself to their existence, recalling, "I bent / over arms / dangling loose to wind and snow to be / with them assailing the earth with moans." What we ultimately observe operating here is an insoluble communication barrier, as the trees can no more benefit from the poet's "quiet speech" than he can truly participate in their experience of the world simply by striking a pose in a snowy field. Leaning with one's arms dangling does not make one a tree, and both parties, tree and poet, remain trapped within the limitations of form, despite a mutual desire otherwise. It is apparent the poet must continue his search for a way to establish the unity he so desperately seeks.

The particular and singular urgency one senses in Ammons, permeating the struggle with these concerns of division and unity, is derived from the dual nature of the poet's quest. To Ammons, the discussion not only attempts to enact the dissolution of restrictive form on the level of poetics, but simultaneously seems to seek a solution to the philosophical and metaphysical dilemma posed by the separation of self and other that so consistently plagues his thoughts. Harold Bloom states that in many of the earlier poems, "Ammons tried the impossible task, beyond a limit of art, in which language seeks its own end to the one:many problem" (Bloom 155). Even the most passionate experimentation of the day's formal revolutionaries— as in Olson's implementation of Projective Verse or Kerouac's charging unbroken prose— does not seem to compare, in terms of the weight of the personal stakes in Ammons. It is as if, in successfully disintegrating the restrictions of poetic form, the poet will somehow free himself from the identical barriers he feels separating his individuated self from the truth of universal unity. Mazzaro, as I noted in the introduction, describes Ammons as a poet "whose very methods of accretion and dialecticism exceed literary considerations and ... become important to an understanding of what possibilities may exist for unity, knowledge, and being in the world" (Bloom 118). In order to establish how these concerns may have led to the provisional solutions inherent in the innovative *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, it is important we briefly examine the poet's conception of man and poetry's place within the universe, and the organization of the space in which it all transpires.

Just as Emerson conceived of a universe unified by the repetition of a single shape— "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end" (185)— so too with the endlessly

reproducing spheres of Ammons. Throughout the entirety of Ammons' body of work, the universe is consistently represented as an overlapping nexus of circular motion, the ultimate defining characteristic of which is "the unwearying readiness to cycle" (SP 159). Absolutely nothing exists independent of these ceaseless rotations, as all "things go round and / round and tie up a fullness which I call the // reality" (GB 116). This is the motion and the shape the poet observes transpiring everywhere, as all organic material draws each instant closer to death, whereupon all things are reabsorbed and applied to fresh life, reborn.

In keeping with the poet's ongoing efforts to breach the barrier he senses separating that which lies within the self and that which lies without, the arbitrariness of such a division is demonstrated, time and time again, as Ammons presents man and nature as coadunate, indistinguishably melded with one another. There can be no distinct barrier truly separating man from the exterior world, as the cyclical processes maintaining interior balance are identical to those transpiring throughout the universe at large. In a comparison repeated in various forms throughout his body of work, Ammons affirms that "the alimentary canal as river with falls, lakes, / etc. is a good form" (SP 49). The comparison is especially well chosen, as both food and water ceaselessly cycle through the processes of sustaining life. In this, the local becomes identical to the universal. Both the absolute inextricability of each seemingly discrete article comprising the universe, and man's incorporation therein, are paradigmatically rendered in the *Tape* as Ammons ruminates upon abstract resemblance:

the vine that (still
green) tangles under
the cherry tree
reminds me of a brain:

why?
 it's a vine:
 or of a bed of sexual
 nerves
 intermingling:

 it reminds me how
 reality can go so many
 ways
 at so many levels
 & still keep the "roundness"
 of a clump:
 discernible unity:
 but it's vine:
 I put mirrors in it
 & behold myself:
 (TP 165)

In response to the self-directed query as to why the vine would evoke comparison with the brain, Ammons reiterates the vine's status as vine, insinuating that the equivalency is unavoidable, utterly self-evident. He then further melds human and non-human, incorporating an accompanying comparison between vine and the physical impetus of procreation. The connective circle is cinched still tighter, as the poet identifies the inescapable "roundness" of the most manifold aspects of reality, before demonstrating such with yet another evocation of the Romantic monadic mirror.

In Ammons' view, the poem is an inseparable extension of the poet, so fundamentally rooted within that the slightest removal, the establishment of any genuine distance, however minute, will necessarily prove impossible. We see this within his oft-referenced essay, "A Poem is a Walk," in which Ammons describes the extremely personal corporeality of the process of composition:

...the motion common to poems and walks. The motion may be lumbering, clipped, wavering, tripping, mechanical, dance-like, awkward, staggering, slow, etc. But the motion occurs only in the body of the walker or the body of the words. It can't be

extracted and contemplated. It is nonreproducible and nonlogical. It can't be translated into another body. There is only one way to know it and that is to enter into it (SM 18).

The internal self is equally visible in the verse, as the poem is an “externalization of an inward seeking [...] involvement is total, both mind and body” (16). Twenty-six years later, Ammons remains consistent in his conception of poetry's essential nature as a direct bodily and psychological extension of the individual, commenting in an interview with Zofia Burr that “there's something about the poem...that communicates a person's gait...and that allows you to get somehow deeper into the nature of that person, the essential nature of that person, than you can through conversation” (74).

Over the course of 33 days in 1963-4, Ammons recorded his quotidian musings and activities on a thin strip of adding-machine tape he had picked up at a hardware store. The length of the poem thereby created was to be determined “organically,” its final line occurring whenever the final rotation of the tape rose up through the poet's typewriter. The line breaks were also at the mercy of the tape's physical parameters, with each line scarcely building momentum before encountering the furthest reach of slender horizontal space. This “long thin song” would become 1965's *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. With the innovative implementation of the adding-machine tape as his canvas, Ammons was able to poetically recreate the salient truths he saw defining the universe in a way hitherto unimaginable.

The tape's continuous cyclical uncoiling perfectly tropes the ubiquitous flux and circular motion the poet perceives transpiring all around him. To Ammons, poetry exists as an intrinsic, inseparable component of the artist, and here he attempts to transcribe his mental life as a real-time progression, independent of intention or alteration. This will allow the poet to figuratively meld his internal workings with those identical motions

operating throughout the world at large. It will allow the cyclical flow of the mind to enter out, via the trope of the unfurling tape, into the cycling motions of the universe. The limiting imposition of form is removed, and the shape of the poetry comes to mirror the shape of universal motion.

Ammons states: “it seems that there was something taking place in the mind and there was no difference between that and what happened on the page and so it just became itself” (Burr 43). Commenting elsewhere on the same phenomena, Ammons explains, “life is a journey. *Tape* then becomes a mini-life” (Schneider 334). It is especially appropriate here that the poet, a man extremely sensitive to the weight and nuance possessed by every word, explains not that the poem represents a life, but that it “becomes” one. At times, the limitations of artistic representation seem to fall away, and the poem becomes not just flawlessly mimetic, but inextricably bound up in the very fabric of life itself. The unwinding tape then becomes a participant, intimately involved in the day’s events. During such moments, through both the figure and the actual physical presence of the unfurling tape, Ammons is able to vividly demonstrate his conception of shared matter and ceaseless flux. It is often as if poet and poem have become indistinguishable from one another, sharing identically in the day’s trials, tribulations and triumphs.

As the poet’s thoughts progress, so does the cyclical unwinding of the tape. On the second day of January, we see that the adverse of this is also true, as Ammons complains, “sunshiny: so / bright on the tape, I / squint /inhibited and frustrated” (155-56). Acted upon by the same inhibiting agent, bright sun glaring against the tape and, in turn, refracting into the poet’s eyes, both suffer identically. The glaring light that stuns

Ammons, severing all continuity of mental process, simultaneously severs the rotating continuity of the unfolding tape. Another period of forced dormancy, more complicated in origin, is explained as Ammons recalls:

and last night, after
anger & a family tiff, I
suffered a loss & breakage
of spirit, blankness
as of plateaus: my "poem"
turned to incontinent
prose, unburdened by spirit,
and this occupation
with a rolled
strip of paper
blackened to
obsession, senseless,
slightly mad: the Muse
cleared out, leaving an
empty house:

(49)

Here, due to a lack of harmony in familial relationships, both poem and poet have become identically jumbled and deranged, "incontinent" and "senseless," unable to communicate clearly. Just as the Muse has vacated, leaving the once-lively space of the stagnant tape desolate and lifeless, so too with the "empty house" the poet has fled, as we imagine the severity of the fight driving wife and son elsewhere for the night.

Should such periods of frustration and stalled progression reach their extreme, the unified stream of poet and poem, surrendering their mutual status as a viable cycle, will meet with destruction affecting each identically, and simultaneously. Ammons laments his own vacuous disengagement from the world and lack of sustaining connections, admitting, "I've won no battles and lost / none: / am engaging no / realities." Just as this solitary emptiness leaves him with nothing to actively engage the mind, the tape suffers an identical stagnancy, and perhaps should be disposed of, as the poet senses he has

“cause enough to stop & / tear” (50). The poet is equally subject to such a disposal, should inspiration fail to return, evidenced earlier as he asks of the fickle, absent Muse, “will you tear me / to pieces?” (45).

The inextricable coexistence melding poet and his unwinding tape is vividly demonstrated in instances that involve shared, simultaneous experience out among the physical world. Relating a potentially close call with extreme weather, Ammons imagines:

had the storm last night
come half a mile farther
east, it would have
taken my roof off and
wet my poem
 (and my pants):
 (17)

Here, we see them affected identically by the raging storm. In a parallel instance, Ammons describes a shared outing:

my poem went for a ride
today: I
 backguttered it all
the way out
of the typewriter,
rewinding the roll:
stuck it in a paper
bag, then in the
 glove department:
we all went to York, Pa.
to visit relatives:
 (70)

In this instance the roll is implicitly identified as a member of the family, included in the collective “all” travelling to see mutual relatives. In imagining the hypothetical dangers of such a trip, Ammons poses and answers the question:

but mightn`t you have had

a car accident & ruined it?
mebbe but bebbe I'd
have ruined myself, too,
 past caring about
 poems,
 mebbe:
 (71)

As the two move and exist, inextricably, among the physical world, their fates become intertwined beyond differentiation.

Just as there are stifling agents that render movement mutually impossible, and physical dangers to deal with, there are also shared moments of sublime inspiration catalyzing an explosive progression both of thought and tape. Repeatedly, Ammons describes such moments in terms equally applicable to the unwinding physical progress of the tape and the flow of inspired thought it necessarily accompanies, blending the two beyond distinction. This is the case as he describes the intense “joy of the crest, / riding & writing / in the going making / single stream” (72). Similarly, as the poet is stricken with wonder and anxiety at beholding the awesome cosmos, he, in direct conjunction with the tape, is unwound, pulled irresistibly along by the rushing flood of inspiration:

noticed how
some nights the stars
are raw & brand new?
 make you feel
 slightly
 uneasy?
 it's the size
 & distance
 unwinds you,
 pulls you out
 attenuating you
 into
 nothingness
 (128)

Just as the poet's quotidian musings fuel the movement of the tape, in this instance we see the processes of inspiration metaphorically transforming Ammons himself into the rotating strip, as he is "attenuat[ed]" into cosmic speculation. Reciprocity is thus established, both poem and poet described in terms of the defining properties of the other. The equivalency between the poet and his unfurling roll of tape is further established as both progress, under the influence of such inspiration, toward "nothingness." This being, of course, the inevitable fate of the tape, with each word transcribed bringing us ever closer to the bare spool. Throughout the poem, Ammons substantiates his assertion, a compendious iteration of the overarching theme of the entire piece, that "the thing I couldn't / do was separate us" (71).

It is these moments of immersion in, and connection with, the defining universal truth of unity that the poet seeks above all else. Ammons demonstrates this, in terms that once again incorporate the presence of the tape, as he explains the importance of constantly recalling where one has been, and where one is heading, explaining that we must:

keep the threads looped
tightly with past years,
the fabric
taut
& continuous, past growing
into present so present
can point to future:

(81)

Here, the very progression of time and the cycle of life are equated with, and described in terms appropriately descriptive of, the rotating roll of tape. Similar language is used as Ammons describes poetry, boiled down to its most fundamental level, as "the going tension / that holds us / suspends, rises & falls, / the going on" (177). In total, the uncoiling poem is melded beyond distinction with the individual man writing, the

underlying impetus and essence of poetic expression, and the ethereal fabric comprising the passage of time/cycle of life. The entire universe seems to converge upon the center of the unwinding poem, variegated elements melding into an all-encompassing esemplastic stream.

Such a sustained, ubiquitous amalgamation is performed in the service of enacting an eradication of form, as form becomes impossible in a world in which each thing bleeds indistinguishably into the next, and nothing maintains an independent existence. Just as “structure / & function / are inextricably / intertwined” (139), *Tape* further embodies the principles it attempts to communicate by subverting any sense of ultimate closure, even when the red ink signaling the exhaustion of this particular cycle begins to rise from the floor. Ammons portrays the tape as embodying the same tenets of ceaseless regeneration and return that he observes maintaining the entirety of the universe:

the nest I've pro-
 vided
 for this
song to wind into is
the wastebasket: that's
symbolic: the roll, tho,
unwinds from the
glazed bottom of an
ashtray: I don't
 know what to make
 of that:
 phoenix?
 (29)

The tape, just like the mythical bird, will rise again. While this particular cycle within the larger turn has run its course, the thread will undoubtedly be picked up again, as further communicated through the poem's closing salutation of “so long” (205). Harmon comments upon the Whitmanian connotations of this parting expression, and the

accompanying signification of impermanence: “Whitman used *So long!* as a striking refrain, novel but durable. ‘A salutation of departure, greatly used among sailors, sports, and prostitutes,’ runs the definition Whitman gave William Sloane Kennedy. The sense of it is ‘Til we meet again,’—conveying an inference that somehow, they will doubtless so meet, sooner or later” (Schneider 320). Just as in the pre-*Tape* verse, the rotating movement of the poem has again been projected beyond the confines of its ostensible conclusion, into limitless space that eludes definition with its lack of boundaries or discriminating detail.

CREATION OF A SELF-SUSTAINING POETIC UNIVERSE

As demonstrated in the previous section, with *Tape for the Turn of the Year* Ammons attempts to recreate, both physically and metaphorically, the cyclical flow he observes simultaneously comprising and maintaining the universe around him. There is another aspect of the experiment that warrants examination as well, when one considers the poet's commentary, within the rondure of the tape poems, concerning the nature and origin of poetry itself. Ammons repeatedly indicates that, in his conception of the universe as governed by constant motion and cyclical return, the imaginative force that is poetry provides no exception to this pattern of organization. Most often, he conceives of the actual poem as inscribed evidence of the motion of this poetic force, an accumulated imprint, which he succinctly describes with the distinction "art is not nature / but the flow, brook-like, in the mind / is nature" (SP 278). Spiegelman describes Ammons' attempts to recreate these natural shapes and patterns within the body of his poetry:

He has produced during almost a half century a body of poetry (the organic phrase is unavoidable) notable for its measure of the natural world, the data within the terrain and the climate that the poet has assiduously collected, and for the often explicit theorizing within the poems about the kind of poem he wishes to write, about the relationship between the shape of his poem and the shapes available to the discerning eye within the natural world. (Schneider 52)

With this in mind, Ammons attempts to produce a poetry that simultaneously reflects, and in a sense enters into, the cycling flow of energy coursing through all space and matter. This aim is reflected in the poet's frequent comparisons within the tape poems linking his free-flowing verse with paradigmatic examples of nature's cyclical regenerative motions. Just as the experiment of *Tape* begins, Ammons implores the Muse and describes her presence as producing "water from spring heights, / warmth and

melting, / stream inexhaustible” (1), evoking not only continuous flow but the consistent influx of seasonal replenishment, two fundamental properties of the system maintaining the universe. In the first resurrection of the tape, *The Snow Poems*, Ammons describes the poetic capacity of the wind:

the wind's many
motions, inscribe,
a telling not of one
thing to another, pen
to paper, chalk to slate,
skyscraper to groundbase,
microinscription to fossil
but undivided telling:
 this writing
 makes bowls
 and fills seas:

(119-20)

The markings of the wind upon the landscape are described as utterly honest, unadorned, with nothing lost in the transfer from motion to inscription. Bringing the figure back to verse, the best poetry can be thought of as simply incidental evidence left behind in the wake of a powerful flow, marking the progress of its motions. Later in the poem Ammons reiterates this description, indeed positioning himself as the generator of the circling motion, with the reverent lamentation, “I am not worthy of the / energy that winds up / spruce tops and floats off / into the air still winding” (275).

The idea of poetry as itself a localization of the universal energy, possessing a flowing presence not unlike that of water or wind, is further represented as the poet describes verse as possessing the fecundity and element of continual regeneration he views with such singular awe operating throughout nature. Considering the imposition of some classifying system upon poetry, Ammons explains the impossibility of such unnatural bottling up and preservation with the contrary explanation:

but poetry resists this, yielding to erosion,
horse manure, bird droppings,
pine needles, the wind, moss,
bracket, bract, stone of change,
a troublesome, marvelous garden:
fertility inexhaustible, a milling:
(146)

Here, the processes and materials that poetry “yields” to, thus determining its shape and form, are portrayed as both accumulative and regenerative. Accompanying this, verse is shown springing from nature’s least poetic, but in Ammons’ conception most incredible, miracles, as the result of detritus and excrement returning to the soil and replenishing the next generation of life. In *Garbage*, Ammons’ reverent celebration of the purest operation of the universal principles as manifested in refuse, he repeatedly describes poetry as exhibiting the same properties. This is immediately established in the poem’s prescript, dedicating the work “to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, / wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers.” After issuing the declaration “garbage has to be the poem of our time” Ammons renders a full description of the comparison as flowing in the alternate direction, as well:

poetry is itself like an installation at Marine

Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit
and cool oil of stale recognition and words and

brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays
with light and strings with shiny syllables and

gets the mind back into vital relationships with
communication channels: but, of course, there

is some untransformed material, namely the poem
itself;

(108-9)

Here, while portraying poetry as exhibiting the same properties and capacities as accumulated garbage, which Ammons considers a singularly paradigmatic example of the world's capacity to ceaselessly maintain and regenerate itself, he also reiterates the description earlier likening poems to the markings of the wind. In either case, the poem itself must be viewed as evidence of motion, markings accumulated during prolonged activity, accurately depicting the progress.

Having conceived of a form that successfully approximates the sense of indefinite projection so fervently sought in the earliest verse, the poet's aims become even more ambitious. Beginning with *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and continuing over nearly four decades, Ammons seeks to imbue the rotating, returning field of the tape poems with the same properties he observes constituting nature's other cycles. Therefore, the structure of the tape poems is designed to produce an overwhelming sense of continuity and return. This begins with the actual physical foundation of the tape, with its unique properties of horizontal limitation and vertical motion. The relentless passage of outgoing motion, with little opportunity for horizontal stall, keeps the synchronous unit of poem and poet in a state of constant flow. Complementing this property of constant motion, we have the spinning circular spools of tape, frequently described by the poet as they cycle through the typewriter, again reflecting the movements Ammons senses turning throughout the natural world. Owing to these shared aspects of structure implying constant cyclical motion, and Ammons' oft-expressed conception of the structure of the universe, we may reasonably view the full body of the tape poems as a continuous whole. Just as in nature, one cycle within the tape's full turn runs its course, followed by a period of ostensible stagnancy. This may represent a period of fecund reconfiguration and assimilation, a

transference and gathering of energy to be reapplied elsewhere. In the poet's conception, this cycle of breakdown and return constitutes the indomitable and singularly crucial principle of life. Therefore, the use of the tapes provides a vivid, ingenious metaphor through which Ammons attempts to represent the flow of verse as exhibiting the same fundamental principles he observes operating within nature.

In order to create a means of composition approaching the history of accumulated motion observable in the markings of wind upon stone, Ammons strives for the type of unintentional, indiscriminating perfection he senses at work in nature. It is this impulse underlying the method the poet describes to Jim Stahl in a 1984 interview:

...I have in some of my work tested the possibility of writing spontaneously—getting it “right” the first time—in the long essay poems and in *The Snow Poems*, and earlier in the *Tape for the Turn of the Year* way back in 1963 I tested my ability to say it right the first time in a long poem. And you know that that is an exaggerated test to place on oneself, but if it does come right somehow it has a ...necessary quality to it that seems inevitable; it seems that there was something taking place in the mind and there was no difference between that and what happened on the page and so it just became itself. (SM 43)

In such instances, Ammons no longer feels as if he is translating the poem's motion; the residue of the poetic energy has simply “happened” upon the page. This conception of poetry as a powerful localization of energy that leaves the poem behind as evidence of its passing is represented in verse as the poet explains:

I would love to get the poetry just
the way it happens, the way it comes
on, heavy and thick like
a thunder tangle or empty as high
blue, weaving, stalling,
a little bit of all the
progressions including the
unstirring

(SP 177)

For such a state to be achieved, things must be operating in a manner exhibiting what the poet might describe as naturalness and truth. The poet must simply let the poem inscribe its own motion without interference, or interpretation, as “art too strong or weak / betrays the living man” (279). This state of neutrality, so to speak, the ability to simply allow the poetic energy to communicate, is invoked at the opening of *Tape*, as Ammons cries out for “clarity and simplicity!” (4). His vision of this dynamic remains constant, as evidenced by the following commentary from *Glare* denouncing the use of deliberate obfuscation in poetry: “mystery is what comes true at the // center of the perfectly clear: I / mean, all efforts at clarity having // failed, one succumbs to mystery” (129). When operating optimally, the force of poetic motion that leaves its passage upon the page clearly evinces its connection to the universal energy the poet senses spinning around him. This interconnectedness and similarity compels him to speculate that “imaginative / forms derive from bioforms” (SP 48), as he further observes that “the motions of the language / system correspond to / the motions of the world system” (134). Ultimately, then, Ammons seeks a poetry that:

tells the truth, an

accuracy of all the other
dispositions, hills, marshes,
declivities, underground ways
of the terrain surround, an
instantaneous, just summary
and announcement:

(278)

Another of the salient universal truths Ammons attempts to recreate within the unfurling field of the tape poems is the principle of inclusiveness. In a system wherein all things are derivative of the same material, thus inextricably connected, there can be no

hierarchy. In order to represent this, Ammons adopts the process of unfiltered composition begun with the *Tape*, where every seemingly insignificant moment and reaction is transcribed, differentiated in no way from the most soaring poetic epiphany within the same work, thus establishing an equal footing between the two. This practice reaches its extreme limit with *The Snow Poems*, as Ammons includes all manner of syntactic tics, non sequiturs and dirty rhymes with the following aims: "...I had meant to write a book of a thousand pages. I don't know why I didn't go ahead and do it, because I wanted to say here is a thousand pages of trash that nevertheless indicates that every image and every event on the planet and everywhere else is significant and could be great poetry" (SM 66). There is commentary upon this goal within the poem itself, such as the poet's admission of sprawling single-mindedness, "I know only one / thing to talk / about (poetry) / and that / covers everything" (SP 226). Elsewhere, he indicates the desired capacity he wishes to achieve through his poetic language with the set-off, insistent line "wor(l)d" (193). In *Garbage*, an extended examination of the world's most miraculous motions of reabsorption and renewed life, as carried out in an aesthetically disgusting environment by the ostensibly lowest forms of life on earth, Ammons describes the desire to infuse his poetry with a similarly democratic scope:

poetry is strawbags full of fleas the dogs won't

sleep on or rats rummage: I am the abstract inexact's
chickenfeed: I am borderlines splintered down

into hedgerows: I am the fernbrake ditches
winter brown, the shaggy down springs' flows

acruce: but think what it would be like to get
every word in, to trickle every rhythm in and

the overrhythms curling, lagging, eddying along

a network of motional obligatos: imagine

getting all the elements in (including the
element of surprise), the axis each philodendron

leaf takes to the window, gathering it up round
and dumping it to where it belongs in the sweeping,

the unheard, the unspent, that which is around
the edges of whatever may be: everything

assimilated to star-ypointing song:

.....

but who reports taking a leak or blithely oozing
a porch fart—

(103-4)

Crucial to the construction of this poetic universe that exhibits the same properties of the universe at large, Ammons densely populates the entirety of the tape poems with a limited number of repeating symbolic icons. Having developed a compositional method that approximates the continuity of constant motion and interconnected inclusiveness that he considers the fundamental formative principles of the universe, Ammons employs the use of recurring symbolism in order to represent the motion transpiring within the turning foundation he has laid. In the poet's estimation, not only are all things connected, but since the universe is comprised of shared, constantly recycling energy, all matter eventually returns, albeit often in another exterior form. A foundational property of the universe is that, ultimately, "things that go around sometimes go / around so far around they come back around" (GB 100). We see this propensity for inevitable return become an important personal theme throughout *The Snow Poems*, as Ammons repeatedly returns to the somewhat haunting discovery that "sometimes I notice my / shadow and think / there's my father / but I'm fifty now / and it's me" (12).

In order to represent this system, the poet infuses an extremely small number of well-chosen organisms with archetypal significance, then proceeds to cycle these loaded symbols through his poems again and again. In doing so, Ammons weaves layers of cyclical motion into the similarly spinning foundation of the poem. When considering these recurring iconic symbols that, in conjunction with one another, comprise the poet's personal symbolic system, we see that, in each case, he has chosen an organism that is paradigmatically representative of the circular, regenerative forces that comprise and maintain the universe. The individual organism itself, then, represents the smallest circle of motion from which the rest of the spinning nexus radiates outward. The second layer of motion is established as this primary figure, itself powerfully emblematic of the circular processes that form the universe, begins to repeat, cycling back relentlessly. The third, foundational level exists in the metaphorical innovation of the field upon which all this spinning motion takes place, the tape itself, rotating ever outward from the poet's typewriter. Through this elaborate construction Ammons attempts to create an accumulative and inclusive verse formed by layers of constant cyclical motion.

The most prominent among these symbols that Ammons imbues with archetypal significance is the bird. The fundamental habits of this organism deem it perfectly suited for such a role, as most avian species are ceaselessly cycling, migrating from place to place. Such movement, of course, shares a precise synchronicity with that cycle which man is most irrevocably and ubiquitously attuned to, that of the changing seasons. We oftentimes consider the bird the ultimate arbiter of seasonal change, to be trusted above our own empirical observations. We mark the impending onset of winter as their exodus begins, though the day may be warm, and cheer the beginning of true spring only after

hearing their numbers united in song. For these reasons, the bird provides a perfect symbolic figure for Ammons' purposes, as the cycling back of its return occurs with utter infallibility. The prominence of the bird's position throughout the tape poems is exemplified in the beautifully rendered final scene of "The Ridge Farm," where the catbird is portrayed as the center and catalyst from which the innumerable nexus of overlapping spheres emanates, pecking at the glassy water, "dipping into and / beading the reflective surfaces with / mishmashes of tinkling circlets" (41).

In traditional Romantic fashion, Ammons frequently identifies birdsong as a source of powerful inspiration issuing forth from nature. Upon waking in the morning, he "can tell the weather by their voices before / I open my eyes" (GB 51). In this instance, he is able to conceptualize both landscape and the processes operating therein simply by listening to the birds sing. Accompanying this conception of song producing inspiration, again echoing oft-repeated traditional Romantic sentiment, Ammons views the ensuing verse as itself constituting song. *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, Ammons' "long thin song," describes the poet's ravenous interrogation of his environment in just such terms: "I devour / the whistle out of / the bird, / bust his / guts open / and devour / their churning" (103). In this case, the poet must consume the song of the bird, in order to sing, himself. Similar sentiments run throughout the tape poems, as he declares, "I want to be singing" (GB 76), and describes the passionate necessity "to fill women with food and seed, / to climb up any high place one can // find and sing (like a bird) I, I" (GL 19).

Representative of its favored position within Ammons' iconography, the bird seems to possess an intensely heightened synchronicity with, and understanding of, the fundamental processes fueling the universe. The rotating forces fueling all life, it seems, are not

immune to the occasional stall in operation, whereupon the bird becomes the crucial catalyzing agent of rejuvenation. In typically scatological fashion Ammons recalls such an instance, observing starlings that:

having hung sideways on the music building's
ivyvine collection while picking the berries,
sit meditatively high in the branches of the
oak to rest and then the berries
that had not fallen from the vines fall
from the lofts of oak, empurpling do's
sparse rain:

(SP 42)

However stubbornly the berries may cling to the vine, the starlings pass them along into the crucial next stage of their existence, that of loam for the soil, nutriment to be absorbed through the roots of the majestic oak, converted into growth and next season's berries. The transference is especially timely, once again indicating a prescient anticipation of the changing moods of nature, since:

the starlings barely
got the berries
off the vines

before snow
lineations loaded
them up again

(42)

Had the starlings not swooped in to perform their inestimable task right as they did, ground and berry would have been frozen, buried in snow, thus immiscible, resulting in the squandering of valuable energy. When, later in the poem, Ammons describes, "flocks of birds foliating, / defoliating shrubs and / trees" (226), the metaphor is to be applied in terms of both image and content. Were it not for the activity of the flocks as catalyst and

facilitator of the sustaining processes of regeneration and growth, eventually the trees would indeed stand barren.

It is suggested that the bird, owing to its deep understanding of and synchronization with the natural world, has achieved a reconciliation of the one:many dichotomy that so plagues the poet throughout his lifetime. Seagulls observed through a rainstorm appear to transcend earthly restrictions of individual form, dispersing freely out of discrete existence:

rain in the luminous
woods, yellow with unfallen fall,

feels like creation beginning: and
gulls foraging on the lawn by the waste

treatment plant blur in and out of
form through windshield

rain:

(GL 169)

The poet's personal limitations in achieving the desired state of universal dispersal is directly juxtaposed with the bird's natural residence within just such a state, as expressed in *Tape*:

sometimes you can keep
track
of the patterns five birds
make in a woods edge or
open tree:

beyond that,
you start to have the
large round
congregations,
individuals
lost to the general
symmetry:

(176)

Ammons bestows upon the bird another traditional analogy of the highest ethereal order, musing “it seems that // terns’ slender wings and finely-tipped / tails look so airy and yet so capable that they // must have been designed after angels or angels / after them:” (GB 33). This comparison provides an interesting turn, since in Ammons’ terms precedence between the bird and the angel becomes ambiguous, impossible to establish, thus the two exist on equal footing. The bird is not represented as simply sharing symbolic similarities with these agents of the Almighty, but perhaps serving as the impetus for their inception.

By taking the traditional bird/angel analogy in a radically different direction, Ammons reveals his conception of the ultimately sacred. Far removed from angelic beauty, antithetical to the typical associations with purity and light, it is the most demonically countenanced of avian species that most accurately resemble (or vice versa) the ethereal, as Ammons explains with reverence:

vultures (and other
scavengers) will
eat up the ruptures, lesions, gashes,
dissolving sores of dead
animals
and gut-cleanse the disease till
shit’s reductive bit, which may
stink, is (as the world
is made) pure

(SP 133)

The vulture, inextricably paired with death both literally and symbolically, is here portrayed as transforming the corruption accompanying death into that which is untainted, “pure.” Through the vulture’s intercession, the deceased may be redeemed from interminable decay. When one enters the final stage of one’s personal existence, returning to the loam of the soil, they are able to make the transition quickly, undertaking

the operation in a state of purity, as opposed to suffering the indignity of a prolonged deterioration beneath the sun. The vulture, then, becomes imbued with the powers traditionally attributed to God, granting absolution and deliverance upon death. The grandiose religious air of the scene is reiterated and amplified, as the action depicted becomes the true impetus and process of Creation, wherein the purity of the vulture's shit is conceived "as the world is made." A parallel scene occurs earlier in *The Snow Poems*, as Ammons contemplates upon shafts of heavenly light observable from his window:

a lot of sunshine today now falling in
gold vertical striping against
the garage and breaking to
fall on up the roof
a glorious coldness
and brightness antibacterial as saliva or vulture shit
(131)

In this instance, Ammons again reverses the expected direction of the simile, giving precedence to the vulture shit as an exemplary model of radiance and purity. The heavenly beams of sunlight, then, can only aspire to match this archetypal symbol. The entire scene is imbued with an air of religiousness and beauty appropriate to the process of breakdown and regeneration upon which all life depends, as represented by the shit.

In constructing his adaptation of the kingdom of heaven in order to reflect his own understanding of the truly sacred, Ammons further includes other unlikely organisms among this new order of angelic beings. With a similar reverence to that bestowed upon the vulture, Ammons describes the angelic qualities of another bearer of macabre and disgusting associations:

maggots tho,
mostly— as we do not— turn into
something else, flies, you know, with

wings: that's probably where we got

the idea of angels from: we'll fly
away or flies will fly away with us

or seed us with fly seed that turn
into little blunt-ended nuzzlers
(GL 160)

Here, the fly is portrayed not only freeing the soul of man from confinement within the cadaver, but also utilizing the dead material, laying eggs. Nothing is wasted, and the cycle is portrayed as being both complete and ceaseless, as these "angels" break down the corpse's nutriment for acceptance into the soil, while simultaneously producing the next generation. Not only has the regeneration of fresh life been guaranteed, but also its subsequent breakdown, and so on, ad infinitum.

Ammons completes his angelic triumvirate with the inclusion of the lowly worm. Throughout "The Ridge Farm," Ammons experiences anxiety concerning the continued presence of a dead squirrel at the side of the road. He describes his dismay at discovering the roadkill: "...affrighted past loafing / by the small blood / lining the squirrel's mouth / where he lay on the highway's edge / his legs spraddled stiff into space" (25). As the corpse lingers on, even making an improbable return after its disappearance, the poet's anxiety grows, and he finds himself longing for the activity of "the worms rising up under / and draining him off into flight" (35). Broken down into its most fundamental elements, this fear can be seen as deriving from a perceived breach in the system. The most elemental, definitive universal pattern of breakdown and regeneration has stalled. Should it cease to reengage, the universe, as perceived by Ammons, would come apart entirely.

In what initially appears to be a reversal of the appropriate direction for this “draining,” Ammons equates the worm, joining the vulture and fly in this vaunted category, with the ethereal guardian. This is set up earlier in the poem, as he imagines that the recently deceased will “fly again (?) with / winged worms” (14). The comparison is again reiterated in *Glare*, as he imagines death as primarily consisting of “angels / and worms” (27). The equivalency is apt and accurate, since without the contribution of these scavengers to the body’s postmortem processes of decomposition, the organism’s energy becomes eternally caught and wasted. Whereas, in religious mythology, it is the angel that bears away the soul, freeing it from a similar state of captivity, in Ammons’ conception of things the personal localization of universal energy that we consider the self becomes equated with the religious entity of the soul.

Ammons illustrates the magnitude of the worm’s contribution in performing this service for man, both individually and collectively, explaining:

since we must die,
sweet completeness will
not have us wait in attendance
on our bodies
while workers fatten
and disperse and find
slick tunnels to
flight and the rich (or poor)
man’s table
(SP 265)

The aforementioned angelic scavengers, referred to here as “workers,” are responsible for enacting the crucial final stages, through which a “sweet completeness” of the cycle of life, death, and regeneration is ultimately achieved. Eventually, the corpse’s released energy and transferred nutriment will emanate across time and space, returning to replenish the larders of those still living. Since man does not customarily derive his

sustenance from the worm or the buzzard directly, we may infer that an entire intermediary plane of lives has been sustained, flora and fauna, by this transferred life force en route to the dinner table.

Owing to the aforementioned processes, and the resultant vastly elevated role of the worm, Ammons frequently describes one's role as worm food in vaunted terms. Consumption by the worm represents both release and a sort of immortality. He imagines one's freedom from the stagnant motionlessness of death coming about as "a worm would find a bit / to stir here and there, / the sinews would loosen and / bone spill from bone" (SP 284). Similarly, in discussing the permanent dormancy accompanying death, which Ammons likens to "dead / impounded water," he qualifies this inescapable eternal stall with the following exception: "the dead unless // ruffled by worms don't move" (GL 158). Here we have a metaphorical re-animation of the dead, enacted by the industrious worm. This idea is further elevated to include an afterlife, with the declaration "we live again in the bellies / of worms" ("Ridge Farm" 14). Just as the poet conceives of one's borrowed portion of the universal energy as constituting the soul, here he asserts a belief in his own version of life after death. One's "soul" does indeed live forever, as transferred energy fueling the worm, en route to a host of other plants and creatures, cycling ceaselessly. An identical vivification takes place when one's remains fall beneath the maggot's care, as "maggots like / undertakers (too) / work dead stuff / but are unlike / livelier" (SP 213). While it is the undertaker's duty to preserve dead matter, which to Ammons' view is singularly unnatural and wasteful, the "lively" decomposition and dispersal catalyzed by the maggot serve to sustain the following generation of life on earth.

Having examined, in sweeping comprehensive fashion, the establishment and extended development of these repeating “angelic” symbols, it is appropriate to take a more directed look at the apex of these themes, as played out in *Garbage*. In this book-length poem Ammons examines with awe and reverence his own personal Mecca. There can be no symbol more perfectly demonstrative of the most sacred processes transpiring upon the earth than the soaring spectacle of the massive Floridian dumpsite. As the poem reaches its soaring heights, Ammons describes the miracle of regeneration through death and decay as it is presided over by these angelic organisms.

Throughout *Garbage*, we see moments of transcendence accompanied by the overseeing presence of circling birds. A virtuosic example of such is rendered as Ammons describes the following scene taking place upon the Floridian dumpsite:

with a high whine the garbage trucks slowly
circling the pyramid rising intone the morning

and atop the mound’s plateau birds circling
hear and roil alive in winklings of wings

denser than windy forest shelves: and meanwhile
a truck already arrived spills its goods

the back hatch and the birds as in a single computer-
formed net plunge in celebration, hallelujahs

of rejoicing: the driver gets out of his truck
and wanders over to the cliff on the spill and

looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine
rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the

birds white and clean as angel-food cake: holy, holy,
holy, the driver cries and flicks his cigarette

in a spiritual swoop that floats and floats before
it touches ground:

.....

here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal
of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding

enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots
of placenta:

(27-28)

In a passage dense with religious allusion, Ammons creates his typically democratic high/low equivalency, juxtaposing Isaiah's reverent exclamation upon beholding the face of God with a tongue-in-cheek reference to "angel-food cake." The presence of birdshit is of inestimable importance, as the gulls both break down components of the garbage heap, then reapply them as fertilizer, contributing to the maintenance of the world with paradigmatic circularity.

Ammons' description of the refuse heap as a "pyramid" echoes the earlier lines "the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance, / as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls // and garbage keep alive, offerings to the gods / of garbage" (18). In representing the mound as a site suitable for Old Testament visionary proclamations, it is significant that the highest reaches of the sky, to which man has traditionally turned for answers concerning the enigmatic proceedings of life, now contain not God, but "gulls and garbage." In the universe created within Ammons' poetry, it is to these circling scavengers that the disciple must turn with his existential inquiries and prophetic exclamations. In doing so, the bulldozer man undergoes a transformation, becoming "a priestly director behind the // black-chuffing dozer" that "leans the gleanings and / reads the birds, millions of loners circling // a common height, alighting to the meaty streaks / and puffy muffins (puffins?)" (20). Just as the priest is thought to share some privileged connection with God, and an insight into His workings denied the rest of us, so too the

blue-collar worker carefully studying the formation of birds, wherein lies the very formation and organization of the universe.

The fly's angelic connection to these forces is demonstrated later in the poem as Ammons describes how, from the burning furrows of garbage, "a priestly plume rises, a signal, smoke / like flies intermediating between orange peel / and buzzing blur" (30). The rising smoke, both tapped into a higher power, "priestly," and serving as a revelation or "signal" to the observer, is very appropriately likened to a cloud of flies. Throughout the deeply reverent meditations of *Garbage*, when Ammons turns his attention to the twin miracles of decomposition and fresh life, his angelic scavengers are present, presiding over the process.

With the 1963 implementation of the adding machine tape, carrying through on impulses clearly evident years earlier in *Ommateum*, Ammons begins seeking out a means of pairing the movement and construction of the poetic universe he is creating with that transpiring at large. To the poet, this represents the ultimate expression of honesty in poetry, which he views as itself a vein of the reciprocal, intermingling universal energy.

A primary component of this constantly recycling system is the inevitability of endless return. In order to imbue his verse with the same motion, Ammons begins working a very limited number of iconic symbols throughout poems spanning over three decades. After establishing these symbols and their enormously weighted significance, Ammons pairs them with the rare instances during which man is granted a glimpse into the processes operating behind the scenes, including the mechanisms governing his own mortality. Towards exhibiting a principle frequently discussed within the poetry,

Ammons chooses the lowliest, most aesthetically repugnant organisms for this honor. In doing so, he demonstrates that this truly is the face of God, the processes of rot and regeneration as they occur in the corpse and the garbage heap, dutifully carried out by the insect and scavenger.

3. FINAL ROTATION OF THE TAPE

As we have seen, in giving physical presence through the revolving spool of adding machine tape to the conceptual form he imagined defining the universe, Ammons laid the foundation upon which he would go on to construct an elaborate poetic universe of interconnected, cyclical motion. On this spinning canvas, the first and most fundamental cycle, Ammons sets in motion an intricate nexus of interconnected cycles, accomplished through his usage of repeating, cyclical imagery. Complementing this extended, symbolic demonstration, Ammons frequently discusses the circular, regenerative patterns that serve to define everything he thinks and beholds. There is a kaleidoscopic mesh, then, maintained through both content and form, mirroring that same construction operating ceaselessly and incorporating all of reality.

Constantly in Ammons' work we encounter demonstrations of the individual as an ephemeral concretion within the recycling universal nexus of energy. An understanding of this principle as ultimate truth catalyzes the poet's extreme anxiety concerning the partial truth that necessarily accompanies any imposition of discrete form. As a result, we see him, from the earliest verse onward, wrestling with some way to break the restrictive barriers that constitute form—one such experiment being the implementation of the tape. This idea of perpetual and limitless motion is closely related to the poet's conception of dispersal and regeneration after death, as the postmortem transference of energy provides an extraordinary example of nature's unwillingness to stall. We have seen, throughout much of the preceding discussion, that Ammons views the mechanisms

of rot and decay with utmost reverence, describing one's reentry into the universal energy stream as a moment of unparalleled personal glory and emancipation.

In his laudatory descriptions of the miraculous processes that take place following death, Ammons does not shy away from including human mortality as a crucial part of the natural cycle. Oftentimes, the death evoked is his own, such as we see occurring in his many speculations concerning a dispersal of the self into the environment. This philosophy is dependent upon a strong faith in the imagined system, since one is to view one's own impending mortality as both necessary, and in a sense, beautiful. How, then, does the poet's resolve hold up when the death is no longer kept at arm's length, conceptual, but personal and approaching fast? In a world in which all discrete existence is simply a temporary illusion, and the honest philosopher respects nothing so much as death, how willingly does the poet surrender the ephemeral cycle known as Archie Ammons?

In the intricate, elaborate construction of the self-sustaining poetic universe of A.R. Ammons, each installation of the flowing tape orients itself around a particular center. In the first and last rotations of the tape, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) and *Glare* (1997), the center is the poet himself. In *The Snow Poems* (1977) Ammons centers the unwieldy verse around the idea of a background "continuo" provided by the near-constant Ithaca snowfall. A pair of very different monuments, though similar in stature, provides the centers for "The Ridge Farm" (1986), which rotates around the perspective provided by a nearby ridge, and *Garbage* (1993), Ammons' reverent examination of a Floridian dump. In each case, the poem's center serves as a symbol around which to orient

the poet's most central lifelong concern, the miraculous universal properties of death and subsequent regeneration.

In *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, it is the poet, himself, that provides the stable center around which the growth of the poem occurs, as well as the touchstone to which the poetic flow repeatedly returns. In transcribing his ongoing thoughts and quotidian motions, the poet seldom strays from the internal space of mind and office. As for the prominence and endurance of the individual, Ammons wastes no time in vividly rendering his perspective concerning such:

last
night I
read
about the
geologic times
of the Northwest, the
periodic eruptions into
lava plateaus,
forests grown, stabilized
and drowned
between eruptions:
in the
last
10,000 years (a bit of
time) the
glaciers have been
melting, some now unfed,
disconnected, lying dead
and dissolving in
high
valleys:
.....
10,000 yrs
Troy
burned since then:
but the earth's been
"resting" —entering
a warm
cycle: the Sumerians
had not, that long ago,

compiled
their
holy bundle of
the elements of civil-
ization, nor
had one city-state stolen
it from another:

ten thousand years: how
many Indians is that,
fishing the northern
coast, marrying, dying?
coming & going, they
left no permanent sign
on the warming
trend:

(5-7)

In the sum total of these gradual, irresistible progressions and processes, we encounter a world turning, however slowly, through a ceaseless cycle of perishing and rebuilding. Interwoven throughout this tableau of cooling lava, sliding glacier, and drowning flood, Ammons positions humanity, reminding us that man, just as surely as any other element comprising the natural world, is subject to the exact same dynamic. Whether we are discussing the majestic forest or the well-structured harmonious society, each runs its course, enacting certain lasting effects, and gives way to that which proceeds. And this, Ammons tells us, is the inescapable unifying principle of the universe. The issue of death, then, the universal slide towards breakdown, is kept at a panoramic distance, discussed in terms philosophical, and collective. Ammons is, at this juncture, absolutely confident that the tape will continue to spin, the phoenix continue to rise, and is thus secure in his laudatory elevation of the processes surrounding mortality.

In the following installment of the tape, *The Snow Poems*, Ammons' verse rotates voluminously, around a center other than the poet himself. Ammons describes the

intention of the project as follows: “I wrote *The Snow Poems*, where I had meant to write a book of a thousand pages, I don’t know why I didn’t go ahead and do it, because I wanted to say here is a thousand pages of trash that nevertheless indicates that every image and every event of the planet and everywhere else is significant and could be great poetry [...] But I went on long enough to give the idea that we really are in a poetically inexhaustible world, inside and out” (SM 65-6). Towards establishing this sense of inclusive, ongoing interconnectedness, the poem is strung together upon the common thread of the “continuo.”

Cueing off the definitional sense of the musical term, we recognize that the background accompaniment running throughout the poem, and providing a sense of ongoing movement and cohesion, is the near constant Ithaca snowfall. Ammons frequently comments upon the falling and accumulated snow, periodically returning to such observations in order to ground his abstract meditations in the concrete world of seasonal meteorological activity. From the snow he obtains inspiration for many passages in which he praises the beauty and efficiency of nature's operation.

The idea of the continuo is expanded beyond the trickling fall of snowflakes, broadened and explored until it has become a universal principle, unifying not simply the poem but all of space and time. The idea of the continuo is first introduced as a timeless, universal constant:

a day and decade like most any other
if you put in the wind, sun,
believe the brook’s fuss,
trees nodding, yessireeing,
the mixture of identifiable hunks of
historicity with permanences and continuos

(7)

Here, the continuo is portrayed as the universal principle of ceaseless motion, which, along with its opposite component of permanence, comprises nothing less than the natural landscape and the sum total of history. This sense of sprawling inclusiveness, without exception, is fully illustrated later in the poem:

weather is continuo to the clustral or choral
the deep through-going that adds a middle
to rain, or snow, or wind or
the sun's weather is
continuo
to earth and Mars and
elsewhere
or the galaxy's (here we go again) shine is
continuo
within which gather and move chords,
concerts, aggregates, configurations,
tangles, thickets
which in turn turning feed into and move the
continuo:
(83-4)

Here, we see the concept exploded to the point that, literally, every thing imaginable, big and small, becomes an accompaniment, constantly in motion, to every other thing, while itself simultaneously receiving accompaniment from every outlying particle of the universe, and so on, without end. In such a universe, defined by constant and ubiquitous turning motion, no obstacle can conceivably break the rotation of such, an assertion

Ammons expresses as follows:

so I don't think
we will be
concerned if the
continuo's overwhelmed
underground
by appallingly
pretentious blocks of
paydirt
it goes on trinkling under
there, eventually reappearing

Even in the dense interior of the earth, the principle of constant cyclical motion through which the universe is defined and maintained continues unimpeded.

While much of this long poem rotates around the immense, all-inclusive theme of the continuo, when the poet's musings do turn inward, they are frequently centered upon a recent landmark event in his life—that of his fiftieth birthday. Appropriately, Ammons most often positions his own advancing age in relation to analogous cyclical progressions, such as when he declares, immediately following a description of the autumnal scene beyond his window, “I’m at fifty October” (14). Similarly, in the poem “Here I Sit, Fifty in the,” following a catalogue of the poet’s own various flagging powers, he extends his examination into the “skinnyings up for winter” he sees stripping the landscape’s vivaciousness away, declaring of these parallel transformations:

hard to think of going back into spring,
 buds, slender parts, sprigs putting
 out, early green and preparation,
 then summer filling out, making up,
 might as well rush right on through into
 ripeness rotten
 where like summation or artistic
 compression
 seeds velvety in the dried-up pulp
 summarize recommencement, time’s compression
 (8)

Whereas the landscape will, in fact, bloom again, the poet himself will not, though he may provide fecund loam for the next generation of “seeds.”

Just as everything eventually cycles back, Ammons, having gained the half-century mark, now begins to see himself as a recurrence, such as when he comments, “sometimes

I notice my / shadow and think / there's my father / but I'm fifty now / and it's me" (12).

Elsewhere, we see a full rendering of this:

O my father, I say,
and when brook light, mirrored,
worms
 against the stone ledges
 I think it an unveiling
or coming loose, unsheathing
of flies
O apparition, I cry,
 you have entered in
 and how may you come
 out again

.....
O, my father, I cry,
are you returning:
I breathe and see:
it is not you yet it is you
 (276)

In this passage, somewhat anomalous and certainly notable due to its emotional intensity and sentimental tone, Ammons is stricken with a rush of ecstatic uncertainty, faced with what appears to be the resurrection of his dead father. A bit of wordplay is involved, as the action of the water, "worms," occupies its own line, naturally lending it a double-meaning as the noun-usage of the word. This resurrection, then, inspired by the worming water, is likened to the "unsheathing of flies." The prominent incorporation of these two key symbols implies that the return of his father must be read with a dual meaning. First of all, owing to the previous passage explicitly identifying that such a return is taking place, the poet's own reflection cast in the water signifies that Ammons now occupies a space and role previously filled by his father, and that the elder, in a sense, is thus resurrected through the image of the younger. Alternately, the presence of these two archetypal harbingers of death and subsequent re-entry into the stream of life (worm and

fly) suggests that, perhaps, Ammons is acknowledging the essential impermanence of death, realizing that his father has undoubtedly, with the assistance of these catalysts, been transferred back into the continuous cycle of regeneration and, thus, lives again.

Despite the significant birthday recently passed, and the accompanying similarity with his dead father, the combination of which suggests an acknowledgement on the part of the poet that he, like all things eventually, has now decidedly gained the downward slope of his particular life cycle, the vast majority of Ammons' contemplations of death in *The Snow Poems* fail to evidence any genuine apprehension or anxiety. The following represents one of the more serious considerations of the many mechanisms of mortality:

...what is
matter's project here, is it, where every
hub is afire with spinning and every
axle taking on the resonance of a
dissonance, where every next instant has
a twelve-ton meteorite or thousand-foot
ledge-drop in it, where everything
one once loved drains backward away into
a common hole, where underfoot one
feels time's shimmy, the sludge- and
sledgeweight of gravity's maw,
where nothing that in this fair
day takes on brilliant delimitations
and delights will miss tomorrow's
indifferent spill, waste, or fill or gravid
mud

(38)

However, such a poignant meditation is immediately invalidated, as Ammons provides the parenthetical aside "(I can hardly care a paragraph for such / fidgeting)." After temporarily losing himself to such macabre musings, he wastes no time in reassuring the reader that these anxious considerations of impending doom do not, in fact, genuinely reside within him.

Most often, when discussing human mortality in *The Snow Poems*, Ammons assumes a position of heraldic detachment, as if he is bound by duty to spread the news, while remaining personally removed from the ramifications of that which he announces:

I sometimes catch myself
fearful I've
let out the news of death,
told more than people will
please to hear,
a news, though, nowhere to be
kept still:
it flies loose and about
and is (must be) told in
every ear till
told too loud
no one's there to hear
(56)

Here, Ammons assumes the stance of one reluctantly revealing the genuine existence of a particularly frightful bugaboo to a group of children. In occupying this role, it is inherently implied, of course, that only Ammons is indeed capable of handling this news in a calm, dignified manner. Furthermore, his bravery extends beyond simply receiving the news, as he is able to remain in constant possession of it, accepting the onerous task of passing it on to unreceptive vessels, for their own good. This stance is reiterated as he educates the reader concerning events “when they put you in your coffin” (59), and later, as Ammons explains “you fear the grave / so much it is / possible before life is / done with you you / will beg for it” (83). In each case, Ammons has assumed the position of an outside party, speculating about “your” death, and constant fear in the face of such, viewing both death and fear at a safe, unaffected distance.

The poet's portrayal of death becomes so glib and so far removed from his personal concerns that he reduces his examination of mortality to a sort of word game, again

depicting those “others” who have reached the grave, without an acknowledgement of his own irresistible approach. Ammons composes ten small blocks of verse, each beginning with the refrain “look at / the people / in the / graveyard” (99-100). Many of these segments are then completed with tongue-in-cheek phrases such as “they / don’t seem to / mind,” “when dawn comes / no one stirs,” and “disturb the / peace.”

When Ammons is not parodying death, he is singing high praises to the process, exclaiming with apparent delight “what a dancer the stem of the / whirling down will be!” (287). While ostensibly acknowledging that his own cyclical trajectory upon this earth has begun to work itself downward, he reveals no genuine anxiety regarding this situation. Ammons has instead assumed the role of philosopher, calm in the face of impending mortality in such a way that seems to attribute shortcoming and foolishness to those who would react otherwise.

In “The Ridge Farm,” by far the shortest of the tape poems, a nearby ridge provides the center around which the verse revolves. In his book *A.R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope* Steven Schneider eloquently and accurately describes the significance of the ridge as follows: “...the ridge provides a natural landmark, a signpost or reminder that puts into perspective the comings and goings of generations and natural forces. It provides a ‘measure’ against which the poet gauges his own mortality and that of his readers. It is what he comes up against, the measure of his own limited days against the longer spans of geological time the ridge has endured” (186). Accordingly, the monolithic landmark inspires in the poet brief and occasional moments of anxiety, such as when he remarks, “slice thirty degrees off the summer / summit eighty and the windy ridge / that’s left can change your summer / clothes: it’s April and / glory is still uncertain

and death / not” (18). Juxtaposed with such an emblem of permanence, the poet is chilled by the accompanying implications concerning his own approaching death. Along these lines, he writes, “yesterday was one day, today is / another, tomorrow still one more: / the creeps” (22). The passage of time, which puts him ill at ease, is here described in terms that evoke comparison to its companion cycle, that of the slithering unwinding tape.

However, despite these occasional moments of nagging anxiety and unrest, death and its accompanying processes are overwhelmingly portrayed in celebratory terms. In fact, laudatory representations of the cycling turn of mortality and regeneration provide one of the poem’s dominant themes. Ammons compendiously outlines the progression of life and death:

nature that roots under us
thrusting us up and out
flows through assembling
us but eventually
the structures of the mouth
crack down to incontinent corners
moist, the eyes weeping
air’s mere burn
(12)

After a parenthetical, he continues the thought:

flows through
taking us apart, returning fine knots
to recycling’s fuzzy frays
and chunks: can we not,
then, find in these majestic
necessities
room for consideration,
notice of the sacred, an
overriding working steady
in care and keeping: look
elsewhere or go on paying close attention
(13)

Even when faced with the graphically depicted human death, we are to praise the incredible rotation of these processes enacting such decomposition. We must slough away our instinctual fear of mortality, the poet tells us, in the radiant presence of the world's workings, however ostensibly frightening and aversive, since "there is / no cause for alarm: and no joy except / in buying everything" (9). Similar praise is offered when Ammons, discussing the universal and inclusive "curvature of the going," asserts the reassurance that "but probably, though we can't / wait too long to see, it comes / out right eventually" (25). Again, the death of the individual is acknowledged, an inevitable fact that in no way diminishes the glory we are to take in the efficiency and continuity of the surrounding processes. It would be foolish to mourn even the natural eradication of an entire species:

...the stump of a giant
dutch elm stands by: its bark warps
off in swales of curvature: splits
enter radially closer
and closer to the heart: the meat
mush-sodden feeds mushrooms, big
whiteheaded, and brackets respond
vigorously to the softening:
various mechanisms appropriate,
necessary, useful, even beautiful
will do away with it in time and then
the mechanisms will find other work,
earth's supply of dutch elm stumps run out

(8)

The system continues to operate in beauty and perfection, unaffected as the species falls, never to be seen upon the earth again. Peace of mind is to be found only in a complete surrendering of the self to this perfection, trusting in the system despite what may transpire throughout the individual lifetime:

...so

many things to consider, undoing so
unlikely, assent follows, the wide band
of the mind shifting to acceptance,
finding the staying place amid
horror, lust, need, necessity, that
which is, a small
place to walk in a system of others

(14)

The wisdom of such acceptance and surrender is demonstrated as Ammons describes the folly of oppositional reluctance in the face of nature's relentless progression, since "(even now backsteppings are being wound / forward)" (5).

Here, the poet's tone, in examining death, has turned from the arrogance and sarcasm permeating such discussions in *The Snow Poems* to a voice imbued with grave weight and utmost seriousness. Throughout "The Ridge Farm," he insists that, though the individual must inevitably perish, he must still view such an end with reverence, as it represents a step within the glorious cyclical system of death and regeneration. For these reasons, fear, or a reluctance to meet one's personal moment of transformation, is folly, and indicative of some lack of understanding concerning the workings of the world. This attitude of laudatory reverence will continue into the next rotation of the tape, reaching its pinnacle in *Garbage*.

In *Garbage*, published in 1993, Ammons has chosen, for center, an immense heap of refuse he observes from the freeway looming above a Florida dump. The most salient theme of the poetry rotating around this mound of garbage is an extended celebration of the processes of breakdown and reentry through absorption Ammons sees transpiring in a paradigmatic, vivid manner there at the dump. Accordingly, the heap is described in terms befitting such an icon, as a "ziggurat" (18) and a "pyramid" (27), through which he extends the statement that "garbage is spiritual" (18). Both the bulldozer man (20)

organizing and consolidating the garbage, as well as the smoke rising after he has ignited the mounds (30), are referred to as “priestly.” In multiple places, the truly inestimable sacredness of the mechanisms at work within the dump becomes fully enumerated, as the language soars. Of the dump, Ammons declares “here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal / of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding // enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots / of placenta” (28). As the processes of breakdown and absorption are accelerated, with the bulldozer man setting fire to the heaps of garbage, Ammons declares of the smoldering refuse “O eternal // flame, principle of the universe, without which / mere heaviness and gray rust prevail” (31). Shortly thereafter, the flame becomes “eternity, the burning edge of beginning and // ending, the catalyst of going and becoming” (32). Ammons defends such laudation as adhering to the genuine, natural construction and order of the universe, as opposed to artificial constructs imposed by man:

so while I might regard the digestive fire lit
at the top of the mound a purifying ritual, the

white smoke an incense, highrising as a wish,
aromatic as a blessing, I think I would not be

blasphemous, unless, of course, we as fallen
creatures should divide things up and strive to

be holy, not whole:

(116)

Frequently, Ammons does include man in his considerations of spent matter’s disposal, and subsequent return to the earth. In places, we continue to see the matter of death discussed from the vantage of a distanced, and somehow exempt, observer. This is the case as Ammons describes the various reactions “old people” exhibit in the face of

their impending death, most prominently a “ridiculous” optimism, followed by the shock at seeing an image of their own awaiting coffins (53). He then, again, assumes the role of sage advisor: “this is why they and we must keep our // minds on the god-solid, not on the vain silks / and sweets of human dissipation, no, siree.” Elsewhere, in imagining the apocalyptic demise of all of mankind, he asserts his calm adherence to a trite but sweeping philosophy in the face of such destruction: “one // solar flare (nova) will recall all to light: / I’ll tell you: I’m just not worried: in fact, // there is a saying that should be repeated in / piano interludes —don’t worry, be happy” (109). This insouciance, even when ostensibly including his own impending deterioration in such musings, can be seen as Ammons imagines the pitfalls of his advancing age: “I need time and verve // to find out, now, about medicare / medicaid, / national osteoporosis week, gadabout tours, // hearing loss, homesharing programs, and choosing / good nutrition! for starters!” (14). After this tongue-in-cheek list of approaching problems, he concludes, in the same undermining tone marking the parting lines of the two passages above, “posh, as I // have never said” (14-15). Further philosophizing on man’s ridiculous propensity to cling to life unrealistically, he posits that “the heaven we mostly // want, though, is this jet-hoveled hell back, / heaven’s daunting asshole” (22). In each case, this type of commentary seems to mark Ammons’ position, in the problematic shadow of mortality, as one of understanding and control.

In the inextricably interconnected cycling universe, as matter and energy revolve without respite or gaps, “things that go around sometimes go / around so far around they

come back around” (GB 100). So it is with the rondure of the tape poems. In *Glare*, published in 1997, Ammons returns to the center he began to explore thirty-two years earlier with his first rotating installment; that center being the poet himself. We have seen that, while the specific focal points of each of the tape poems differ, at the most fundamental level all have continued to saliently explore the circularity and ongoingness, the breakdown and dispersal, that Ammons perceives as ultimately defining the entirety of the universe. Here, as he returns to the localized occupation of universal energy that is Archie Ammons, we encounter a poet whose outlook regarding these vaunted processes has been forced into a radical change.

Ammons indicates this return to the self as center, transcribed directly onto the flowing tape with unadorned immediacy: “I am for the poem: it tells me who // I am: as the poem becomes itself, / so, I hope, do I” (74-5). The familiar equivalency between the progression of the poet’s existence and the “life” of the turning tape is further established as Ammons calls life “ONE HELL OF A NOTE” (287). The self we encounter moving throughout the weaving stream, here, has undergone many changes during the cycling journey, as the poet acknowledges, “I’ve had my turn: turn / as in going from something fresh and new to // something old and fresh, no, I mean, old and / stale: or it could be called a turn through // time” (236). As Ammons examines this older self in the mirror of the tape, he begins to doubt the authenticity not of his method, but of the sometimes unfamiliar voice he finds flowing there:

...I take all these pills, every
morning: it’s because I’ve been
sick some: well, I think I lost a few
brain cells in one or two of those

episodes, and one of the drugs makes

me wonder if I'm doing medical
emotions or synergetic emotions: I

think my vocabulary doesn't access
the way it used to, and I don't have

always ready ways to the heights:
(59)

Later, he again expresses doubts over the nature of the dubious voice issuing forth from his partially ravaged body and mind, complaining, "so many pills you// can't tell the effects from the side effects: / and who are you, someone before the medications // or during or after," going on to wonder, "are your feelings // lofty or zolofly, red or blue, down or double // downdown: do you, in this condition, have any // right to speak, for who or what is speaking, is / it milligrams or anagrams, is it tranquility or // tranquilium" (282-3). Though the tape continues to rotate, as does the cycle of his life, Ammons now understands time is short, things are irrevocably winding down, as he issues the lamentation, "I don't care what becomes of me now, I'm / already become of: the end is clear (and // clearly dark)" (261). As the road has been long, the outcome certain and unfavorable, such self-centeredness becomes undesirable: "enough about me: I sure wish I could / think about something else" (178).

Shortly thereafter Ammons considers death, and the potential for redemption from such:

why is it that
the truth is not half as believable as the

unlikely: why?, why because the truth runs
from indifferent to terrifying ("we die")

whereas the unlikeliest possibility we have

any evidence of is that (“we don’t”): but it
is just the unlikeliness that introduces the
presence of the marvelous, abrogations and
effects only gods could arrange: the unbelievable
(through faith) becomes the most believable
while the dull flood of pure truth, abundant,
overwhelming, obvious, just washes us away:
(206)

Significantly, here the proposition of inevitable death has come to include the poet himself; “we die.” Of much greater importance still is the description of the previously vaunted processes that enact and require the death of each individual, which the poet has spent so many years describing with religious reverence, as a “dull flood” (206).

Similarly, as Ammons considers his pretensions to “make myself last in / something lasting,” he realizes the foolishness inherent in such a project, acknowledging, “now I am here by the // going-away and my dizzy little arrogances turn / in an overwash to mud” (275).

The “arrogances” that Ammons refers to are his lifelong attempts to establish something enduring through his poetry, a piece of his identity that will remain after he has gone. Such attempts acquire a manic pace and tone as the tape of his life winds out, and down; he describes himself “leant over, // scrambling, searching for the last years, one / goes into a pixie dance at the lunatic poetry, // the wooden structure wrapped in butcher paper / meant to save one from death but, alas, it // was but a painted show that careens and crashes: / hark, here goes the squeaky thing again...” (186-7). Since poetry will not enact the magical preservation that he seeks, he makes a tentative direct appeal to the forces above, asking of the Lord, “you cannot, I suppose, give // me another chance:

right?" (22). Though at that point he considers the request rebuked, Ammons will return to the subject later, reassuring himself that

...surely, I will have

another chance: surely, nothing is
let go till trouble free: when

I come back I'm going to be there
every time: and then the wave that

comes to blank me out will be set
edgy and jiggling with my recalcitrance

and my consciousness will take on weight
(122-3)

Though the passage begins with a slightly insistent, yet conversational and only half-serious tone, things change as the lines progress, and the language accumulates increasing elevation and authority. The "wave" bringing death is no longer represented as a harbinger of the beatific processes of dispersal, so frequently anticipated with religious reverence, but a force intending to "blank me out." The precedence given to individual form, in this particular case that of the self, and the tenacity with which the poet now clings to such, is striking. As the dispersal he so earnestly sought forty years prior approaches, he now intends to defy the oncoming rush, to fracture the order of the universe. Suddenly, preserving the identity of the individual has come to supercede the universal flow.

Earlier, in evaluating the encompassing system that defines the universe, Ammons declares that "it comes / out right eventually" ("Ridge Farm" 25) and "everything but our understanding / is flawless" (SP 205). In *Glare*, his aphoristic summary of the system's efficacy takes on a much different tone. First of all, he announces that, in direct

opposition to earlier assertions of glory in the system and its mechanisms, now “a meditation like this is somewhat / melancholy: hopes of setting a bit // of stuff aside out of the round are / founded like other hopes on hope” (161). These are hopes he has repeatedly expressed throughout the poem, though he has found all attempts thwarted, as “floods grab stuff back into the swim / and motion cannot be prevented from // getting back whatever stalled in it / a ‘moment’” (161). Ultimately, Ammons reiterates the same assessment he has announced throughout the preceding poems, but in a radically different tone, as he laments, “alas, it is all made // right: I’m terribly sorry: it is / made right” (162). We may contrast this, as well, with the previous instances in which the philosophically removed poet fulfilled his responsibility of breaking the news of inescapable death to the masses.

Since *Glare* represents a return to the poet-as-center first explored in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, there are significant common threads connecting the two. In both cases the flow of the cycling poetry is to be considered a direct extension of the progressive flow of the poet’s own life cycle, a proposition explored in depth in section one of this work, so it is extremely telling to examine the poet’s conception of the outflowing space within which he works and lives. Throughout *Tape*, Ammons experiences anxiety concerning the immense expanse of blank tape stretching before him, and the possibility that he may not be able to endure to the end of the strip. The poem has scarcely gotten off the ground, as he begins to grow apprehensive:

I get weak in
the knees
(feel light in the head)
when I look down
and see
how much footage is

tightly wound in that
roll: once started,
can I ever get
free
of the thing, get it in
and out of typewriter
and mind? one
rolled end, one
dangling, coiling end?

will the Muse fill it
up immediately and let me
loose? can my back
muscles last? my mind,
 can it be
 as long as
a tape
and unwind with it?
 (3-4)

Here, the tape is represented as possessing an interminable length, and the poet is certain he will break down, both body and mind, before seeing the final rotation cycle through his typewriter. Even as the poem progresses well beyond the halfway point, the anxiety remains: “the / empty tape is still / imposing, / frightening” (145). Later in the proceedings, we find the poet arguing against the fears he still entertains, attempting to reassure himself that “it’s impossible / there’s not an end to this / tape” (164). The self-imposed duty Ammons assumed when purchasing the tape has become anathema, since, stated quite frankly, “this tape is too damn long: / I’ll tell you that: / terrible task” (75).

Towards facilitating and expediting his dubious task, Ammons frequently invokes the Muse, requesting inspiration and progress. Here, he begs for some catalyzing nudge, cataloguing the various ills the project is beginning to inflict:

Muse! Muse! fiery
woman, what
you got to tell me?
tell me:

I feel weak so
much tape remains:
my back's getting sore
I don't sleep good
with this going on-
(38)

Later, the poet voices similar complaints, once again calling for the intervention of inspiration to sweep him, and the imposing, voluminously blank tape, along:

oh this poem is long:
the tape's still thick
& slow:
Muse, come & take my
riding, rouse my riding:
we got a long long way
to go:
(66)

The absence of the Muse will continue to plague the poet throughout the tape's long unwinding, as he again complains of a flagging spirit, admitting, "I've shot my load: / but I can't stop: give / me a second wind" in hopes it will burst "open & / fill this tape / plentifully up" (101).

Repeatedly, Ammons ignores the experience of the ongoing, longing only for the finish line. He expresses the urgency of this impatience as "every inch / of this rising tape / ruffles my blood / for the gathered product" (131). Towards enacting this desired completion as quickly as possible, sacrificing the content of the flow, in favor of speed, he runs a rapid string of one-word lines, racing down the page:

well
if
it
must
be
onward
to
the

end,
let's
get
there
in
a
hurry:
(59)

Peace will only come when the poet has been released from this odious duty, as he imagines the impending rise of the red ink signaling the tape's termination: "how glad I'll be then! / I'm so tired / you can't imagine: / I want to do other things" (195).

Throughout *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, we encounter the poet experiencing spatial anxiety that is vertical in nature. The road he has yet to travel seems at times interminable. As we have seen, this causes Ammons discomfort both mentally and physically. With *Glare*, the poet returns once again to his own interior space for the center around which the verse will revolve. In accordance with this sense of immediate and total presence of the poet within the flowing lines, Ammons' reaction to the space he must move within once again becomes a primary focus of the poem. Once again, we encounter the poet evidencing extreme discomfort in relation to this space. However, this anxiety now derives from a perceived dearth of horizontal room in which to expand, as opposed to the intimidating abundance of outflowing space the poet feels in *Tape*.

Ammons feels the horizontal margins creeping in and the end racing closer. He senses the loss of individual form, the release of death, drawing nigh, and perhaps the processes of breakdown and dispersal he has spent a lifetime vaunting no longer appear so inviting.

The constrictive barriers Ammons finds himself forced to work between have become so distressing that he suffers physical symptoms, similar to those afflicting him, for vastly different reasons, in *Tape*:

narrow strip this walled road is:
shave a micron or two and you're

off-roading: try to get a whole
stretch out, and you get cut back:

see what it will do and before you
can your speed is broken: I declare

I don't know what to do with this
thing, these cramps, this breaking

back:

(63)

The effect of the overly narrow road on the flow of the poetic stream is commented upon despairingly: "the tape is too narrow: // the lines turn in on themselves: / they can't get loose, they break // back, they can't lope into loops!" (26). This problem is bemoaned at length, as Ammons considers the regrettable effect it has forced upon his poetic capacities: "I was thinking how this tape cramps / my style: it breaks down my extended // gestures," resulting in a situation where "everything happens before its / time, interrupted, turned back, cracked // up." The commentary continues:

...anyhow, I am brittlized

run like a cow through a cow dip, my
flourishes stripped down, my feathers

deflowered: so cramped, my words
lose letters on the right-hand edge or

I start typing too early on the left-
hand side and slice words up:

(175)

Elsewhere, Ammons describes the claustrophobic confines he must work between as mirroring the oppressiveness of the deep winter Ithaca landscape beyond his window:

everything now is in a still, white

suffering, an unloaded tension, I

mean, a tension in which the load
has not been un: and the tension

makes me tense: I don't like to be
cooped up: I don't have any *Snowbound*

resources: my typewriter's my only
outlet into this cramped-up strip:

I don't get any easing away before a
margin cracks me stilted or forces me

back in on myself: when I use up
this tape, I'm not buying another:
(120)

Here, again, the tightness of the margin causes Ammons difficulty in accurately expressing himself. His ideas are unable to maintain any sense of flow, or regularity of motion. This anxiety is paired with another, far deeper and darker impetus of the pathos we see running throughout *Glare*, as Ammons acknowledges that this is the tape's final rotation, and there will not be another. In terms of the context I have used throughout my examination of the tape poems, this is equivalent to the poet stating that he senses his own death impending, which is, in fact, another salient accompanying concern throughout the poem. Ammons repeatedly bemoans the strict constriction of the boundaries, a problem that has so recently begun to plague him obsessively, as evidenced by the constant repetition, fouling up his ability to get the poem down correctly: "this tape is so skinny: I / have to crack off the lines and roll / the trimmings back into the next line: / there is never enough room" (135). Shortly thereafter, Ammons protests, "oh, this tight strip breaks my // rhythms, loosens my stable tables, / pours everything towards the middle // where it runs off, a streak: there / isn't room enough to lay something // down

flat” (140), and “there isn’t a bit of / room on this tape for a little // expansion or elaboration” (167-8). Though the poem is densely populated with these complaints, Ammons’ understanding of the order of things causes him to recognize that, ultimately, these protests must prove futile: “I struggle on in this pointless war: / I can’t get the rhythms across the // page: I’m narrowed, cramped, sliced / up, pinched between the shoulder blades, // the words spilling off the edge” (42). Here, he concludes, “it’s not much of a fight and / the margins are clearly the winners.” This sense of uncomfortable physical constriction within the world of the tape is reiterated as he describes the strip as “so narrow: / a rhythm cannot unwind across it: // it cracks my shoulder blades with / pressing confinement” (97).

The poet’s sudden need for expansion stems from his desire, progressively building as the anticipated date grows nearer, to stave off death. He has seen the end of the tape approaching, has acknowledged such as inevitable, and therefore suddenly acquires the fervent need to project the verse, simultaneously wed to the workings of his mind, indefinitely outward. In the real-time progression of the tape, such characteristics being laid down with the appearance of *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, time and space, in terms of available space upon the adding machine tape, flow in direct accord with one another. Therefore, the poet’s need for more space equals a need for more time, the dearth of which he feels very poignantly as he observes the final unwinding of the tape as symbolically parallel with the unwinding of the cycle of his own life. It is extremely telling that, as has been examined at great length throughout this work, a large portion of Ammons’ poetic energy has been exerted attempting to break the restrictive barriers of discrete form. Now, finding himself poised on the very verge of this release, he desires

nothing more fervently than to backpeddle, to maintain the illusory confines of his earthly container a bit longer.

This is further observable in the enigmatic parting interjections with which Ammons closes many of the individual numbered segments in the final section of *Glare*, entitled SCAT SCAN. We are far removed, here, from the hearty cry of “So long” and its Whitmanian connotations that Ammons employs in closing *Tape*. Composed all in capital letters and removed from the preceding verse by indentation and line break, many of these edicts seem to issue from an anonymous outside source, stern and authoritarian. Owing to this, and the poet’s frequent ruminations on impending death paired with his various attempts to, somehow, buy a bit more time, there is much ominousness imbued to the stark command “HASTEN ALONG” (211). Similarly, the old Burns and Allen punchline is rendered chilling, and humorless, as the disembodied voice commands “GOODNIGHT ARCHIE,” providing an unwelcome reminder of the long sleep awaiting Ammons, possibly no more than a tape’s rotation away. In response, we sense the quintessential Ammons-as-fussy-old-man voicing in the replies to these distressing announcements, of “OH DEAR” (215) and “GRACIOUS SAKES” (254). As the poem progresses towards its inevitable conclusion, accelerating as the spool dwindles, many of these capitalized fragments become haunting pleas, cries for assistance in the midst of a situation for which there is no solution: “O HANDS OF TIME BACK UP” (237), “GET HELP” (239), “GET OUT” (274), and “LORD HELP” (279). These solicitations are interspersed with other postscripts serving no purpose beyond silly word play, causing the desperate doomed calls for help to stand out in stark, gloomy contrast. These pleas,

and hope, however irrational and desperate, eventually fade as, with resignation, Ammons finally concedes “BEFORE LONG” (296).

Where has Ammons come to at the end of this long, unfurling road? Appropriately, the answer lies in the utilization of his most frequently recurring and most significant symbolic icon. Slightly beyond the poem’s halfway point, crows are set in motion, as the poet recognizes, “fall is here: crows are up in the air, / like leaves” (152). The crows form one element among many complementary processes announcing the arrival of fall, as Ammons goes on: “the wind loosens crows and leaves, / I mean, and nuts hit the // ground and water jiggles in the brooks again” (152). The activity of the crows is thereby paired with other cyclical natural activity in order to accentuate their synchronicity with such, as well as their position of prominence within the natural order. Shortly thereafter, Ammons observes that “the crow convention // in the tall trees downslope yesterday (big-berry / boluses) was somewhat unsettled, shifty, and // quarrelsome” (185). Ammons expresses amazement at the synchronicity within the ranks of the birds, wondering at “250 of them altogether and once or / twice they all lifted off at once // downwind like a loose cloud.” He then wonders “what sort of meeting was it: / was the whole genetic neighborhood assembled // to see and be seen: were the early stages of / mate selection under way: will they pair off & // square off, now,” continuing to ask himself, “how do the birds know / what to do, what it’s for, where to build, how // to care” (186). As usual, Ammons’ birds are operating upon a plane unavailable to the full understanding of man. Man must, however, trust in the correctness of their motions, due to the avian species’ role as paradigmatic icon of the circular, regenerative forces that comprise and maintain the universe. The crows return to provide the tape with its final and defining image:

...(the crows gathered somewhere across
the hill this morning—August 3—and there
was a flurry of raucous introduction, the new
young, ready to fly, getting acquainted with
the old community, winter together ahead, the
isolations of summer-rearing behind): I try to
hide the old fool playing the fool, buy you
hear, don't you, the young man, still young,
still under there saying yes yes to the new
days darkened howsomever: it is a sad song but
it sings and wants to sing on and on and when
it can no more it wants someone else to sing:
to sing is everything but it is also specifically
to dive the stave into marshy passageways and
bring relief and the future singers in...
(293-94)

In appropriately layered fashion, here at the simultaneous starting point and finish line of the tape, Ammons expresses what he has come to consider, ultimately, the summed wisdom of his cyclical travels. The point, of course, is simply in the ongoing. The crows pass down lesson and instinct, sending forth the young generation as they, themselves, prepare to cycle out. Ammons, still vigorous in his desire to sing, declares that the point of life is to experience the flow, the ongoing song. Of equal importance is to extend the song, the tape of one's life and experience, to the next generation of singers. It has come time for him to cycle down into death's sweet dispersal, clearing the strip for he who comes next.

In returning, ultimately, to a celebration of the processes of death, following years of fluctuating anxiety, Ammons elects to find solace emanating from the same source that

Whitman turned to so many years before, following a period of dismay deriving from Lincoln's assassination. In "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman's flagging spirit is reassured by "the carol of the bird" exhorting:

*Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.*

*Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.*
(269)

Though Ammons' lifelong interrogation of death exhibits far more frequent doubt and deep anxiety than Whitman's consistently celebratory examination, the sometimes cynical poet's concerns are ultimately overcome by the incredible beauty of life, moving him to reassume the laudatory posture occupied by his Romantic predecessor.

In the poet's earliest attempts at limitless expansion, he sought a synchronicity with, and entrance into, the flowing processes he sensed fueling and maintaining the universe. Only through an intimate association with the motions of nature might one come to truly understand the system. Throughout a lifetime's interrogation, Ammons repeatedly returns to the conclusion that, to truly understand the world's workings, one must participate in the ultimate mechanisms of dispersal and inclusion surrounding death. As the individual dies, only then does he truly become present in all things, as his energy is transferred into the soil, fueling countless species of flora and fauna in the process. As the poet himself approaches this glorious release, though we see his enthusiasm for such progressively fading, his philosophical footing does not slip. This is communicated through the beautiful parting image of the birds. Just as all those that have made the

passage before him, over whom he may have scoffed as a younger man, Ammons cannot help but yearn to remain here, in this “jet-hoveled hell .../ heaven’s daunting asshole” (GB 22). Though every form instinctively hoards its portion of the universal energy, ultimately, “it is made right.” Despite an inevitable emotional resistance, Ammons maintains the unerring efficacy and miraculous beauty of the system he has spent his life’s energy examining.

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