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It is damp there, the cement floors are cool.
But you keep your place in line.
It is a penance you impose upon yourself
like kneeling on unpadded prie-dieux.
You owe her that much.
Whether you loved her or not
you owe her that much.

FIELDS OF ACTION / CRITICISM AND POETRY

"To Be Quiet in the Hands of the Marvelous": The Poetry of A. R. Ammons / Frederick Buell

Those who first became acquainted with the work of A. R. Ammons by reading his more recent poetry have probably been surprised by looking back to the early poems reprinted in his *Collected Poems: 1951-71*. A large number of the poems dated between the years 1951 and 1955 (the date when his first volume of poetry, *Ommateum*, was published) do not seem to be characteristic of his mature work. Ammons has set these poems in a grim, at times overtly Gothic, world of death, shame, grief, and unexplained loss, and he has centered them around gestures of mysterious impotence or failure. Even where the poems' speakers move toward self-extinction, the result is neither peace nor catharsis, but a state of sensibility that is hauntingly difficult to describe. For want of a better phrase, I would call it a state of incomplete suffocation.[1] An example is the conclusion of the volume's best-known poem, "So I Said I Am Ezra":

I moved my feet and turning from the wind
  that ripped sheets of sand
  from the beach and threw them
  like seamists across the dunes
swayed as if the wind were taking me away
and said
        I am Ezra

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As a word too much repeated
falls out of being
so I Ezra went out into the night
like a drift of sand
and splashed among the windy oats
that clutch the dunes
of unremembered seas[2]

Ezra's "fall out of being" is not a metaphysical fulfillment. It is not a loss of self to a cosmos, to a larger order. Ezra falls out of being into a partly psychological, partly mythical limbo; this place does not bring peace, but the sense of suffocation and unexplained turbulence that is expressed in the way the oats "clutch" the "dunes of unremembered seas." The poem's Ezra, a reference to a hunchback playmate of Ammons' youth and also ironically suggestive of Ezra the biblical scribe, cannot assert his name against the visionary indifference of the wind and ocean.

The landscape that haunts these early poems is less Ammons' native rural South than it is the ancient Near East. It is the landscape of Sumerian mythology, to which these poems abound in reference. Its God is unapproachable, and its earth is one of dust, sand, wind, and desert. One feels that the landscape is burdened with a timelessness that is stifling to the creatures of time; in it, apocalyptic transformation, though yearned for, is inconceivable. The landscape thus blends imperceptibly into the domain of the Queen of Darkness of the Gilgamesh epic, the realm from which "none who enters ever returns . . . the road from where there is no coming back." As Enkidu's dream reveals, the underworld is a place of suffocation where men endure forever, retaining selfhood but not their vitality, their connection with Being. In the Gilgamesh epic, moreover, no one can escape death, neither the hero Gilgamesh, two-thirds a god, nor the "priests of the incantation and ecstasy"; Ammons' early poems abound in examples of failed heroes and seers.[3]

Ammons' lyric voice in his early poetry is that of a seer who has no social or individual characteristics but is instead a presence of more than ordinary awareness and longing. The seer, moreover, is one who has lost or never securely had a saving message or special revelation; one could say that he is the creation of a Christian sensibility which had lost its faith in the "good news" of the New Testament and had delved back into the eschatological pessimism of the older Jews and Sumerians. The poems begin as the seer enters their largely mythic landscapes, unlocated in place and historical time. They begin with statements that have biblical and visionary overtones, such as "I went out to the sun," "Turning from the waterhole I said Oh," "I came in a dark woods upon / an ineffaceable difference," or "I came upon a pla-

teau."[4] The seer then moves through the mysteriously, often whimsically, often ominously changing landscape into encounters with gods or phantasmagora that are intentionally and suggestively indefinite. Though magically capable of extraordinary movement ("So I left and walked up into the air"),[5] the seer is curiously unfree, damned to failure in an indeterminate quest ("How shall I / coming from these fields / water the fields of the earth / and I said Oh, / and fell down in the dust"),[6] or to protracted wanderings, or to a quest for failure that ends without attainment of self-annihilation:

> Peeling off my being I plunged into
> the well . . .
> went on deeper
> finding patched innertubes beer cans
> and black roothairs along the way
> but went on deeper
> till darkness snuffed the shafts of light
> against the well's side
>   night kissing
> the last bubbles from my lips[7]

These journeys and encounters are filled with a pressure that one feels would have been a hunger for apocalyptic transformation if time and the possibility of meaningful change had not already effectively ceased. Of that hunger, there remains only in the poems the consciousness of there having been a great longing. In the well, as in Enkidu's dream, vitality is lost, while consciousness remains.

Though Eliot's poetry is one of the proximate sources for these poems, they are far more turbulent with their unsatisfied desire than "The Waste Land" and related poems. Behind Ammons' early work looms a desire too large and sometimes too corrupted by indefinite sin or decay to be able to find in nature an image for itself or to be able to make, going beyond nature, objects for itself. The longing behind the poems' incomplete failures is so strong that, when one comes across the poem "This Black Rich Country," one reads it as a result of a nearly heroic endeavor. It begins with the line "Dispossess me of belief"; in renouncing the absoluteness of his longing and in attempting to claim for himself a world of ordinary mortality, the poet, who is now as much a man as he is a seer, appeals to an unnamed force to

> leave me this black rich country,
> uncertainty, labor, fear: do not
> steal the rewards of my mortality.[8]

It is one of the first poems to end with a period rather than a timeless suspension, and it searches for what, in light of the earlier poems, are achievements. It would find uncertainty, rather than a limbo in which all possibilities are suffocatingly voided, though unstilled; it would have labor rather than an impotent longing without means to realize itself; and it would experience fear rather than a state of sensibility that seems to be alienated from all merely human emotions.

Ammons' early work thus seems to lie far afield from the poetry that leads immediately up to "Corson's Inlet" and then into his major long poems; it seems to have little to do with Ammons' reputation as an Emersonian "nature poet." Though the distance between the absoluteness of the early poems and the speculative liveliness of the later work is great, the change is by no means arbitrary. Ammons achievement has been to relativize and multiply the absolute for the sake of imaginative survival and the promise of a nearly unlimited intellectual growth. He abandons the seer of the early poems for an astonishing variety of inventions of voices and personae, the variety of which becomes clear only as one surveys a large number of poems. Ammons humanizes the seer and gives him specific identities. Though Ammons compromises thereby the absoluteness of his visionary quest, though he absorbs more of the imperfect properties and knowledges of time, he is imaginatively freer within these limitations. He has consciously humbled himself to accept an object, imperfect earthly nature, for his now controlled but always resurgent longings.

In doing this, Ammons begins to expand his work in two directions. He brings it closer to the American commonplace, and he opens it to a broad eclecticism of knowledge and wisdom. He enters, in short, the mainstream of American visionary poetry. The poetry after *Ommateum* gradually reveals the extent of and the principal sources for Ammons' spiritual eclecticism. Behind the bulk of it (the only major exception being perhaps *Tape for the Turn of the Year*) lies a varied use of Greek thought, the Ionian nature philosophy that is the point of origin of Western science, and a personalized use of ideas and terminology that comes from Eastern thought, ultimately Laotse, named by Ammons as his "philosophical source in its most complete version."[9] Most of Ammons' mature writings—in idea and strategy—are made up of his interweaving of these separate sources, and their union is like the union of compensatory opposities. Ammons' juxtaposition of intellectual speculations with his references to emptiness or the void, his virtuosic capacity to give precise though fluid form to idea and perception coupled with his repeated attainment, within the rapid flow of his verse, of moments of stillness or serenity reveal how he has united his two very different sources. These moments of sudden rest in his verse, moreover, free idea and perception from logic and referential knowledge; by them the mind

is stilled and refreshed so that it is ready for renewed speculation and perception. The use of these sources, then, provides controlling ideas for the poetry as well as resources of mood and mode. Ammons' use, for example, of the colon as a structural device is a stylistic derivation from these polarities. Perhaps the best summary of how the two sources help constitute Ammons' vision would be to say that the one is the basis for his active knowledge and the other is the wisdom that enables him to engage in the activity of knowledge.

Ammons' creation of a nature with which he could initiate a richly provisional expressive relationship was a conscious reaction against the direction of his early poetry. Ammons' mature poetry is not a rebellion against a corpse-cold Unitarianism. As Ammons' early poems would indicate, his religious background was, if anything, too hot, too passionately apocalyptic to be dealt with directly. To naturalize his imagination was thus a saving achievement, as "This Black Rich Country" would indicate, and the provisional accords with nature in Ammons' work should be seen as an accomplishment that is often most sublime when it is most humble, brilliantly equivocating, and overtly comic.

Most immediately striking in the poetry dated in the *Collected Poems* between 1956 and 1966 is the great variety of voices and lyric selves that Ammons has created. Sly or serious inquirer, chanter, celebrant, country skeptic, diarist, observer, reasoner: the speakers range in utterance from the formal, hortatory, or celebrative Whitmanian chanter of songs to the wry, ironic doubter of prophecy. Ammons often addresses the reader directly, rupturing the absoluteness of the early lyrics. Sometimes, he will address the reader's soul with Whitmanian urgency, and sometimes he will appeal to the reader's interests and sympathies in a breezily chatty manner. Equally various are the terms that he employs in these poems for metaphysical speculation and for definition of the nature of temporal process. He writes of, reasons about, or chants the one, unity, the overall, the underlying, the void, the changeless, and the divine in different poems, and he uses terms like motion, order, entropy, accident, mechanism, and weaving and unweaving to present in different poems the processes of nature in time.[10]

It would be incorrect, I think, to call these poems mere experiments in voice and idea, though they do establish many of the modes for the longer, more encyclopaedic poems to come. (One could even say they require Ammons to attempt the longer poems as acts of self-integration.) Their variety comes instead form a pragmatic and organic impulse: to develop a mode of expression that is suited to the different subject or mood presented. Some modes and wisdoms are peripheral. Ammons' direct appeal to the Christian mystery of the incarnation in "Christmas Eve" is unusual, although the

mode and tonality of the poem are crucial for the wonderful book *Tape for the Turn of the Year;* Ammons' regression into an amniotic unity in "Sphere" is most unusual; and his weaving and unweaving of self in "Muse" is unusual in the Whitmanian cadences of the first half and the immediacy and directness with which this theme is handled. In general, the overt recreations of Whitman's style do not endure in Ammons' work, although it abounds in wonderfully indirect echoes of him.

Ammons' main interest, as it emerges from the variety of his middle poems, is in the realm of the changing in nature and its accessibility to the mind. Ammons discovers two complementary approaches to this theme. The most familiar is Ammons' remarkable ability to rationalize process into flowing order and to make it intelligible by means of the Ionian concepts of the one and the many. This is a realm of intellection at which Ammons is an unparalleled master. Ammons presents his "one" as ungraspable, not to be fully thought or experienced; he sees experience of it as a destruction of self. The world short of the one is the human realm. In it, Ammons exercises the full play of his mind; he brings the world of multiplicity into changing orders by means of an intellectual resourcefulness which is as fluid and undogmatic as natural process. It is not logical reasoning, but an underlying motion in the mind which parallels, precariously, the motions of things. Ammons experiences that motion in the mind in the act of poetry, and he images it as the wind:

> but the music
> in poems
> is different,
> points to nothing,
> traps no
> realities, takes
> no game, but
> by the motion of
> its motion
> resembles
> what, moving, is—
> the wind
> underleaf, white against
> the tree.[11]

To try for totality is a destruction; it ends the motion that informs nature and the creative mind.

The less familiar strain in Ammons' poetry is a mode that is not of motion and the mind, but of an underlying receptivity in both the cosmos and man.

Ammons sees this receptivity as something prior to identity or self; it is his version of Taoist emptiness or void. In the cosmos, the void contains process, and, in the person, the void is a cultivation of inner stillness and receptivity. Ammons arrives at a statement of it at the end of the fine poem "Terrain," a poem about the soul:

> it is an area of poise, really, held from tipping,
>   dark wild water, fierce eels, countercurrents:
> a habitat, precise ecology of forms
>   mutually to some extent
> tolerable, not entirely self-destroying; a crust afloat:
>   a scum, foam to the deep and other-natured:
> but deeper than depth, too: a vacancy and swirl:
>
> it may be spherical, light and knowledge merely
>   the iris and opening
> to the dark methods of its sight: how it comes and
>   goes, ruptures and heals,
> whirls and stands still: the moon comes: terrain.[12]

Ammons' essay, "A Poem Is A Walk," which is, according to Harold Bloom, "infuriatingly Emersonian," is perhaps not so dark once this strain in his work is recognized. A poem, as Bloom quotes Ammons,

> is a motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization. Its knowledges are all negative and, therefore, more positive than any knowledge.[13]

Ammons argues that the poem, as well as the self and cosmos, has an inner stillness and vacancy. It is a wholeness accessible even where the mind in motion fails to attain the one, rebuffed by the provisionality of its orders. It is the stillness against which the provisionality of motion has meaning and form. Ammons makes explicit the fact that these two modes coexist as parallels in his imagination in his poem "Two Motions."

The justifiably well-known poem "Corson's Inlet" integrates rather than juxtaposes, as does "Two Motions," these modes of imagination. The poet's active mind is no longer animated into motion by an external wind, but is completely in his possession, and it is fused with the full acceptance that "Overall is beyond me," an acceptance that, fully realized, yields "serenity." The poem is a walk and thus a mixture of the active and the passive, not a voyage or a nonvoyage, the opposing terms of "Two Motions." The fact that it is a casual walk, yet a walk for meditative discovery, locates it somewhere

between the uniqueness and goal-directedness of a quest and a passive vacancy of receptivity to its surroundings. In a walk, one loiters and absorbs as much as one attempts to get anywhere; in a repeated, daily walk, this passive absorbtiveness is emphasized. Ammons' controlling idea in the poem is active. It is the mind's ever recrudescent and expanding capacity to "fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder," to combat increasing entropy. He finds, however, rest in an insight that is related to the passive or receptive elements in the walk:

> there is no finality of vision,
> that I have perceived nothing completely,
> that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.[14]

Ammons thus reveals how the activity of mind and the receptive stillness of wisdom are necessarily related to each other. When they are integrated with each other, the poet can achieve a fuller and fuller (though forever incomplete) naturalization of his imagination and humanization of nature. The motions of the poet's mind can become more and more a part of and supplement to nature's active motions. They neither need be merely "wind," the appearance for moments in the human mind of something essentially nonhuman, nor need they attain a finality or autonomy that would be threatening and unnatural in its conclusiveness. They need neither be too natural in origin to include human consciousness nor too human and conscious to find a place in natural process. With the resources of intellection and wisdom, Ammons can locate himself within the mid-world of natural process, the realm of time and change. He can root himself precariously within the flowing. In this context, his use of the colon, a staple now of his poetic syntax and to remain so, becomes luminous. In Emerson's prose style, each sentence often seems to be a unique origin, and an essay is at best a cumulative series of original insights and at worst a collection of mutually repellent particles. Ammons' poetry, by contrast, accents continuation in process as much as it does surprise and involvement in natural fate or law as much as it does freedom. Ammons mitigates and brings into a balance terms that are paradoxical polarities in Emerson's thought. Indeed, in "Corson's Inlet," Ammons modifies the terms "law" or "fate" in order to make them responsive to his scientific understanding of natural process, which he sees as neither a total discontinuity of original self-recreations nor something bound by adamantine law or fate. Nature is, like the poet's mind, a process of mingled order and disorder, cause and accident, event and probability.

The "freedom" of "Corson's Inlet" is the unfinished quality of nature and of vision. The poem balances subtlety in order with a maximum of possibil-

ity, and this balance of order and possibility allows the experience of freedom. The price for the freedom Ammons attains is risk: the risk of possibility, the risk that the accident of death will shatter time, and the risk of order, the risk that the imagination will quail before an apparent rigidity of order, the tight food-chain of death.

In its celebration of provisionality, "Corson's Inlet" is a self-conscious summary of Ammons' work to that point. In it, Ammons attempts to rationalize his diversity of thought and voice. In firmly establishing a mid-world of imaginative existence within temporal process, and in its attainment of inner and outer coherence within the changing, the poem looks forward to the impressive developments of Ammons' later work, particularly the *Tape for the Turn of the Year,* the long poems that appear in the *Collected Poems,* "Essay on Poetics," "Extremes and Moderations," and "Hibernaculum," and the book-length poem *Sphere.*

In *Tape for the Turn of the Year,* Ammons takes the wisdom of "Corson's Inlet" as far into the American commonplace as one could wish. A long, skinny poem, written on an adding machine tape that Ammons found at a home and garden supply store, it extends through several hundred pages and a five-week period of time his achievement of freedom within time, his precarious balance of continuum and surprise.

Ammons bases his *Tape* upon an affectionate parody of the *Odyssey.* He relocates the epic story to a diary-like account of his passage through a little over a month's time, and he breaks the voyage of Odysseus up into a series of internal and external side-trips or forays and encounters with daily eventualities or accidents. Like Odysseus, Ammons has a destination, a home he seeks; this is one of the main themes of the poem. With wonderfully disguised slyness, Ammons seeks another Ithaca, as he is waiting to hear about a job offer from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. The theme of homecoming itself is, however, far more complex. The opening sections of the poem announce it as a story of "how / a man comes home / from haunted / lands and transformations" to an "acceptance of his place / and time."[15] The poem thus becomes, in theme and in overall form, the attainment of a way of "going along with this / world as it is."[16] Ammons' resources are those of "Corson's Inlet," active intellection and receptive wisdom; the goal of his quest can also be put in the terms of "Corson's Inlet" as the continuing and ever unfinished attainment of a partial humanization of nature and naturalization of the imagination. Ammons attempts continuously to deal with the question he raises at the end of the poem:

> have our minds taken us too
> far, out of nature, out of
> complete acceptance?[17]

The home sought is thus finally not a fixed residence. It is a home in motion; Ammons realizes that

> those who rely on any shore
> foolishly haven't faced
> it that
> only the stream is
>   reliable:[18]

Indeed, "home is every minute."[19] Ammons includes in the poem a number of wonderfully vivid and clear remembrances of his boyhood in the South; they are too finely realized for nostalgia, for he recollects them with the insight that there is no way home in going back. Ammons thus distinguishes himself from a yearning for paradises lost. He also distinguishes himself in *Tape* from a yearning for paradises to be regained, making it clear that his conception of time retains the irreversibility but not the teleological goal of Christian history.

These Miltonic echoes Ammons intends; he also explicitly echoes Wordsworth's "Prospectus." His high quest is not to justify the ways of God to man nor to effect a marriage, with apocalyptic overtones, between the mind of man and the external world, but to come to an acceptance of changing place and time, a reconciliation he describes as a "going along with this / world as it is." This reconciliation is never so complete nor final as a marriage. Instead, it involves a blend of continuous activity of wit and intellect with a large draught of acceptance, abandonment to being swept along, and it necessitates a poem that is as arbitrary in beginning and ending as is the *Tape,* a going along with a section of the poet's time. Ammons' sense of transience is even more extreme in this poem than Emerson's was in his essay "Circles," itself a resistance of apocalyptic marriage with nature. Rather than draw larger and larger circles of awareness about himself, each one an attainment which is dissipated by a return to time and which necessitates a further self-recovery, Ammons attempts to ride a "moment- / to-moment crest."[20] He attempts, in short, to ride rather than to circumscribe. The wisdom of "Corson's Inlet" has become now a possession of daily life, not the sublime assertion of a recognition attained at the end of a meditative walk. Ammons tests that assertion to see if it will be capable of sustaining an ordinary man in the disorder and homeliness of daily life in a house in inland New Jersey (a location now removed from the ocean margin).

The *Tape* is thus set in the mid-world of "Corson's Inlet," a world whose visibility and clarity of form is rooted in the active knowledge of Greek philosophy and receptive wisdom of Taoism. Something that is specific to the *Tape,* however, is an expansion of Ammons' religious and philosophical

eclecticism. More than in any other poem, save perhaps the most recent long poem, *Sphere,* Ammons suspends this mid-world in darkness, a darkness out of which the clarity of fact emerges with the same attained sweetness as invests the "natural light" attained at the end of the atypical poem "Bridge." In writing that the

> eternal
> significance is of some
>   significance to me: I
> just don't know how: but
> temporal significance is
> a world I can partly make,
> loss & gain:[21]

Ammons surrounds the processes of time with something larger, something unknown and unknowable in terms of inner need and external knowledge; though the "Overall" is still beyond him, it is very much in the poem, if only in the background of the New Jersey winter nights, a natural darkness. This darkness, however, may at times suggest something more than nature to "the terror-ridden / homeless man / wandering through / a universe of horror"; this homeless wandering man always haunts the background of the poem, even though Ammons seeks to be the "man at ease / in a universe of light," saying

> let's tend our
> feelings &
> leave the Lord
> His problems
>   (if any): He
> got us this far on His own:
> & millions have come
> and gone in joy
>   (predominantly):[22]

Though Ammons leaves the Lord on his own and only comically gives Him personal identity, and though one could not call even the moment Ammons speaks of the Lord devotional in intention, his acceptance of uncertainty is Judeo-Christian in overtone. The atmosphere of the Christmas setting for the *Tape* determines to a certain extent its tone and substance. Between the obedience of Abraham, submitting to an unknownable will, and the regeneration of Pauline faith, a death and rebirth to a new world, the poet of the *Tape* is to be found. Of course, Ammons follows neither of

these paths. He retains his limited freedoms and whimsy and he tries to stay within time as mere ongoing. But that Ammons' middle road is flanked by these Judeo-Christian paths is clear from his credo, the *Tape's* central moment, spoken after a description of an afternoon church service in which "the deacons went down / the aisles & gave light to / each row / & the light poured / down the rows & / the singing started":

> though the forces
> have different names
> in different places &
> times, they are
> real forces which we
> don't understand:
> I can either believe
> in them or doubt them &
> I believe:
> I believe that man is
> small
> & of short duration in the
> great, incomprehensible,
> & eternal: I believe
> it's necessary to do
> good
> as we best can define it:
> I believe we must
> discover & accept the
> terms
> that best testify:
> I'm on the side of
> whatever the reasons are
> we are here:
>
> we do the best we can
> & it's not enough:[23]

The terms of this poem are finally a nonintellectual humility and limited hope, not entropy and order and serenity, an acceptance of the void. The credo's humility indicates what lies beneath the poem's rich play of the mind, and the highly conditional hope—whether it comes from choice, faith, or the delightfully comic rendering of the American desire to be on "the right side of things"—underlies the poem's quest for acceptance from within time. Just as it is the humble and always hopeful fabric of daily American

life that sustains this poem as its imaginative setting, it is humility and provisional hope that sustains the speaker.

Ammons thus deprecates his speculative ideas to the nonintellectuality of Christian humility and hope and to the routines of daily life they inform. It would, moreover, be doing an injustice to the *Tape*, both in its own right and in its position as forerunner to the more difficult and intellectually brilliant later long poems, to omit a notation of the poem's range of thought. Ammons attempts in this poem to take account of the whole range of man's knowledge: he deals with questions aesthetical, epistemological, metaphysical, religious, psychological, sociological, social, sexual, and scientific. The *Tape* previsions the later poems' attempts to find models that include and unify all these realms. I shall discuss this point later at some length in connection with the "Essay on Poetics"; here I only wish to note that the *Tape* is the herald of the later poems' intellectual cosmoses. In the *Tape,* Ammons does not yet assert ideas as ideals, saying "ideas are human products, / temporal & full of process"; he modifies this description slightly but significantly in the later long poems.[24] In the *Tape,* Ammons undercuts ideas by juxtaposing them to the fabric of daily life, a poetic resource which provides much of the entertainment as well as wisdom of the poem. Ammons will, while on a flight of thought, frequently interrupt himself with a parenthesis "(just went to take a leak: / jay on the back lawn, / hopping, looking around, / turning leaves)"[25] or refer back to a past speculative flight in a way that is comic but not completely deflating "(I had / lunch after / 'who cannot love')".[26]

The *Tape* is Ammons' essential poem of America. Whereas some of the poems prior to "Corson's Inlet" echo Whitman's mode directly and with remarkable success, the *Tape* is both highly personalized and rich in indirect echoes. Ammons writes it as a song of myself, a self, however, empiricized and provincialized. Though the poet remains the representative man and the poem is a poem of America, the poet and poem attain this status through their provinciality and smallness or homeliness of delineation. When Ammons uses the word "we," his tone is familial and sharing, something appropriate to a poem about a quest for home and to a poem that is rich with the Christmas winter atmosphere. He seeks to temper the external adversity of the weather, the long dark winter nights of ice, and the nearness of an inscrutable mystery by recreating the internal hearth warmth of family event and shared daily eventualities. These voices and attitudes are a barbaric yawp, a genuine one for our day. Ammons is a rebel against the "literary" in catching the humble, casual, and provincial in American speech and event; a sympathetic portrayal of an American Christmas, an event regarded by the merely literary as the fountainhead of *kitsch,* is a remarkable achievement in a Whitmanian vein.

Ammons' long poems since *Tape for the Turn of the Year*—the major ones are "Essay on Poetics," "Extremes and Moderations," "Hibernaculum," and the book-length poem *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* and a comparatively minor, but sheerly delightful one is "Summer Session"—make use of the continuous form of the *Tape,* but alter its import and effect in a number of ways. I shall focus on "Essay on Poetics' as representative of the major long poems and content myself mainly with references to the others, for, even taking "Essay on Poetics" alone, I am all too conscious that justice cannot be done to its richness in a brief survey of Ammons' whole body of work.

The speaker of the "Essay" has a somewhat different identity than had the speaker of *Tape.* No longer primarily identifiable as a provincial American, he emerges more vividly as an ironic Stevensian and mock-Victorian essayist-comedian. The essayist writes in a language of propositions, a language that is not as various as that of the *Tape,* though its variety of thought and expression is stunning. The language of the "Essay" relies heavily upon the resources of connective syntax, as its propositions, thoughts, and aphorisms are connected not only by the continuation of the colon and the surge of continuation of thought, but also by a host of connectives that modify or qualify the direction of the thought, such as "indeed," "still," "but," etc. (This is a language that the essayist himself calls attention to at one "point of provisional summation" in the poem.)[27] The effect of the poem's freedom with connectives is to multiply its thought rather than to restrict it. Like the *Tape,* the "Essay" is always in motion, but this motion is far more rapid and sustained than that of the *Tape,* and it quickens still more in the other long poems, less tied to the meandering mood of an essay.

The "Essay" has a quotidian setting, for it is written during the "natural suspension" of a snowstorm, and it refers often to the weather and the look of the land outdoors.[28] In contrast to the setting for the *Tape,* the snowstorm is a "natural suspension," in which the poet distances himself slightly from his normal life in order to write a poetic essay, not a diary. Thought has gained a slightly greater degree of primacy and even autonomy. Though, as in the *Tape,* Ammons hews a "middle way," it is now a middle way of thought rather than experience, a way cut between an "artificial linearity" and "nonsense."[29]

Ammons' change in mode signifies an important development away from the *Tape*; it is a slight push away from his former attempt to naturalize the imagination and toward an attempt to assert the autonomous freedom of the imagination. Ammons explicitly avoids a complete liberation from nature, however; the distinction is an important and subtle one. At one point, early in the poem, Ammons writes "what this is about," the " 'gathering / in the sky' so to speak, the trove of mind, tested / experience, the only place to stay . . . the holy bundle of / the elements of civilization, the Sumerians

said."[30] This "gathering in the sky" is akin to the Heavenly City and the ungrasped Overall of Ammons' earlier poems, though it is now no longer a destruction. It is "impossibly difficult"; it is an ideal that guides human action, inaccessible, nonexistent in a literal sense, but nevertheless an ideal to be striven for. That Ammons feels an immense risk of loss and a profound pathos in his quest now for something slightly out of nature is clear from the moving dedicatory poem (for Harold Bloom) that begins the book *Sphere.* In it, Ammons returns to the mood and Sumerian setting of his earliest poetry as he covertly identifies himself with Enkidu, who was removed from nature and humanized at the cost of his ability to converse directly and live in harmony with it. Ammons concludes his magnificent lament with the lines:

> this place has provided firm implication and answering
>   but where here is the image for *longing:*
> so I touched the rocks, their interesting crusts:
> I flaked the bark of stunt-fir:
> I looked into space and into the sun
> and nothing answered my word *longing:*
>   goodbye, I said, goodbye, nature so grand and
> reticent, your tongues are healed up into their own
> element
> and as you have shut up you have shut me out: I am
> as foreign here as if I had landed, a visitor:
> so I went back down and gathered mud
> and with my hands made an image for *longing:*
>   I took this image to the summit: first
> I set it here, on the top rock, but it completed
> nothing: then I set it there among the tiny firs
> but it would not fit:
> so I returned to the city and built a house to set
> the image in
> and men came into my house and said
>   that is an image for *longing*
> and nothing will ever be the same again[31]

The "Essay" and the other long poems in the *Collected Poems* do not, however, seek to attain or give themselves up to such finality. Instead, Ammons carefully draws in them the line between naturalization and apocalyptic freedom of the imagination; he makes the distinction clear in two passages in "Hibernaculum." The first explicitly resists apocalypse:

> some think mind will continue

growing out of nature until possessed of its own self
second-nature it will bespeak its own change, turn with
or against the loam out of which it grew: I'm pessimistic:

23

for my little faith, such as it is, is that mind and
nature grew out of a common node and so must obey common
motions . . . :[32]

The second passage, however, sets itself against the apparent naturalism of the previous one:

the mind's
one: it pre-existed, I think: even before it was

mind it was mind plausible: it was the earth: when
it is fully born, it will be another earth, just like
the earth, but visionary, earth luminous with sight:[33]

These are not oppositions, finally. Though the second passage echoes the new heaven and earth of *Revelation*, it is a new earth exactly like the old, and the progress toward it is not a second birth but a continuation of the first. Whereas Emerson wrote of extremes, the poetic recreation of a second world and the complete naturalization of the mind, Ammons precariously edges against and holds together both possibilities.

"Essay on Poetics" is a poem that quite obviously is about poetry. It is, however, also an encyclopaedic poem, as was the *Tape*, and it attempts what the *Tape* avoided, an integration of the different realms of knowledge that it draws on. Ammons builds a model of the ideal poem which serves as the "symbolical representation of the ideal organization, whether / the cell, the body politic, the business, the religious / group, the university, computer, or whatever."[34] "Ideal" means a level of abstraction from nature and not what constitutes nature; as an ideal, it is something nonexistent but which guides human striving.

To understand just how poetry forms a model for the ideal organization necessitates some reference to the controlling image for the "Essay," an image that comes from the field of cybernetics. Ammons' new form of conceptualization and thus partial humanization of nature involves transforming nature into information bits: this transformation means first an act of abstraction and second a kinetic act of relation of the parts. Ammons reworks the model of order and entropy he used in "Corson's Inlet" into the model of cybernetics. It is a cooler and a higher-speed model, and this determines a change in the tone of the verse. Interpreting physical processes now in terms of conceptual processes, rather than in terms of "laws of nature" which

are prior to and perhaps antagonistic to those that govern mental processes, Ammons has made a subtle change in both the mode and the vision of his poetry. His abstraction of reality into information-bits is precarious, and "language must / not violate the bit, event, percept, / fact—the concrete—otherwise the separation that means / the death of language shows"; how precarious this is, and how impotent we are to control the processes consciously, is illustrated by Ammons' meditation on the word "true." The word "true," related etymologically to "tree" and therefore the elm tree of the essay, itself physically composed of more "bits" than the mind can handle, is shown to contain greater resonance and rootage of meaning than a logical mind can comprehend. Not in logic then, but only in poetry, a medium capable of dealing with greater complexity in motion, is abstraction possible. To accomplish this end, poetry has, for one thing, the capacity for illusion, as it can heighten "by dismissing reality."[35] Once the bits are abstracted, they are immediately, as a part of that abstraction, brought into relational motion: both speed in motion and intellectual virtuosity are essential, as one can see from Ammons' stunning printout of variations on William Carlos Williams' "no ideas but in things."[36] If Ammons should stop on any word, "language gives way; / melting through, and reality's cold murky waters / accept the failure."[37] Just as computers in action retain information by rapid electronic circulation of it, so Ammons' verse retains its meaning in its mobility.

Ammons' cybernetic model of poetry as bits thrown into motion is based on an ideal of organization. He gradually feeds into his poems bits of different information (ideas, themes) and then, in the course of the poem's high-speed motion, he produces different clusterings or core-tanglings of the bits. These core-tanglings are Ammons' new approach to the familiar one: many problem, and they form a model for societies, businesses—whatever—as well as for computers and for poetry. The ideal is a maximum of unity without distortion or suppression of any of the bits. Poetry is the highest model: it has resources beyond those of computers. It has forms of order that are more than merely an increase of the motion's speed:

nothing defined can

be still: the verbal moves, depends there, or sinks into unfocused
irreality; ah, but when the mind is brought to silence, the
non-verbal, and the still, it's whole again to see how motion goes:[38]

We are back again in Greece and China in the long poems in *Collected Poems,* the themes of which are intellection and the quieting or giving up that represents wisdom. A familiar technique of the "Essay" and of the later poems generally is something that echoes classic American silent films.

Ammons will multiply information, pour more into the poem than a rational analysis is capable of, will then, if an explosion of nonsense is not the result, recover himself with a gesture of giving up that returns the mind, suddenly, to integration. After multiplying the considerations that make it impossible to ever determine the location of the elm in his backyard, let alone say anything about its inner structure, Ammons falls back into a wonderful self-recovery that also recovers the wholeness of the elm:

> I am just going to take it for granted
> that the tree is in my backyard:
> it's necessary to be quiet in the hands of the marvelous:[39]

NOTES

[1] Examples of these poems are: "So I Said I am Ezra," "The Sap Is Gone out of the Trees," "In Strasbourg in 1349," "Rack," "Turning a Moment to Say So Long," "Dying in a Mirthful Place," "Eolith," "With Ropes of Hemp," "I Struck a Diminished Seventh," "I Assume the World Is Curious about Me," "One Composing," "I Came upon a Plateau," "Sumerian," "Gilgamesh," and "Whose Timeless Reach."

[2] A. R. Ammons, *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (New York, 1972), p. 1. Hereafter to be referred to as *CP*.

[3] *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* trans. N. K. Sandars (Baltimore, 1972), p. 92.

[4] *CP,* p. 6, p. 10, p. 14, p. 27, and p. 31.

[5] *CP,* p. 3.

[6] *CP,* p. 2.

[7] *CP,* pp. 10-11.

[8] *CP,* p. 37.

[9] The comment comes from an interview in the Ammons issue of *Diacritics,* III, iv (1973), p. 51. The interview also reveals how self-conscious and chosen a creation Ammons' mature verse is; the rural South, in which Ammons was brought up, he came to "discredit religiously and intellectually" and thus became a man who had—and has, as he uses the present tense in the interview—"no culture." His transformation of himself into a poet of the tradition of the New England mind would have something in it of the assumption of a provisional disguise. Indeed, his poetry is often overtly parodic or, when not overtly so, based on an allusive revision of literary tradition that is so wry yet unobtrusive that it resembles, ever so slightly, a tall tale told with a straight face. A tantalizing question for Ammons criticism will be, I predict, the question of tradition and his individual talent; the spirit of Old Possum may be more important, in indirect ways, to the later poems than Eliot's poetry was as a direct influence upon the early poems. To deal with these questions adequately, Ammons criticism will, as the *Diacritics* interview reveals, have to provide a different—both more subtle and more American—conceptual framework than that employed by Harold Bloom in his articles on Ammons.

[10] A list of the poems I consider most important in this connection may be helpful

here: "Hymn," "Come Prima," "Prodigal," "Mechanism," "Guide," "The Golden Mean," "Risks and Possibilities," "Bridge," "Terrain," "Unsaid," "Uh, Philosophy," "Sphere," "Muse," "River," "The Strait," "Open," "Catalyst," "Christmas Eve," "Identity," "What This Mode of Motion Said," "Motion for Motion," "Expressions of Sea Level," "One: Many," "Two Motions," "Corson's Inlet," and "Saliences."

[11] *CP*, pp. 146-147.

[12] *CP*, p. 90.

[13] Harold Bloom, "When You Consider the Radiance," *The Ringers in the Tower* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 270-271.

[14] *CP*, p. 151.

[15] A. R. Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (Ithaca, 1965), pp. 9-10.

[16] *Tape*, p. 203.

[17] *Tape*, p. 202.

[18] *Tape*, p. 19.

[19] *Tape*, p. 31.

[20] *Tape*, p. 37

[21] *Tape*, p. 26.

[22] *Tape*, p. 155.

[23] *Tape*, p. 98.

[24] *Tape*, p. 32.

[25] *Tape*, p. 38.

[26] *Tape*, p. 61.

[27] *CP*, p. 299.

[28] *CP*, p. 317.

[29] *CP*, pp. 301-302.

[30] *CP*, p. 300.

[31] A. R. Ammons, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (New York, 1974), dedicatory page.

[32] *CP*, p. 358.

[33] *CP*, p. 367.

[34] *CP*, p. 315.

[35] *CP*, p. 298.

[36] *CP*, p. 308.

[37] *CP*, p. 298.

[38] *CP*, p. 310.

[39] *CP*, p. 304.

POETRY / A. R. AMMONS

When I Was Young the Silk

When I was young the silk
of my mind
hard as a peony head