“Where Here Is the Image for Longing”: A.R. Ammons and Writing as Technology

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Senior Conference 399b
7 April 2011
If anything, the volume of discontent has been turned up since the arts inherited the problem of language from religious discourse. It's not just that words, ultimately, won't do for the highest aims of consciousness; or even that they get in the way. Art expresses a double discontent. We lack words, and we have too many of them. It reflects a double complaint. Words are crude, and they're also too busy—in inviting a hyperactivity of consciousness which is not only dysfunctional, in terms of human capacities of feeling and acting, but which actively deadens the mind and blunts the senses.

(Susan Sontag, *The Aesthetics of Silence*)

Alphabetic writing can engage the human senses only to the extent that those senses sever, at least provisionally, their spontaneous participation with the animate earth. To begin to read, alphabetically, is thus already to be dis-placed, cut off from the sensory nourishment of a more-than-human field of forms. It is also, however, to feel the still-lingering savor of that nourishment, and so to yearn, to hope, that such contact and conviviality, may someday return... The pain, the sadness of this exile, is precisely the trace of what has been lost, the intimation of a forgotten intimacy.

(David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. 196)

...since words were introduced here things have gone poorly for the planet:

(A.R Ammons, *Garbage*, 74)
Part I: I am small, I contain multitudes

Despite his status as a decorated contemporary poet who often enjoys a position of prominence on critical lists of the most significant American poets of the late twentieth century alongside such talents as John Ashbery, W.S. Merwin, and John Berryman, A.R. Ammons has not enjoyed a correspondingly wide or enthusiastic readership outside of critical circles, nor, in fact, has his work attracted a great deal of sustained discussion within those circles. What major discussion there is tends to date from early in Ammons’ career, usually from around or before the period in which *Collected Poems 1951 – 1971*, which won the 1973 National Book Award, was published, with a slight resurgence in attention around the turn of the twenty-first century, when Ammons’ death in 2001, less than a decade after *Garbage* quietly earned him another National Book Award in 1993, prompted the usual flurry of posthumous laurel heaping. When Ammons is casually talked about, it is often in broad and therefore unhelpful terms: as a nature poet, as an abstract poet or a poet of ideas, as an “American landscape poet,” and so on. When critics seek to yoke him to any number of possible literary influences, they come up with names as unhelpfully varied as Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jack Kerouac, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Penn Warren, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, all of whom may have influenced Ammons but none of whose individually perceived influence is particularly illuminating if one reads Ammons deeply and broadly across his near half-century of accumulated work. While many critics have pointed out the abundance of similarities between Ammons’ philosophical views and those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, such observations, confined as they are to the realm of ideas alone, do little to enrich our understanding of Ammons’ poetic method, which I will argue is entirely his own. After all, Ammons’ particular resistance to classification stems less from any kind of bold, attention-
seeking radicalism of either subject matter or content and more from a sense of strong-willed detachment from all things artistically, politically, or intellectually trendy—even detachment itself. Like the natural phenomena it often (but not always) describes, Ammons’ poetry is consistent only in its resistance to the ascription of consistency, definition, and hard lineations, and in its constant radiation of a peculiar quality of social indifference unique (or very nearly so) to Ammons alone.

As a result of this negatively-defined poetic approach, reading Ammons critically can be more than a little bit annoying, and not always unintentionally so: as the poet waggishly writes in “Dunes,” “Taking root in windy sand / is not an easy / way / to go about / finding a place to stay” (Selected Poems 51). If one is looking for a poet to grow old with, a poet who yields to digging or mining rather than a more ambivalent touch, a poet of comfort, warmth, or conciliation, or a poet of celebratory lushness, joy, or fantasy, Ammons is, generally speaking, not your man. Rather, at his most characteristic Ammons is measured, understated, prone to aphorism, not much for grand displays of emotion, impeccably observant and precise, quite cranky at times, and possessed of a kind of impish humor that nicely complements both his occasional apocalyptic seriousness and his perpetual awareness of natural indifference to the human plight.

When critics have engaged Ammons on his own terms, they have tended to emerge with the most cutting and important insights about his work. For example, Helen Vendler, one of Ammons’ most prominent critics, writes in a 1973 essay that “[the] poetry [Ammons] is best able to write is deprived of almost everything other poets have used, notably people and adjectives” (73). Later in the same essay, Vendler acutely observes that “Never has there been a poetry so sublimely above the possible appetite of its readers” (76), where “sublimely” functions most
compellingly in the pure Burkean sense of “dark, uncertain, and confused,”\(^1\) thus inspiring in the reader a kind of pleasurable anxiety or horror. Aside from Vendler, the critic most strongly associated with Ammons is Harold Bloom, that looming colossus of the literary old guard whose longstanding interest in Ammons almost certainly helped establish the poet’s early reputation in critical circles, and whom Ammons counted as a close friend and correspondent throughout his life. Bloom’s characterization of Ammons early in his career as “a descendant of the great originals of American Romantic tradition, Emerson and Whitman” (1) is simultaneously apt and troublesome, since Bloom’s gargantuan critical presence has imparted to such early pronouncements a kind of consuming inertia that does not always allow Ammons’ later poetry adequate breathing room. Furthermore, Bloom’s readings of Ammons, guiltlessly arising by his own admission\(^2\) out of a kind of intense, demonstrable love of the poetry they concern, might be, according to the critic’s own theories of reading, especially prone to “misprision.”\(^3\)

In a 1971 essay, tellingly entitled “A.R. Ammons: ‘When You Consider the Radiance,’”

\(^1\) Edmund Burke’s sublimely-titled treatise *A Philosophy Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), a touchstone of pre-Romantic aesthetic philosophy, attempted to explicitly define the difference between the “beautiful” and the “sublime.” According to Burke, beautiful things inspire feelings of pleasure and love in the viewer, whereas things that are sublime inspire instead a kind of fear, confusion, or pleasurable terror. This terror could arise from a number of qualities in an artistic work, including darkness, obscurity, vastness, and an appearance of infinitude. Burke thought that a sublime work of art, because it deals in such strong human emotions, was inherently far more powerful and moving than a beautiful one.

\(^2\) “Ammons’ poetry does for me what Stevens’s did earlier, and the High Romantics before that; it helps me to live my life.” (Bloom, “When You Consider the Radiance” 5)

\(^3\) This assertion technically represents something of a distortion of Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence on my part, since the theory, as Bloom conceives it, deals *only* with poets—according to Bloom, a poet is one who “[rebels] more strongly against the consciousness of death’s necessity than all other men and women do” (*The Anxiety of Influence* 10). However, the passage on which I am relying in order to make this (possibly somewhat distortive) logical leap comes from the preface to Bloom’s essay and reads as follows:

> What matters most (and it is the central point of this book) is that the anxiety of influence comes out of a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call “poetic misprision.” What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the consequence of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. (*Preface*, xxiii)

I question whether a similar process to the one which Bloom describes as occurring in poetry cannot occur in critical readings; it has been pointed out to me, however, that an in-depth exploration of the psychological turmoil that ensues when critics fall in love with the works they critique is territory best left to Henry James, and not me.
Bloom examines Ammons' poetic output from *Ommateum* (1955) to *Uplands* (1970), and authoritatively lays out the following map of his influences:

Beyond its experimentation with Poundian cadences, *Ommateum* shows no trace of the verse fashions of the fifties; I cannot detect in it the voice of William Carlos Williams, which indeed I do not hear anywhere in Ammons's work, despite the judgments of several reviewers. This line of descent from Emerson and Whitman to the early poetry of Ammons is direct, and even the Poundian elements in *Ommateum* derive from that part of Pound that is itself Whitmanian. (46)

Unintentional as it may be, there is an amusing note of self-caricature in this densely referential characterization of Ammons as given by Bloom, as though the famous critic's own "anxiety of influence" is irresistibly forcing his hand towards a kind of obsessive pulling on the threads of Ammons' supposed literary and historical influences in an attempt to scrunch the examined poet into a neater bundle of philosophical, poetic, and artistic intentions. Bloom continues, noting that "Ammons's true subject, his vitalizing fear" is "poetic disincarnation" (46). Arguably, this is precisely the process fomented by the critical technique of funneling aspects of a particular poet's "originality" to their "sources": the critic, via the analytical stance, gains increasing control as the poet loses his right (supposing he ever had one) to intentionality. It is not a malicious process, but it is one devoted more to the construction of a kind of literary history, or heritage, than to a deepening what might be called a more "comprehensive" analysis of the work of a particular poet. After all, it would not be wholly incorrect to call Ammons' early work (as some critics have) "outsider art" (McGuirk as qtd. in Gilbert 14), and critical approaches such as

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4 Ammons was never a literary darling in any pure or traditional sense: though he was thoroughly exposed to the giants of literary history through the three post-graduate semesters he spent studying English at University of California Berkeley (*SIM* 4), he was "the holder of [a] B.S. degree from Wake Forest College in North Carolina...the principal of an elementary school at the age of 26...[and] an executive, thereafter and inconsequently, in the biological glass industry" (Howard 22) before he was anything resembling a "professional" poet—as all modern poets who come to us in printed and anthologized form must in some sense be. Ammons' first book of poems, *Ommateum*, was published by a vanity press in Philadelphia, and sold just sixteen copies in its first five years on the market (Gilbert 9).
Bloom's necessarily sequester Ammons in the literary world even as they tend to submerge his (Ammons') potential for novelty.\(^5\)

To hear Ammons himself tell it—a difficult task, since he is liable to directly and unapologetically contradict himself from interview to interview and certainly from poem to poem—his initial ambition in life was to "stay a farmer, but my father sold the farm. So, that option was eliminated" (Set in Motion 60). His progression from farmer's son to navy recruit to pre-med student to teacher to business executive was propelled by economic expediency, and though he claims he wrote poetry continuously for years before he had any idea how to get it published (SIM 96), it might be that the note of self-deprecating humor mixed with something like Humean pragmatism that pervades Ammons' work—his signature turn from the high drama of a kind of "Shelleyan 'awful doubt"' (Bloom and Trilling, Romantic Poetry and Prose 412, footnote to "Mont Blanc") to, usually, a joking comment on some specific of quotidian existence—derives from a life led, at least initially, in service to a sort of American lower-to-middle-class necessity. Even Ammons' realizations of cosmic insignificance are balanced by a sense of the absurdity, to begin with, of talking about the cosmic. As he says in another interview, "I think life ought to come first... The solemn, the pompous, the terribly earnest are all boring" (SIM 70).

\(^5\) As a somewhat evasive counter to this argument, Bloom writes: "That even the strongest poets are subject to influences not poetical is obvious even to me, but again my concern is only with the poet in a poet, or the aboriginal poetic self" (The Anxiety of Influence, Introduction, 11). My point in this paper, then, is that such a singular concern as "the poet in a poet" is inadequate to reading Ammons in particular, to the point that essential aspects of Ammons' poetics are glossed over by such an approach. Ammons directly discusses Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence with regards to his relationship to Emerson in a 1973 Diacritics interview, the relevant text of which is reproduced below:

About the "anxiety of influence," you know that Emerson is supposed to have felt that very little. I have experienced very little anxiety of that kind that I could identify—a need to come, and a fear of coming, to terms with a literary father. It is nearly impossible for me to identify closely with Emerson because he comes from Concord, and I from a rural and defeated South. You know, there are just too many wave lengths that we don't share; it's impossible for me to imagine myself belonging to any culture because of that rural South, which, in growing up, I tended to discredit religiously and intellectually, though I could not emotionally—you know, I am there, that's who I am. But that culture contained no elements, either religious or intellectual—formulable elements—that I could maintain to this moment. And it may be because I have no culture that I have not experienced what Harold Bloom talks about when he speaks of culture in the formal sense. (50)
One can trace, in Ammons’ poetic trajectory, an increasing vein of this self-deprecatory humor as the poet ages, culminating in his final book of poems, published four years after Ammons’ death in 2001, being titled, at his request, *Bosh and Flapdoodle*, an even less self-important descriptor than *Garbage* (1993)—for while trash has, at the very least, a lasting detrimental effect on the earth, nonsense would seem to have no effect whatsoever, passing out of the world as innocuously and uselessly as it entered it. In Ammons’ constant gestures towards complete dissociation, in his spoken idolization of silence as opposed to speech, in his knowingly ironic embrace of the idea that “silence is finally the only perfect statement” (*SIM* 12), Bloom would no doubt see his theory of “the anxiety of influence” gone utterly neurotic, so that all the well-schooled poet of the late twentieth century can ultimately do is relentlessly talk about how he does not want to talk about poetry, and eventually, about how he does not want to talk at all. And yet, Ammons’ prolific, not to say profligate, poetic output remains as stubborn testament to some kind of belief in, if not compulsion towards, the act of writing poetry as one whose unknowable value is determined by its necessity—in the same way, perhaps, that any given apparently useless, ugly, or even destructive organism, when removed from its appropriate ecosystem, might set the whole balance askew.

Since Ammons lived and died in an age in which poets and their critics shared an increasingly symbiotic and concomitantly tense relationship, and since his poetry deals extensively and sometimes bitterly with the issue of critical, as well as popular, misinterpretations of his work, it seems crucial to acknowledge, at the outset, that unique tension between poet and critic, which, especially in the case of the well-known correspondence between Ammons and Harold Bloom, may have led to a kind of mitigation, not to say distortion, of the unchecked flow of thought-turned-poetry for which Ammons often claimed to strive. In a 1994 interview with
Ammons claims that he “[has] tried to get rid of the Western tradition as much as possible” (SIM 105), and, in response to the interviewer’s suggestion that “I thought you had decided to become influenced by Emerson only after Bloom told you that you’d been,” Ammons affirms, “That’s basically correct” (107). Various critics, too, have commented on Ammons’ long poem *Sphere* (1974) as the site of a particularly obvious effort on Ammons’ part to assimilate what Susannah Hollister calls “Bloom’s urgings toward a more transcendent poetics” (674). Hollister notes that “Bloom, Ammons’s close friend and frequent correspondent in the early 1970s, was the first reader of the first draft and the dedicatee of [*Sphere*]. He urged Ammons, as he did throughout their friendship, toward the higher, singular side of the poem’s guiding paradox” (668). Donald Reiman further notes, perhaps somewhat presumptuously or reductively, in his essay “A.R. Ammons: Ecological Naturalism and the Romantic Tradition”:

> Ammons superficially adopted the doctrines of the Bloomian humanists in *Sphere*, I believe, because the existential angst that had fueled his poetry from the beginning was compounded during the late Sixties and early Seventies by the common mid-life crisis that strikes men when they realize that they are growing old and may never achieve the goals they have set for themselves. (39)

In light of such informed speculations, it seems credible to assert that critics examining Ammons from a “Bloomian” standpoint tend to “consider the radiance” (à la Bloom’s seminal essay title) to the exclusion of Ammons’ more strange and mutable darknesses, especially as they emerge later in Ammons’ career. As Reiman writes, “A first-rate poet — that is, a poet sensitive enough to grasp and intelligent enough to express the deepest issues of his or her time and place is always a mass of contradictions” (22). This is a generative point, and one that seems especially suited to Ammons, who never seemed fully able (though he was never trying very hard) to “make up his mind” with regards to his poetics, and seems instead to have “decided” that making up one’s mind is unnatural, limiting, and ultimately rather humorous in its presumption of the
possibility or the value of complete control in a universe that doesn’t care much for the defensive constructions of the individual mind to begin with—not even that most hallowed of humanistic idols, love.  

For the purposes of this essay, then, I would like to, as others have not always done, take Ammons at his (always somewhat “firmless”) word. In doing so, I do not wish to deny Ammons’ poetic and literary influences as they bear down and sideways upon his work from either his contemporaries or his predecessors; nor do I wish to make philosophical claims for the poet’s authority over his work’s interpretation as opposed to the reader’s. Rather, I want to see what novel interpretation of Ammons’ poetry emerges when one approaches the poet from a similar plane to the one on which he claimed to stand. In my view, this plane is constituted by the formative interaction of two separate statements Ammons made relatively late in his career that I see as being indispensable to understanding Ammons’ poetic project. The first is to be found in the context of a 1989 interview with the Michigan Quarterly Review. After observing that “[in] about 90 percent of your poetry the reader is brought into the poem to witness the solitude of the speaker,” the interviewer asks, “Is it your loneliness you’re writing about?” to which Ammons replies: “Yes it is. I really don’t write to an audience. I never imagined an

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6 In “The Account,” a poem deeply concerned with what I would broadly label “anthropocentrism,” Ammons directly interrogates the concept of love as a kind of human invention, manufactured by the mind to salvage a fiction of the importance and permanence of the individual self in a large and indifferent universe: “...should I spurn earth now with / mind, toss my own indifference / to indifference, invent some / other scale that assents to / temporary weight, make something / substanceless as love earth can’t / get to with changeless changing...” (“The Account,” Selected Poems, 75)

7 This elegant self-descriptor comes from Ammons’ first long poem Tape for the Turn of the Year:

    ecology is my word: tag
    me with that: come
    in there:
    you will find yourself
    in a firmless country:
    centers & peripheries
    in motion,
    organic,
    interrelations!

(112)
Five years later, in a 1994 interview with the *Paris Review*, after making the previously-quoted claims about his poetry’s place, or lack thereof, in the Western tradition, Ammons says the following about his poetic process: “I really do want to begin with a bare space with streams and rocks and trees” (*SIM* 105). It is these two strangely understated overstatements, both of which have the appearance of impossibility—how can a poet be speaking to no one? how can he claim to work outside of “his own” tradition?—that I would like to take at face value. Further, I would like to make claims for them as important touchstones of Ammons’ poetics. I do not believe that Ammons is so naïve as to think that he can actually purge the entirety of the Western literary and philosophical tradition through sheer force of will or literal ignorance; moreover, regardless of the poet’s initial imaginings, his work, widely published and anthologized, is in possession of a substantial audience. Still, it seems unwise for the critical reader to discard these statements out of hand as, perhaps, manifestations of self-delusion, or as Ammons’ subconscious “askesis” (*Bloom*, AI 15) getting the better of him. To discard or ignore such statements as hyperbole is to discard the clues they give us when it comes to listening to something in Ammons other than the (often quite loud) voices of his poetic forebears.

It would be ridiculous to assert that Ammons at any point succeeded in crafting a poetry that so perfectly melds its medium with its message⁸ that to attempt analysis is automatically to misread it; nor, to be fair, was he ever exactly trying to. In fact, Ammons’ early work is particularly amenable to traditional modes of criticism precisely because it self-consciously makes an attempt to place itself in (or outside of, as the case may be) some kind of tradition—it seems, often, to know not what—and to “do what poets do.” *Omnateum* (1955), Ammons’ first

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⁸ Here I am self-consciously relying on a distortion of Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement that “the medium is the message” to make a separate point; I am using the word “message” to mean “content,” whereas McLuhan used it to mean “effect” or “outcome.” Subsequent to this point, however, my argument will rely on the phrase as McLuhan intended it: that is, the idea that the medium (*how something is conveyed*) is the message—as in, the “point” of Ammons’ work as I’m construing it.
book of poems, includes a number of phrases and tropes that readers of Ammons' later work would be positively confused (if not amused) by; for instance, *Ommateum*’s third section begins:

In Strasbourg in 1349
in the summer and in the whole year
there went a plague through the earth
Death walked on both sides of the Sea
tasting Christian and Saracen flesh...
(29)

Section 7 starts similarly, with the lines, “At dawn in 1098 / the Turks went out from the gates / of Antioch...” (36). Section 19 begins thus: “Gilgamesh was very lascivious / and took the virgins as they ripened...” (56), and, perhaps most jarringly, Section 28 begins with, “A crippled angel bent in a scythe of grief / mourned in an empty lot / Passing by I stopped / amused that immortality should grieve / and said / It must be exquisite” (73). Moreover, on a constant basis throughout the poems, Ammons invokes the character of “Ezra” as poet-prophet incarnate—“So I said I am Ezra” (25)—Ezra being, variously, a “hunchback [childhood] playmate” of Ammons’ (Bloom, *WYCR* 46), the Biblical scribe of the same name credited with leading the Jews out of exile to Jerusalem, and the first name of a certain modernist poet whose “cadences” are, according to Bloom, to be detected throughout *Ommateum*.9

What is going on here? Surely this is not the same poet who said in 1994, “You notice I don’t mention anything in my poetry having to do with Europe or where we come from. I never allude to persons or places or events in history... [The] only way you can do anything at all about all of Western culture is to fail to refer to it. And that’s what I do” (*SIM* 106). In the context of the early poems, such statements seem downright false, or at the very least, revisionist. Though the Ezra of *Ommateum* tends to address these grand evocations of

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9 It seems extremely unlikely that Ammons meant to evoke this third interpretation, even though he once wrote to Josephine Miles that he “[thinks] of the character [of Ezra] as wiry, evaporated, leathern, a desert creature, much soul and bone, little flesh” (Gilbert 10), which, it must be admitted, does sound vaguely like Ezra Pound.
“historically significant” events—the siege of Antioch, the black plague—with near-satirical inadequacy of speech (“and I said Oh” (28)), and generally ends each historical episode not by imputing articulate meaning but by “look[ing] down at the ashes / and [rising] and walk[ing] out of the world” (30) or by “[falling] down in the dust” (28), thus demonstrating historic disengagement via some combination of impotence and indifference, still Ommateum, with its proper nouns, exact dates, and weeping angels, represents a fascinating artifact in the context of Ammons’ own history.

Never one to disown an apparent inconsistency, Ammons never distanced himself from Ommateum—not even close—saying as late as 1989, “It may be my best book” (SLM 62). Even allowing for Ammons’ usual measure of mischief, this statement is an odd one, relying, it seems, for its “truth” on Ammons’ playful interpretation of the word “best”—here perhaps used as a measure of critical palatability, or as an indicator of purity of vision or intent combined with faithfulness of execution, a harmony the aging poet was bound to have trouble relocating in future collections as his vision grew more unwieldy and less fresh. As “traditional” as it may appear in relation to the rest of Ammons’ pursuant oeuvre, Ommateum’s gesture is ultimately purgative in nature, an explicit attempt at a Bloomian “swerve” away from all that came before: “I closed up all the natural throats of earth / and cut my ties with every natural heart / and saying farewell / stepped out into the great open” (33)). Post-Ommateum, European history, as well as, for the most part, the “leathern” Ezra, will have vanished from Ammons’ vocabulary without so much as an “oh.” It is as though the poems themselves in their enactment have acted to exorcise their own content—and indeed, when critics write about Ommateum, their focus tends to be on the recurring image of the wind and Ammons’ portrayal of nonhuman nature, both of which are relatively consistent with the themes of Ammons’ later work, as if to draw attention to the early
poems’ incongruous aspects is to commit a kind of gaucheness akin to gaping at a malformed limb.

Yet, despite the presence in *Ommateum* of what appear to be kowtows to a poetic tradition Ammons would later abjure, as well as the absence of what were to become Ammons’ characteristic modes of expression—scientific language, the casual or joking tone, puns and open wordplay—these poems, while they do, in style and tone, at times resemble strangely self-effacing variations on portions of *Song of Myself;* also obliquely harbor the kernel of what was to grow into Ammons’ clearest divergence from the “direct” American Romantic heritage ascribed to him. While Whitman’s familiar assertion that “Writing and talk do not prove me, / I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face, / With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic” (*Song of Myself* 579-81) has some resonance with Ammons’ career-long refusal to attempt to “prove” himself or even to make nice with his readers (“I am no slave that I / should entertain you, say what you want / to hear, let you wallow in / your silt” (*Collected Poems*, “Coon Song” 87)), Ammons’ concern, unlike that of the magnanimous Whitman, is not solely with the indivisible untranslatability of the essential self when it comes to the use of language. Rather, Ammons is additionally concerned with the dangerous, dissolutive, and misrepresentational tendencies of language—that is, written, and specifically printed, language—as *a technology*, and with poetry, by extension, as a tool, an art form, and an artifact.

In other words, while Whitman and the American transcendentalists, as well as the English Romantics, were generally engaged with the impotence of language as opposed to the wide-roaming, unassailable power of the human mind, Ammons is often engaged, instead, with

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10 *Songs of Who, Me?* being, perhaps, a worthy candidate for *Ommateum*’s potential subtitle.

11 Worth noting, too, is Donald Reiman’s insight on another essential difference between the two poets: that “Ammons’ expounded self, unlike Whitman’s, exposes isolation and loneliness, rather than a sense of community and love” (Reiman 39). As Ammons writes in *The Snow Poems*: “oneself I sing, / a person apart, / shoved aside, / silenced” (243).
the wide-roaming, unassailable power of written language as opposed to the weakness, the manipulability, and the vulnerability of the human mind. It is not that Ammons has necessarily ceased to idolize the sounding of barbaric yawps across the roofs of the world, but that his awareness of his medium has heightened—writing, as he did, in the postmodern, post-Joycean age; i.e. the age of poststructuralism, John Cage’s “silent” music of chance, and Marshall McLuhan’s uncannily prescient observations on the sociohistorical effects of media, from the clock to the television—to an appropriately modern pitch. It is this modern, somewhat “multidisciplinary” hyperawareness of writing-as-technology, as combined with Ammons’ rather unique background as both a working-class farmer and a student, significantly, of twentieth-century science, that I wish to interrogate in some depth in this essay. As I mentioned previously, I am not denying Ammons’ uncanny philosophical congruence, in many respects, with Emersonian ideas—and, in fact, I am taking such congruence as a given—but I seek to complicate that similarity and uncover Ammons’ poetic singularity within and beyond it. As Emerson himself writes in “The Poet,” “…it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, – a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (186, my emphasis).

Part II: “For god’s sake drop all this crap about words”

In a 1964 review of Expressions of Sea Level, Wendell Berry, another Southern farmer-turned-poet, writes the following regarding Ammons’ poetic technique:

[So] many of [Ammons’] poems include lines or passages that have the cadences of prose that I assume it must be deliberate, part of Mr. Ammons’ usual method. The only near-equivalent or precedent for this, so far as I know, is the gathering in of prose quotations, statistics etc., in such modern poems as Paterson and The Cantos... [The] prose detail is admitted raw into the poem not to be transformed into poetry by it but to be illuminated or newly clarified by the energy with which the poem surrounds it—and to serve the poem in some way in which only prose can serve it. This use of prose in poems may be
justified by the poet’s conviction that poetry might legitimately deal with subject matter which is customarily the subject matter of prose—his realization that some of the things he knows and is concerned about are new, and haven’t been prepared for poetry by any considerable period of association or usage. What I’m indicating here is that Mr. Ammons aims to bring science into his poems as *subject matter*, not just to borrow words or images from it. (3, emphasis Berry’s)

Earlier in the same review, Berry remarks that technical scientific language, such as Ammons sometimes uses, “is by nature stiff, like a wooden shoe. No conceivable amount of use would limber it up” (4). Here, Berry imports a relatively traditional view of what constitutes poetic language. With seeming disregard for, say, actual sound values or other indicators of what a “limber” word might be, Berry, not by any means wholly traditionalist himself, though in many ways more straightforward than Ammons, refuses “poetic” status to words such as “hemoglobin” and “enzymic” (*SP*, “Mechanism” 21), mostly, it seems, because of their clinical associations. Thus, for Berry, is poetic language inseparable from its tradition in a way that prose—probably non-literary prose, specifically—is not; Berry’s “limbered up” language might conceivably inhabit Wallace Stevens’ dump.

This view of Berry’s illuminates an important aspect of the “Ammonsonian” difference: for Ammons, all language is poetic language. There is no separation between “scientific” language and the language of poetry because, for Ammons, the world is divisible into only two realms: those things that man has made, and those things he has not. Because all words are man’s creation, scientific or not, they belong to the former realm, and are dependent for their existence on the latter. Despite an intellectual climate often intent on extolling the primacy, if not the omnipotence, of the subjective, Ammons is a staunch defender of the existence of objective reality, as a result, perhaps, of his scientific training, or perhaps the cause of it. He

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12 Ammons very directly articulates this position towards the middle of *The Snow Poems*:

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I have not been out to stand
near or touch the elm
recently so though I see it
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does not believe that the only things humanity can know are the mind and its creations, and he
does not believe, biblically, that words create the world. Rather, he sees words as secondary to
the world, derivative of it, and therefore capable of being, at times, bypassed or ignored—
though, it seems, paradoxically, only via their use. Ammons’ scientific sensibility, his long-
range evolutionary awareness, endows him with the strangely comforting “faith” that the earth
existed before man described it, and will continue to exist though man someday no longer will.
The importance of this particular philosophical outlook of Ammons’ is simply that it paves the
way for a discussion of Ammons’ intuition that while human speech, our spoken language, is
“natural,” universally emergent, and belongs, in some sense, to the realm man has not created,
the written Word, in all its forms, is a thing man has created, but which, because “translatable”
into “natural” speech, conveys an especially insidious appearance of “naturalness,” thereby
allowing people to mistake the subjective for the real, the temporary for the eternal.

For the sake of context, it will be helpful here to give a brief introduction to some of the
theories as they have emerged, specifically in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, surrounding the shift
in human consciousness associated with the move, in the course of the development of Western
civilization as we know it, from a pre-Socratic, primarily oral culture to one in which literacy had
taken hold, and finally in Ancient Greece to one in which the Phoenician (phonetic) alphabet had
been adopted in place of earlier pictorial or character-based writing systems. This issue is
addressed eloquently and succinctly by Walter Ong (a former thesis advisee of Marshall

(137)

casionally through the other
room’s window
I lack heavy information that
it remains substantial and yet
by faith I have no doubt
if I went out there
to hang myself on it
it would do well enough

In his earlier poem “Gravelly Run,” Ammons writes (rather less morbidly) that “…it is not so much to know the self
/ as to know it as it is known / by galaxy and cedar cone, / as if birth had never found it / and death could never end
it” (Selected Poems, 11), lines which further serve to indicate his faith in the existence of nonhuman nature outside
of the self’s perception of it.
McLuhan) in his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), which, drawing on previous research and theories advanced by McLuhan, Jack Goody, and others, argues that “many of the contrasts often made between ‘western’ and other views seem reducible to contrasts between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness” (29)—an assertion that would certainly seem to resonate with the interests of a poet seeking to purge from his work “the Western tradition.”

According to Ong, and McLuhan before him (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 81, ch. 9), because the written word is a technology which converts the sounded to the seen and which relies on the power of sight to be processed and understood, the widespread interiorization of literacy within a given society eventually leads to the prioritization of the visual sense over the acoustic and what Yi-Fu Tuan has called the “haptic-somatic” (Tuan, *Topophilia* 57)—bodily, felt—modes of relating to the world commonly seen in “primitive,” non-literate societies. This gradual rise to primacy of the visual mode—arguably, the most sterile and detached of human

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13 In another telling quote from the 1994 *Paris Review* interview, Ammons says that “If I get back to the pre-Socratics, I feel that I’m in the kind of world that I would enjoy to be in, but nothing since then.”

14 In his book *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*, Tuan writes the following regarding the environmental perception of modern (literate) man versus that of the Aivilik Eskimo:

> In modern society man comes to rely more and more on sight. Space for him is bounded and static, a frame or matrix for objects. Without objects and boundaries space is empty. It is empty because there is nothing to see even though it might be filled with wind. Compare this attitude with that of the Aivilik Eskimo on Southampton Island. To the Eskimo, space is not pictorial or boxed in, but something always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. He learns to orient himself with all senses alert. He has to do certain times in winter when sky and earth merge and appear to be made of the same substance. There is then ‘no middle distance, no perspective, no outline, nothing that the eye can cling to except thousands of smokey plumes of snow running along the ground before the wind—a land without bottom or edge.’ Under such conditions the Eskimo cannot rely on the points of reference given by permanent landmarks: he must depend on the shifting relationships of snow contours, on the types of snow, wind, salt air, and ice crack. The direction and smell of the wind is a guide, together with the feel of ice and snow under his feet. The invisible wind plays a large role in the life of the Aivilik Eskimo. His language contains at least twelve unrelated terms for various winds. He learns to orient himself by them. On horizonless days he lives in an acoustic-olfactory space. (11)

This analysis contains several interesting points of intersection with Ammons’ work, notably the importance of “the invisible wind” in the Eskimo’s world, since the wind features prominently as Ammons’ motif of choice throughout his career; the impossibility of truly “empty” space is also a concern of Ammons’ (see page 21 of this essay). Tuan’s commentary on the impossibility of “normal” spatial orientation in a snow-covered landscape might have interesting implications for a reinterpretation of *The Snow Poems*; unfortunately such extensive analysis as a full exploration of this parallel would require is outside the scope of this paper.
Hoagland-Hanson 17

senses—has a number of implications for human consciousness and man’s understanding of himself in relation to nature. For one thing, it leads to a kind of fragmentary restructuring of language as, in the process of transcription, the continuous flood or stream of spoken language must be divided into individual words. As Ong writes, “‘Line’ is obviously a text-based concept, and even the concept of a ‘word’ as a discrete entity apart from a flow of speech seems somewhat text-based. Goody has pointed out that an entirely oral language which has a term for speech in general, or for a rhythmic unit of a song, or for an utterance, or for a theme, may have no ready term for a ‘word’ as an isolated item, a ‘bit’ of speech, as in, ‘The last sentence here consists of twenty-six words’” (Goody via Ong 61). Early manuscripts, in fact, had a tendency to elide the spaces between words, and since the earliest books were always read aloud rather than silently, such sound-based elision was not perceived as confusing or incorrect (Ong 61).

Ong writes that “Visual presentation of verbalized material in space has its own particular economy, its own laws of motion and structure” (100), so that the page itself becomes a kind of visual-acoustic matrix in which blank, “empty” space corresponds to silence and inked characters correspond to sound. However, because “[sound] exists only when it is going out of existence [and] is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent...[so that] there is no way to stop sound and have sound” (32), and because the written word, whether represented as a character or as a discrete set of phonetic letters, cannot retain this sense of evanescence and presents instead a façade of concrete containment, “[writing] makes ‘words’ appear similar to things because we think of words as the visible marks signaling words to decoders: we can see and touch such inscribed ‘words’ in texts and books. Written words are residue” (11). Ong continues: “Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it” (11).
Writing, in other words, first creates the concept of separate and distinct words as they emerge from the formally undifferentiated flow of spoken language, and then transforms those words from uncaptureable, uttered events in time into a series of stable, tangible “things” to be arranged within the spatial field. The phonetic alphabet, as opposed to a pictographic writing system, further abstracts the written word from what it describes, tying it nearly exclusively to the realm of the human, and solidifies its “thingness,” since letters, though they did originally derive from pictographs of sorts, do not represent things but rather sounds to be created by the human voice, assembled into a word and then applied outward toward its appropriate “thing.” A series of letters, to one who “cannot read,” means nothing at all, since phonetic letters are now so far removed from directly representational structures as to be inaccessible to anyone who hasn’t studied the code.

Ammons never explicitly addresses this incremental shift as such in his work, but he often, as in “Lines,” invokes it, although whether his awareness of the issue is intuitive or researched (or a bit of both) is difficult to say; at times the references are so unsubtle in their theoretical specificity—as in The Snow Poems, for instance—it seems they must have been bolstered by outside reading. To return, briefly, to Ommateum, it is worth noting that, though Ammons is mostly “correct” in his assertion that, after those earliest poems at least, he does not reference historical places or events in his poetry, there is one historical place that not only remains and recurs over decades of his published work, but which features prominently in the title of one of Ammons’ later books of poetry: that is, Sumer, of Sumerian Vistas\(^\text{15}\) (1987). Famous as the Mesopotamian “birthplace” of the earliest known form of writing, Sumer gave the world cuneiform, or wedge-shaped pictographs pressed into clay tablets, originally employed as

\(^{15}\) This title could be interpreted as a succinct reference to the aforementioned connection between the rise of the written word and the subsequent rise in importance of the visual field in the realm of human perception.
a means of keeping state accounts. *Ommateum*'s sixteenth section finds "Ezra with unsettling love" “[rifling] the mud and wattle huts / for recent mournings” along the banks of one of Sumer’s rivers. Due to a recent rainstorm or snowmelt, the river has overflowed its banks and then receded, covering the floors of the huts with silt. Ezra, who, on his “walk” through the poem, implicitly makes tracks, his own bodily impressions, in the mud, finds that “river weeds hanging gray / on the bent reeds spoke saying / Everything is even here as you can see” (O 52). The obvious image here is that of the indifferent flux of water obliterating the momentary impressions in wet clay made by “the bent reeds” which speak to Ezra, saying “Everything is even here”: as in, not even writing, which seems to give human thought and utterance permanence, survives the flood: man like all creatures is mortal. Ammons will later pick up this thread in the first of his book-length long poems, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965), writing that “poetry has / one subject, impermanence, / which it presents / with as much permanence as / possible” (145).

*Tape’s* guiding gimmick, as it were, consists in its being composed, on a day-by-day basis in journal entry form, on a roll of adding machine tape, thus forcing its author to write a poem that is not only very long but also very thin, so that the reader’s eye moves swiftly down the page in a kind of waterfall or trickling motion, like so:

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I’ve been
looking for a level
of language
that could take in all
kinds of matter
& move easily with
light or heavy burden:
a level
that could,
without fracturing, rise
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16 It might surprise readers familiar with Ammons’ famous essay “A Poem Is a Walk” (which I will address more fully later) that the essay never draws a parallel between footprints and writing, pictographic or not; however, I would argue that the parallel is implicit and necessary, given that a footprint is, like writing, a lasting, static record of previous (and continuous) motion.
& fall
with conception & intensity:
not be completely outfaced
by the prosaic & not be inadequate to the surges
(143)

The resemblance to a stream of water is far from incidental, since what but water can "take in all kinds of matter & move easily with light or heavy burden" and so forth? Perhaps Ammons feels himself in line with the "Tibetan monks [who] used to sit on the banks of streams 'printing pages of charms and formulas on the surface of the water with woodcut blocks'" (Goody 1968a, p. 16, quoting R.B. Eckvall, as qtd. by Ong 93) whose practice Ong relays in *Orality and Literacy*. Indeed, in his aptly-titled poem "Classic," which will benefit here from being quoted in its entirety, Ammons finds himself at a direct intersect between his horizonless faith in the eventual transience of his art and the distortive properties conferred by what seeming permanence it retains:

I sat by a stream in a perfect—except for willows—emptiness and the mountain that was around,

scraggly with brush & rock said
I see you're scribbling again:

accustomed to mountains, their cumbersome intrusions, I said

well, yes, but in a fashion very like the water here uncapturable and vanishing:

but that
said the mountain does not
excuse the stance
or diction

and next if you’re not careful
you’ll be
arriving at ways
water survives its motions.
(CP 273)

Clearly, Ammons’ desire to make poetry analogous to water works strongly against the idea, born of literate and subsequently of print culture, that words are concrete things, separable from the writhing sea of history, culture, imagination, individual context, and individual minds from which they spring, as well as from the motions of language itself. As if to underscore this point, Ammons’ delicately signals the impossibility, in a soundscape, of “perfect emptiness”:\textsuperscript{17} while the printed page very easily supports the fiction that it is possible to have a space containing nothing at all—utter white blankness finding its acoustic analogue in complete absence of sound—Ammons immediately and purposefully breaks this unasked-for assumption of silence with the somewhat jarring announcement of the presence of willows. He does so in a fashion so casual that, were one not alert to the poet’s own technological alertness, it might be written off as simply another instance of Ammons’ quirky, interjectional dialect.

Ammons’ ruminations on the tendency of words to illusorily amputate what cannot be sectioned even as they peremptorily make permanent what is naturally fleeting are displayed to best effect in his long poems, which comprise in their very form both the impulse to go on and

\textsuperscript{17} This theoretical point is the \textit{raison d’être} for John Cage’s famous “composition” \textit{4:33} (1952). The piece consists of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of “silence,” intended to be filled with whatever ambient noises occurred within that time period wherever the piece was performed. Cage’s ideas about music were widely influential, and his famous insistence that “I have nothing to say and I’m saying it” is echoed in various forms throughout \textit{The Snow Poems} (a poem, according to Ammons, “about nothing,” and maligned by many a critic for being essentially ambient noise). For example, on page 95 Ammons gives a hearty Cageian “hello from one who knows nothing / (and never lets you hear / the end of it).”
on and the opposing knowledge that no poem, composed of words and lines and entrapped
between covers, can be eternal, or even truly circular. In _Sphere_, he writes:

> however provisional the procedure, tentative the thought, the
days clang shut with bronze finality: days wherein we waivered
studiously with uncertainty, went this way a way and that way a
way, thought twice, take on the hard and fast aspect of the

finished, the concluded fact, thus misrepresenting us: and then
there is at the end the stone that makes it all look purposeful
and deliberate, what was hesitation, gaping, and wondrous

turning around... (54)

Implicit in these lines is a recognition that “tentative thoughts,” unrecorded, do not of themselves
“clang shut with bronze finality” (a phrase which, it should be noted, derives small irony from its
use of onomatopoeia, the closest thing in written language to a pure harmony between sign and
signified—more accurately, heard and read—yet still only possible via the pre-estranged
workings of the phonetic alphabet): “days wherein we waivered” only “take on the hard and fast
aspect of the finished” when the name of the person to whom they accrued is finally _engraved_ in
“the stone / that makes it all look purposeful and deliberate.” It is this false appearance of graven
deliberateness that Ammons apparently sees as characterizing the “good poems” he claims, in
_Sphere_, to be “sick of” (72). His subsequent book-length poem, _The Snow Poems_, is a “dumb,
debilitated, nasty, and massive” reaction to “all those little rondures / splendidly brought off,
painted gourds on a shelf” (_Sphere_ 72). Ammons himself has said that his original intention in
writing _The Snow Poems_ was “to write a book of a thousand pages... 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... But I stopped at three
hundred pages. I had worn myself and everybody else out” (_SIM_ 66).
Despite their author’s stated intentions (which, I would argue, are meant to be taken with a grain of salt, or snow as the case may be), *The Snow Poems* seem to be almost entirely devoted to an expository, though frequently contentious, exploration of the potentialities and pitfalls of the technological implications of the printed page.\(^{18}\) They are, in sum, a sort of experimental study—three-hundred pages-plus of études on the subject of recording equipment. Ammons writes much of the poem in two or more columns, so that multiple sections of text seem to be running “at the same time” even as the reader cannot process them as such, a technique that reveals to us both the limitations of the printed page—it cannot replicate the effect of multiple voices speaking simultaneously, or of singing in harmony\(^{19}\)—as well as its possibility: instead, we visually experience simultaneity even as we must aurally process singularly. In addition to the poem’s somewhat frustrating format, Ammons engages throughout in a lot of what might be perceived as belligerent kibitzing: seemingly arbitrary lists of faintly offensive words (“fucking forefront / rump humper / bang spangler / wart wrestler / butt fucker” (101)), representational

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\(^{18}\) Donald Reiman and others have argued that *The Snow Poems* can be read as Ammons’ mid-life crisis poem, a Freudian working-through of the poet’s fraught relationship with his father; I am focusing less on the “personal” content of the poems and more on what they can tell us (in content as well as gesture) about Ammons’ fraught relationship with poetry.

\(^{19}\) In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong provides a list of attributes he sees as characterizing oral thought versus literate thought. It is interesting to note how many of these characteristics (which I will replicate below) can be applied, generally, to Ammons’ poetry as it appears in *The Snow Poems* (and to a lesser extent in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*). Ong’s list is as follows:

i. Additive rather than subordinative
ii. Aggregative rather than analytic
iii. Redundant or ‘copious’
iv. Conservative or traditionalist
v. Close to the human lifeworld
vi. Agonistically toned
vii. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
viii. Homeostatic
ix. Situational rather than abstract

By noting this, I do not mean to suggest that Ammons is by any means an oral poet, or even that he is working in the oral tradition; instead I want to propose that Ammons’ resistance to particular aspects of written technology (its tendency to confer an illusion of solidity or stasis; its ability to obscure its “true” origins via the editing process; its inherent bias towards the humanistic sphere) naturally inclines him towards a kind of retroactive recuperation of certain qualities of oral thought—qualities which become manifest, paradoxically, in written form.
“drawings” of eyes and faces composed of typographical characters, quasi-nonsensical phrases (“if mush were slush / meep could sleep / dud / dad” (156)), and bitter jabs at almost everyone in the poet’s immediate vicinity, from fellow poets to critics, from his recently-deceased father to himself. The effect is not necessarily a pleasant one, but *The Snow Poems* is not a pleasant work. It means to unsettle (“I Ezra with unsettling love”), to shake loose the reader’s assumptions through sheer force of unpalatability (that is, if the reader manages to finish it), and, published on the heels of the comparatively accessible, “Whitmanian” *Sphere*, it seems to have done just that. One disgruntled critic of *The Snow Poems* writes: “Narcissism, long a fatal attraction, seems to have become a ruling passion for poets in the late twentieth century... *The Snow Poems* are mostly no poems, reflecting in their polished mirrors a period of diminishing poetic inspiration” (Pratt 466). Of course, to read *The Snow Poems* this way is not only to engage in the kind of criticism Ammons despised—taste-based value judgments that essentially hand Pyrrhic victories

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20 For example, what appears to be a dragon’s or monster’s face on page 130, which looks something like this:

(( ))

21 Ammons anticipated and self-consciously fuelled such reactions: in one memorable passage of the poem in question, he adopts an absurd parody of a Southern accent in order to compare his critics to a bunch of greedy crows fighting over a cake of suet:

...they jest a waitin’ that’s what they doin’ they jest a waitin’ sooner or later they gonna plunk right there on the porch and start a grabbin’ and a tearin’ well I thought this year I was goin’ to make up my mind to do somethin’ good fer nature but that warn’t the nature I meant to do any good fer that’s a fact and I don’t keer who knows it them crows is a eating up what little bit of stuff people has and if they ain’t something done about it I’ll tell you they won’t be a thang left around here that them crows ain’t fooled with I bet you five dollars on that (137)
to poems that are purposefully distasteful—and to perform a fairly egregious misreading of the poem; it is also to discount those aspects of *The Snow Poems* that cannot be taken for granted as easily as the poem’s occasional nastiness. It is certainly nothing novel for a poet to rail against his critics, or to fool around at the expense of his critical reputation and marketability, but *The Snow Poems*, when viewed as productively and playfully experimental rather than purely puerile, reveal themselves as a particularly important, transformative “episode” in Ammons’ “evolving poetics” (Vendler 23).

True to their title, *The Snow Poems* transfigure the theme of poetry-as-water pioneered by *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, focusing instead on the element’s frozen, “static” state. In one of *The Snow Poems’* many small but profound tantrums (one could make a case for the book being simply a series of these), Ammons lines up ten variations on the same six lines, beginning with a four-line request that we:

1 look at the people
    in the graveyard
   they don’t seem to mind

2 look at the people
    in the graveyard

3 look at the people
    in the graveyard
    unfailing attraction

4 look at the people
    in the graveyard
    a cardinal attraction

5 look at
6 look at

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22 Apropos the pun on “static” states, Ammons’ titular pun on “snow” as “spots that appear as a flickering mass filling a television or radar screen, caused by interference or a low signal-to-noise ratio” (OED), as opposed to its more common usage as a winter weather phenomenon, is worth noting, since it immediately raises for the reader the idea of technological malfunction as applied to poetry.
Ammons’ purpose in arranging these ten haikuesque “tombstones” on the page in attractive little two-by-twos is manifold. Critics have noted that the numbers assigned to each block of text seem initially to be aimed at drawing our attention to the poetic editing process, a process which readers are not generally permitted to see and one which would not be possible were Ammons working within the oral tradition as opposed to the written (Vendler 37). Look, Ammons seems to say: I thought of ten different ways to end this stanza, and, privileging none, in the interest of full disclosure and unafraid of ugliness, I present them all. However, this passage, no matter how “dumb, debilitated, nasty, and massive” it may theoretically want to be, depends for its existence and effectiveness upon the technologies it seeks to expose and, through that exposure, make problematic. After all, the passage derives part of its effectiveness from the ten stanzas’ typographic resemblance to two rows of gravestones, all perfectly similar aside from their final
two or three lines. This visual component of the passage, as though one is directing one’s eyes from one marker to another in the graveyard the page has become, enhances, rather than detracts from, the soothing, chanted power of those first four lines, which develop into a patient, muted mantra: “look at / the people / in the / graveyard.” Moreover, this “visual component” becomes a physical, “somatic” component: the eyes move in a certain way as a result of the arrangement of the words, a similar effect to the “trickling” motion necessitated by Tape for the Turn of the Year. Ammons, knowing poet—and no doubt careful editor—that he was, never had any intention of narrowing this passage to a single “painted gourd”; such a winnowing would drastically alter the visual potency conferred by the multitude of forms.

Part III: “I want to be singing, sort of”

The question that arises from all this discussion of Ammons’ slippery, apparently paradoxical poetics—his frustrated demands that we “drop all this crap about words /...it is so boring” (Garbage 50) alongside his conspicuous talent for using words effectively and for using an awful lot of them—is not, in fact, the most obvious one that could be asked; that is, it is not the one that Ammons himself asks so many times, in various ways, throughout his poetry:

...if words
hurt me, why do I
come to them to move a saying through:
am I saying in words how I wish nature
in fact were, though impersonal: fluent,
yielding, showy, a dance of mind not
words (though in words) but things:
(The Snow Poems 41)

In other words, the question is not “why does Ammons write poetry” (with the implied, mildly petulant follow-up “if he hates it so much”), since this is a question that the poet has, in some sense, answered just as many times as he himself has proposed it. Although, from an outsider
perspective, the best answer to the question of why Ammons writes poetry might be the same one Flannery O'Connor gave when asked why she wrote fiction ("Because I'm good at it"), the poet has given a number of more seriously-considered explanations for continuing his art, the plainest (at least in terms of its actual wording) of which might be the one he articulates at the very end of his essay "A Poem Is a Walk":

Poetry is a verbal means to a nonverbal source. It 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. (SIM 20)

Part of the difficulty in understanding this koan-like justification for the poetic pursuit comes from Ammons' conviction, adapted from a quote from Lao-tse and shared by many a poet, that "nothing that can be said about [poetry] in words is worth saying" (SIM 12). It is an asymptotic explanation of an asymptotic process, and is therefore doubly evasive. In this evasiveness, however, we might find a kind of release: the question, again, is not, "why does Ammons' write poetry" (since, quite incontrovertibly, he did write poetry, and lots of it), but how does he do it? In the former question, there is the faintest suggestion of a teleological explanation, which is exactly what Ammons' poetic project abhors. The latter question, meanwhile, has the kind of infinitude of application—the expectation of a continuously unfolding, or at least open-ended, response—that the poetry appreciates.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, Ammons' long poem Sphere was dedicated to Harold Bloom; its dedication page contains the centered italicized words "For Harold Bloom," followed by a thirty-four line poem.23 The poem, comparatively short as it is, represents a

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23 This poem was later anthologized in the expanded version of The Selected Poems under the title of "For Harold Bloom," though I believe it is important to note that it is not clear, from the layout of Sphere's dedication page, that the poem is not actually untitled, launching (theoretically) straight from silence into song. If we look, once more, at Ong's Orality and Literacy, we find the following passage regarding the historical origin of the concept of the title: "Manuscript culture had preserved a feeling for a book as a kind of utterance, an occurrence in the course of conversation, rather than as an object. Lacking title pages and often titles, a book from pre-print, manuscript culture is normally catalogued by its 'incipit' (a Latin verb meaning 'it begins'), or the first words of its text... With print, as has been seen, come title pages. Title pages are labels." (125). Such a parallel might seem like a stretch, but it is an interesting one nonetheless.
particularly fascinating specimen in Ammons' career-long study of the word, since it is
essentially an allegorical story of how writing came to be and the effect of that invention:

I went to the summit and stood in the high nakedness:
the wind tore about this
way and that in confusion and its speech could not
get through to me nor could I address it:
still I said as if to the alien in myself
I do not speak to the wind now:
for having been brought this far by nature I have been
brought out of nature
and nothing here shows me the image of myself:
for the word tree I have been shown a tree
and for the word rock I have been shown a rock,
for stream, for cloud, for star
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 the 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.

I would not hesitate to argue that this poem is one of Ammons' most complex. Deceptively
simple in its choice of vocabulary and sentence structure, its “message” is unexpectedly difficult
to parse, and there is the feeling that Ammons’ has somehow managed to fit something almost
impossibly philosophically dense into these thirty-four airy-yet-succinct lines.
really derives from a symbol for the hand: and \( K \) stands

for the palm or open hand: and \( J \), you know, is just another
form of \( I \): that whole IJK cluster is one of my favorites
in the alphabet, and I specially like the JK vol of the WB
(26)

This passage moves swiftly from the visual realm ("I") to the auditory ("which suggests eye" in sound, not in shape) and finally to the bodily or somatic, invoking the most traditional of
symbols for the physically felt in the form of the "palm or open hand," and thus unearthing for us
the physicality of the word, even in its written, phonetic form. By this, we are to understand the
possibility, despite the clutter conferred upon our language by centuries of violent, egocentric,
derivative, and frequently subjugative use, of beginning, still, "with a bare space with streams
and rocks and trees." From this bare space—the blank page—Ammons extends muddy hands
not, necessarily, to any particular reader, but to the world itself. It is the world he addresses, and
not us, when he writes:

if I seem aloof
will you spot it as a
guard
& help me down? if I
act insincere,
will you know it's my fear
you will expel me from
your sincerity?

see the roads I've
traveled
to come to you:
millers:\(^{25}\) I've engaged:

have I earned the grace
of your touch?
(Tape, 159-160)

\(^{25}\) See footnote 19.
Works Cited


---. *Tape for the Turn of the Year.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965


Works Consulted


