1983

Pulsations of order the poetry of A. R. Ammons.

Deborah Fay. Kennedy

University of Windsor

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LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE NOUS L'AVONS RÉCU
"PULSATIONS OF ORDER"

THE POETRY OF A. R. AMMONS

by

Deborah Fay Kennedy

A Thesis
submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of
English in Partial Fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts at
the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1983
ABSTRACT
"PULSATIONS OF ORDER":
THE POETRY OF A. R. AMMONS
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Deborah Fay Kennedy

The poems of A. R. Ammons represent a world of wholeness and unity. Ammons does not try to impose concepts; the poems themselves exude wholeness and unity. The earlier poems from Ommateum and Expressions of Sea Level reveal Ammons' search for meaning. He struggles with loneliness and separation and gradually awakens to the inherent value of life and the reality of a divine design connecting all things.

Ammons' poetry reflects the state of his consciousness. The world he perceives is characterized by unity and diversity, design, integration and entropy, and an acceptance of death as a form of transition in life's ongoing cycles or motion. Ammons' world includes the quotidian and the grand at once, and he discovers that "everything is/magnificent with existence" ("Still," CP, 141). He is alert not only to the sights, but also to the sounds of life around him.
Ammons' open form accommodates the integration of the content and presentation of each poem. His forms are as flexible as the changing seasons and the changing moments. His longer poems are akin to those of Walt Whitman, and the shorter lyrics to those of William Carlos Williams. Ammons crafts his poems by paying attention to the sounds of words, their visual appearance, their meanings, their relationship to surrounding words, punctuation, and line-length. Certain images recur in his poetry that relate to the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. His poetic craft is consistent with his realization that "a new walk is a new walk" (C1, 8) and thus a new poem is a new poem.

For Ammons, poetry is organic and participatory. It awakens readers to a state of concentration and functions at a level beyond critical analysis. At the core of Ammons' poetry is a deep compassion for mankind and all of life. His poems are faithful to the dynamic reality they represent. Ammons' poetry signifies a new experience for individuals and the body of mankind: the beginning expression of wholeness and unity, stemming from the center of man's being.
For my parents
(John and Nancy)

and

Lynette and Lorraine
(my sisters)

Love compels creation
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(William Wordsworth,
"Tintern Abbey")
PREFACE

Archie Randolph Ammons was born on February 18, 1926 in Whiteville, North Carolina. At present, he lives with his wife and son in Ithaca, New York, where he teaches at Cornell University. Ammons' poetry is noticeably different from much of his contemporaries' tragic and confessional poetry. This thesis asserts the integrity of Ammons' work—his spiritual themes, the wholeness of the presentation or form, and the significance of his poetry in today's transforming world.

At the outset, I give special thanks to Archie Ammons for writing the poems that set this thesis into motion. It was my thesis director, Dr. John Ditsky, who first introduced me to Ammons' poetry in a first-year literature course. Dr. Ditsky's approach to literature is inspiring, and I thank he and Dr. Eugene McNamara, my second reader, for their gracious and steadfast encouragement. It has also been a pleasure to have Dr. Mahesh Mehta as my third reader.

It has meant a great deal to entrust the typing of the final manuscript to my very good friend, Mrs. Terry Edwards, who I thank now for the refinement and the caring hand she brought to these pages. I would also
acknowledge the kindness of the Department secretaries, Mrs. Bev Stahlbrand and Mrs. Beth Proctor who give so much to everyone—professors and students alike.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT: A Coast of Trees
B: Briefings
CI: Corsons Inlet
CP: Collected Poems
DV: Diversifications
NP: Northfield Poems
SPHERE: Sphere: The Form of a Motion
TAPE: Tape for the Turn of the Year
WH: Worldly Hopes

All quotations from Ammons' poetry will be drawn from the above volumes. Collected Poems will be used to refer to poems from Ommateum, Uplands, and Expressions of Sea Level.
CHAPTER I
Introduction

A. R. Ammons has published seventeen books of poetry since 1955. Thirteen of these books contain new poems, while four are selections from previously published volumes:

Ommateum (1955)
Expressions of Sea Level (1965)
Corsons Inlet (1965)
Tape for the Turn of the Year (1965)
Northfield Poems (1966)
Selected Poems (1968)
Uplands (1970)
Briefings (1971)
Sphere: The Forms of a Motion (1975)
Diversifications (1975)
The Snow Poems (1977)
Highgate Road (1977)
Selected Longer Poems (1979)
A Coast of Trees (1981)
Worldly Hopes (1982)

A first reading of the hundreds of poems in this canon, full as they are of trees, brooks, and birds, may lead one to label Ammons a nature poet. Actually,
Ammons' poetry is based on a spiritual foundation: a passion for the eternal motion of life, the light of truth in him and around him, and the love of the omnipresent spirit of God. Ammons uses images and scenes from nature to point to the divine design in life and man's place in the design. His poetry has been called "philosophical" more than it has been called "religious," but the term "spiritual" most accurately defines the essence of his writing.

People are rarely mentioned in Ammons' poetry, but the poems have a social significance. They speak to the individual, evoking the ancient call: "know thyself." Ammons has said that all he means to do is overturn the Western mind. For that you don't need a political movement: you need something more radical. Poetry that compels individuals to look, listen, and ultimately to BE is that radical "something" for A. R. Ammons.

Readers may be advised to come to Ammons' work equipped with a dictionary. They will meet with unexpected terminology—words that find a home in this poetry, though they are usually limited to the domain of science textbooks. Ammons fulfills Wordsworth's vision of the compatibility of poetry and science:

The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed...
As a scientist, Ammons is open-minded and compassionate. As a poet, he is practical and scrutinizing. His word choice is among the most daring in print today, not in a decadent sense, but in the easy absorption of words like "rivulose," "etiolated," and "palimpsest" into the realm of poetry. He allows the unity of science and art to be represented, because from his perspective, life is integration.

Ammons' diction may impose barriers for some readers, and barriers are the last things this poet would wish to create. Many of his poems will not work for the uneducated, or for those uninterested in consulting a dictionary to navigate the word arrangement. Ammons said in 1978 that he would like to speak to people who are like the ones he was raised with, "many of whom could barely read or could not read at all, and who were not very well educated." Some poems and passages in his collection fulfill this wish. In other places, his language makes the meaning obscure, and a simple, direct experience of the poem is unavailable. His own feeling is that,

I choose the word most highly polished in use--that is the central vocabulary, the monosyllabic often, though I throw in a lot of polysyllabic words. I don't throw them in because they're polysyllabic, but because they happen to be words that point to very particular things. But the main body of my poetry aims toward the use of the central vocabulary, I think. Daily usage.
Ammons explores, indulges, and creates with words. Sometimes his delight in the English language gets the better of him, and his wordplay is possibly entertaining to him, but not to his readers. Chiefly, he chooses language very carefully and for its significance. As we shall now observe in the poetry from Ommateum to Worldly Hopes, A. R. Ammons is concerned with dealing honestly with one sacred matter: the nature of being. The following survey will explore the changes that occurred in the poet and thus in the poetry, in the context of that spiritual concern.

One of the most memorable poems from Ommateum is "So I Said I am Ezra" (CP, 1). This poem sets the tone for Ammons' canon because it is a statement of a quest for truth and identity. The poet searches for an understanding of man's role in the greater scheme of things. The poem, like a chant, is reminiscent of Whitman's visionary utterances. The protagonist, Ezra, speaks his name, attempting to establish his identity. The natural elements are overpowering: "the words were swallowed up/in the voice of the surf." Ezra has no substance in the presence of the winds and dunes--no center. The poem is a song of isolation. The poet, behind the mask of Ezra, has not discovered what he searches for: his spiritual centre, the place of being. There is more to come for the searcher, and that "more" is the rest of Ammons' poetry.
The poems in *Ommateum* are tales of quests and questions. The settings change to other lands and eras: Antioch, Strasbourg, and Sumeria. The primitive elements that come up often in this book suggest the poet's movement back in time to look for some clue to his origins or purpose. The movement back in time could be called escapist, but the poet uses it as a way to free himself from structures. "The Whaleboat Struck (CP, 9), also from *Ommateum*, emphasizes immortal forms and an immortal identity for the poet. Here, he is killed by an arrow on a beach and says, "My body lies south/ given over to vultures and flies." He is quite conscious of the temporal nature of the body. But he still lives on. He describes a joyful comfort associated with this new way of life: "I running in and out with the waves/ I singing old Devonshire airs."

The predominance of the pronoun "I" in these early poems suggests the introspection from which the poems arise. The speaker goes to the natural world where the setting is quiet and ripe for contemplation. Ammons is looking for something genuine, not for superficial conversations. These poems present the process which Ammons went through that led him to a point of stillness within. As Ammons admitted in an interview in 1973,

It's much cooler to find the objective correlatives in that which does not answer back--nature--rather than in the furies, anxieties,
jealousies, envies and whatever else a human
correlative would contain. 6

From these early poems to the most recent, Ammons
can be found conversing with nature. For instance, the
sun, the moon, and the mountains are personified in
some poems. In such dialogue, the poet is really explor-
ing and projecting his own consciousness, by giving
emotion and thought to the things around him. Most
importantly, these conversations signify that the poet
is developing relationships with the world around him.
In "Turning" (CP, 11) Ammons frees animals and men from
cages by dissolving the code of conduct between them.
He presents a new relationship between a man and a
lioness. They lie near a waterhole where the poet notes
that "water is like love in tranquillity." Ammons calls
the creature "loose lioness." The poem is unsettling in
its eroticism because natural relationships are
breached. Here, as in other poems, the speaker is
unable to speak. The lioness has overpowered him:

and her lips took the words from my throat
her warm tongue flicking the living flutter
of my being

Without the ability to speak, the poet has lost his
strength, like Samson losing his hair. The poet is left
to fumble "about in the darkness."

Movement out of this helpless identity can be seen
in the poem, "Come Prima" (CP, 52). This piece affirms
Ammons' eternal, spiritual identity. It contains no stories and no doubts. The poet is not victimized by the earth and its creatures; he is a man, made in the image and likeness of God and capable of saying,

I know there is perfection in the being of my being,

that I am holy in amness as stars or paperclips,

that the universe, moving from void to void, pours in and out through me:

there is a point only itself that fills space, an emptiness that is plenitude:

a void that is all being, a being that is void:

I am perfect: the wind is perfect: ditchwater, running, is perfect: everything is:

I raise my hand

This statement of "amness" or being, culminates in a gesture that calls to mind man's role as an instrument for creation: "I raise my hand." Having realized the perfection of his being, man may let that which "pours in and out through him" do so freely.

The theme of perfection is carried forth in
"Identity" (CP, 114), from the volume Expressions of Sea Level. Ammons deals with the microcosm and learns about the nature of the macrocosm. As in all his poetry, he records details accepting the significance of the smallest aspect of that which he observes. In this poem he looks at an "individual spider web" and sees "disorder ripe" and "entropy rich." Entropy has a neutral rather than negative connotation in Ammons. By dictionary definition, entropy is "the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity." With this word, Ammons implies that change is part of the creative cycle, and one cannot judge the appearance of things because life is not static, but in motion. Certain aspects of that creative motion may not be pleasant, but they are natural to whatever is unfolding. Ammons speaks of the spirit that "moves in weeds/ and stars and spider webs/ and known/ is loved." This spirit prompts the poet to love another person. Ammons does not mention the name of God, but this spirit which moves "within and beyond us" could be so named.

The poem "Expressions of Sea Level" (CP, 134), from the volume of the same name, focuses on the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The key to the poem is held in the sentence: "surf things are expressions:/ the sea speaks from its core." The centre of the sea cannot be heard or revealed
except through its surface or peripheral aspects. Great things are known through small things. Ammons calls the expression of sea level "the talk of giants." A giant like the ocean speaks in "a dampered grain of sand." The striking final image, like Blake's famous image of the world in a grain of sand, signifies that all parts in the whole have a purpose, no matter how minute or great in size.

To this point, our survey shows how Ammons probes, investigating the universe and his role in it. The voices he assumes in these poems are inquisitive. Generally, there is a whirling motion to the early poems, because search is consistent, and discovery uncertain. But poems like the last three discussed show a change—a calmness. Ammons' experience moves from separation to oneness. He beings to know relationships that are not antagonistic, but perfect. Neither good or evil, they just are. "Amness" for Ammons is all.

Ammons' work has often been compared to that of transcendentalist Walt Whitman. Life's perfect design was affirmed by Whitman in his preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass:

What has ever happened... what happens and whatever may or shall happen, the vital laws enclose all... they are sufficient for any case and for all cases... none to be hurried or retarded... any miracle of affairs or persons inadmissible in the vast clear scheme, where every motion and every spear of grass and the
frames and spirits of men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakably perfect miracles all referring to all and each distinct and in its place.

Moving forward to 1965, Ammons' emerging awareness of design finds a place to grow in *Corsons Inlet*. The title poem (p. 5) may be Ammons' best known piece. It achieves a unity of form and content. The words wind down the page, back and forth, like a person walking over the dunes. Ammons describes in detail some of the things he perceived on his nature walk; but, the poem is not a mere catalogue of the dunes area. It is full of life—birds, berries, and sea creatures—exuding the poet's awareness of a certain order in the apparent disorder, resonant with Whitman's thoughts quoted above. The walk is correlated with the fluid nature of being:

> the walk liberating, I was released from forms, from the perpendiculars, straight lines, blocks, boxes, bins of thought into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends of sight:

> I allow myself eddies of meaning:

> yield to a direction of significance running like a stream through the geography of my work:

> In this poem, there is "no arranged terror." The poet begins to trust that the rug will not be pulled out from under him by a persecuting God. The poem ultimately testifies to an acceptance of change, motion, and being in the present moment. There is no shame, only quiet.
assurance, when Ammons admits that,

Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no
finality of vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.

Ammons has previously contented himself with
beaches, waterholes, and woods, venturing rarely into a
city setting with his poetry. But at this point, he
begins to include the city in his world. The inner
environment rather than the outer environment deter-
mines the quality of his experience. There is a type of
victory described in the poem, "Street Song" (CI, 10).
Ammons stands on the rock of being:

Like an
eddying willow leaf
I stand
on the street
and turn:
people,
both ways coming
and going
around me, swirl:
probably I
am no stiller--
detached; but
gold is
coming
into my veins.

Corsons Inlet closes with "Gravelly Run" (CI, 64).
The poem initially hints at nature overpowering man:
"losing the self to the victory/ of stones and trees."
But the poem makes the strong statement that man is not to worship nature, nor be subject to it. When Ammons writes, "I see no god in the holly; hear no song from the snowbroken weeds," he is not denying the beauty of nature, but accepting the fact of the matter, not his own fancy. Just as the holly is being holly, Ammons needs to be himself. At the end of the poem he is ready to hoist his burdens and "get on down the road," expressing a new sense of vitality and purpose. This sense of purpose continues to be made known in the poet's next book.

Tape for the Turn of the Year, also published in 1965, is a long and winding poem. The narrow margins of the adding machine tape, upon which it was written, predetermined the columnar shape of the poem. The book is a victory for a man who praises process and spontaneity. Tape is not a wild stream of words; rather, it bends to the curve of the poet's discernment, intent, and craft.

The tone of the poem is familiar, relaxed, and spiked with creative tension. The poet wrote for four consecutive weeks, recording his daily affairs and thoughts on the tape. Why he attempted this process in the first place is made clear at the outset:

may this song be plain as day, exact and bright!
no moonlight to loosen
shrubs into
shapes that
never were:

...........
may this song leave
darkness alone, deal
with what
light can win into clarity:

clarity & simplicity!

...........
... let this song
make
complex things salient,
saliences clear, so
there can be some
understanding:

(Tape, 4)

This poem is a risky undertaking, and the poet may face ridicule for its novel origins. But for Ammons, the poem is justified by its healing influence. Tape is inductive and meditative. Ammons looks at the world and himself and tells honestly what he perceives. The poet is serious about his commitment to the tape. But he is never too serious about his work. Ammons expresses an easy humour throughout this book and all of his writing. When given the choice to either laugh or sink, Ammons laughs.

Ammons points out that Tape will not be entirely pleasant, because he will not gloss over the way things are. The poem focuses on his own experiences, but it is inclusive. He speaks to his readers, rather than ignoring them. It is a poem anyone can relate to: "my story is how/ a man comes home/ from haunted lands/ and transformations" (Tape, 9). With rarely a dull moment,
the poem is not only meaningful, it is entertaining.
For example, Ammons tells an elephant joke and then describes the pre-Christmas atmosphere in his home:

smells of
fruitcakes baking and
merriment curls along the
ceiling,
giggles down the walls,
and tickles the floor.
(Tape, 13)

Ammons often concludes explanatory passages with simple statements like, "but the night is clear and full of stars." Such simple observations cite a return to the present moment, the present situation, and a greater perspective.

Evidently, Ammons' typewriter is perched in front of a large window, because the cherry tree, jays, and sumac are often the main characters of his drama. His background in the sciences also comes into play, adding a new dimension to the poetic presentation. The following passage exemplifies the way that Ammons lets daily circumstances be seen in a new light:

the way I could tell
today that yesterday is dead
is that
the little gray bird
that sat
in the empty
tree
yesterday is gone:
........
today is full of things,
so many,
how can they be managed,
received and loved
in their passing?
(Tape, 11)

This passage also shows the poet’s concern to appreciate what the day brings.

Ammons often looks at the poetic process itself. He asks poets: "are we creators in fact/ or collectors of relics:/ do we make grow/ or cast into stone?" (Tape, 89). He invites scrutiny of his own work, its value, truth, or falsity. Later, he validates poetry: "poetry is art & is/artificial: but it/ realizes reality's potentials" (Tape, 177). After writing this 205-page poem, Ammons states his preference for a short poem. But the long poem has its virtues, because it compares to the movement of life: "all day/ life itself is bending,/ weaving, changing,/ adapting, failing,/ succeeding" (Tape, 204).

During the five years after the publication of his first book-length poem, Ammons returned to writing short poems. Northfield Poems, Uplands, and Briefings were published during that five-year period. Their riches are in their lyrics, not in the longer poems they contain. With the exception of Tape, Ammons is usually strongest in the shorter poems where he keeps taut control over the material and theme. Most of the longer poems lose direction and impact. The longer poems tend to be more difficult, even though they have
the advantage of a certain flow. These three books contain some of the most significant pieces from Ammons' canon.

"Northfield Poems" is an exciting book, full of lively lyrics and projecting an integrative outlook. Many poems could be used as examples of Ammons' serene hand, and of these, "The Constant" (NP, 8) stands out. Ammons often uses understatement to make a point. For instance, in this poem he speaks as a man who, almost in spite of himself, saw the universe in a new light:

I discovered the universe this morning
I was in no
mood
for wonder,
the naked mass of so much miracle
already beyond the vision
of my grasp:

The poet mocks his own spiritual laziness and man's irrational belief that life is boring. Ammons announces that "this massive, drab constant of experience" is a "miracle."

The miraculous is described in terms of a personal relationship in "The Foot-Washing" (NP, 22). Ammons evokes the devotion and respect intrinsic to this ritual, creating an aura of humility and forgiveness that is unprecedented in his poetry:

feel the serenity
cool as cool springwater
and hard to find:
if I have failed to know
the grief in your gone time,
forgive me wakened now.

Other poems in Northfield deal with Ammons coming to understand what his role might be in the lush, harmonious order he sees around him. There is again the suggestion that he has something to do, which is distinct from what the world of nature around him has to do. One notes an increasing sense of contentment, as voiced in the closing lines of the last poem, "Way to Go" (NP, 69): "this is/ the world we have:/ take it."

Overall, the lyrics in Uplands are not as clear or gripping as those in Northfield. The book also contains Ammons' attempt to do something with a longer poem called, "Summer Session." It is the type of poem that one can pass over quickly and wonder how Ammons could set such a piece into print. If anything, it might show that most poets possibly need the control of a smaller structure, because they have not developed the substance necessary for sustaining the poetic current.

Two poems worth noting are "Love Song" (CP, 208) and "Love Song (2)" (CP, 209). They deal with the love between a man and a woman, a dimension that Ammons rarely handles directly in his writing. In "Love Song," the woman is compared to elements in nature: "like the hills under the dusk you/ fall away from the light."
Natural metaphors are also used for the man's passion: "the total night in/ myself raves/ for the light along your lips." In this electric passage, the night's movement towards day is compared to the man's desire for his lover, suggesting the male-female polarities, and also reversing the taoist symbols which are night for woman and day for man.

In "Love Song (2)," the lovers think of another lover who might enjoy their song. Their song is "white," suggesting the sanctity of their love. The song is like a strange chant, with images of rings, circles, and wood, reflecting the magical quality of their union:

Rings of birch bark
stand in the woods
still circling the nearly vanished log; after
we go to pass
through log and star
this white song will hug us together in the woods of some lover's head.

In this poem, the natural and human worlds are interwoven into one divine whole.

True to its subtitle, Briefings is a book of Poems. Small and Easy. In Tape, Ammons stated that he hoped to "do short rich hard/ lyrics" (Tape, 143), and in Briefings, he undeniably and abundantly does. The opening poem "Center" (8, 1) testifies to the flow of water, song, and life from a center. In this natural movement,
there is no possibility of error or interference. The poem "Bees Stopped" (B, 9) also rejoices in life's plenitude. It begins with an observation of bees, and moves on to take in the landscape and finally, back down to clumps of drygrass, leading Ammons to conclude: "and life was everywhere; so I went on sometimes whistling."

Poetry itself is frequently the subject of Ammons' contemplation. "Poetics" (B, 44) gives insight to Ammons' understanding of the creative process and the poet's function. Ammons is flexible, "not so much looking for the shape/ as being available/ to any shape that may be/ summoning itself/ through me." Life moves in orchestrated patterns: "I look for the way/ things will turn/ out spiraling from a center,/ the shape/ things will take to come forth in." Ammons' position is both receptive and active. He sees himself more as a vehicle for what is coming forth from the subconscious. He detaches from authorship. The poems come from "the self not mine but ours."

Briefings concludes with one of Ammons' most characteristic poems, "The City Limits" (B, 105). Ammons said in an interview that the city represents to him "the artificial, the limited, the defined, (and) the stalled." But here, the all-encompassing nature of radiance includes the city. Though it may seem that it is outside the city limits that a true revelation of life begins, radiance takes no heed of barriers, as this
passage from "City Limits" suggests:

When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold itself but pours its abundance without selection into every nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when you consider

Ammons invites readers to simply consider the radiance—the holiness of now. The poem is Ammons' own response to the radiance: his praise. The radiance is like the sun, a symbol for the spirit of God. The poem is bathed in the light of the poet's own realization.

After Briefings comes another book-length poem. In 1975, Ammons received the Bollingen Prize in Poetry for Sphere: The Form of a Motion. This book is divided into sections of four verses, with three lines to each verse. Sphere is a significant experiment with the longer mode. It contains many memorable passages about man's identity, such as: "Man is a scourge not because he is man, but because he's not man enough" (Sphere, 138). However, the body of this poem is largely tangential material. The consistent shifting might be justified as the natural form for such a poem, but there must be clarity and unity for there to be understanding. The poem demands a refocusing of the reader's attention. The Bollingen Prize attests to the favourable reception of the book, but Sphere lacks the sharp vitality that gives Ammons' poetry its distinct value.
By the time that Ammons published *Diversifications* he had established himself in the eyes of the critics. His *Collected Poems* won him the National Book Award for 1973. *Diversifications* is a strong volume, with a more pensive tone than the bright *Briefings*. The opening piece, "Transcendence," (DV, 1) considers permanence and impermanence, a favourite topic for Ammons. Impermanent "things and loves" are compared to "the love that never comes except as permanence." The poem implies that attachment to anything brings grief, and until people transcend these attachments, they will be discontent. "Juice" (DV, 33) takes a humorous look at Ammons' preoccupation with the meaning of things:

I'm stuck with the infinity thing again this morning: a skinny inexpressible syrup, finer than light, everywhere present: the cobweb becoming visible with dust and the tumblelint stalled in the corner seem worth.

Ammons' attitude could be described by the phrase "reverence for life." He does not rush past that which is usually taken for granted. He embraces the tiniest parts of the whole:

the simple event suffices--complete--
when fall hawkweed spindling lifts a single adequate blossom.

("The Flaw," DV, 6)
An eighteen-page poem concludes this book. Despite its promising title, "Pray Without Ceasing" (DV, 80) is a difficult poem to enter and move with. The poem contains three word lists, featuring three apparently unrelated words. There are references to a variety of subjects through the eighteen pages, including Egypt, sex, botany, a squirrel's nest, a pony, and a heart attack. Is this mosaic what Emerson was referring to when he said that out of process coherence will emerge? As Ammons writes in "Ars Poetica" (DV, 63) "the/ gods, as with other/species, don't give/ a damn about/ you, only the song,/ and song is all." If the song or poem is all, then a poet's conscious mind would act as a guardian angel, so to speak, only letting in that which is of the true nature of the song. "Pray without Ceasing" lacks control, and closes Diversifications with a scattered experiment in verse.

On the whole, the 1977 volume The Snow Poems presents a rather self-indulgent phase in the cycles of Ammons' writing. In this book, the poet is concerned about his own snowy-years: growing old. The book has received mixed reviews. This comment by Calvin Bedient comes close to the mark; "Here poetry moves right in with the trivial, the gossipy: 'poet friend of mine's/dick's so short/ he can't pull it long enough/ to pee straight with.'" It is not that the poetry should
not have been published, but simply that it reveals a certain stage in Ammons' life where he communicated his sensitivity about aging. Generally, the poems lack the clarity and coherence of most of the poems in his other volumes. Among the noteworthy poems are "I Wonder if Pagan Is" (The Snow Poems, p. 250), "I Cannot Rewind the Brook" (The Snow Poems, p. 278), and "They Say it Snowed" (The Snow Poems, p. 291). It is the publication of the 1981 A Coast of Trees that assures readers that Ammons has successfully passed through a particular personal transition.

From 1977 to 1980, Ammons published three volumes of poetry, two of which contained already published material: Highgate Road, Selected Poems: 1951-1977, and Selected Longer Poems. It was, however, A Coast of Trees that won him renewed acclaim, including the National Book Critics Circle award for poetry. The title poem shows Ammons working skillfully with the language, taking man's structures to task and affirming both the need for differentiation and the inherent unity back of all things. Though neither a coast nor trees are mentioned in the poem, the title suggests a periphery or border, dividing the water and the land. The poem expresses the tenets of Taoism, using terms which may be found in an English translation of Lao Tsu's Tao Te Ching: reality, name, void, unity, divided, the Way,
emptied, and full. Spiritual identity is assured:

we realize
that whatever it is in the Way and
the Way in it, as in us, emptied full.
"A Coast of Trees, ACT, 1"

The poems in this book demand a closer reading than
some of those in collections like Corsons Inlet or
Briefings. They are often not as simple, as easy to
approach. The collection is more serious than previous
ones. But Ammons still adds his humorous touch. In
"Breaking Out" (ACT, 32), the poet, riding on balloons
(ideals, perhaps), falls to earth when the balloons
burst, and he discovers: "I was an earth thing all
along/ my feet are catching in the bush." Ammons cannot
escape his responsibilities for long. Years before, at
the time of Ommateum, there may have been an anguish
felt towards the apparent limitations of life on earth,
but here, there is an acceptance.

A Coast of Trees contains some welcome visitors to
Ammons' poetic world. "Sweetened Change" (ACT, 41) and
"Parting" (ACT, 42) focus on human beings rather than
the spiders, bees, and ambiguous "we's" and "you's" of
other poems. "Sweetened Change" looks at the relation-
ship of an elderly couple. Only their white hair gives
away their age; all the other adjectives that describe
them are youthful. (Perhaps in this piece, Ammons
reveals a resolution to his conflict about growing old.) The husband and wife are interdependent: "one mate gives out and the other/ buzzes fast to sing he's not alone and idle." Though Ammons rarely writes about human relationships in a direct way in his lyrics, whenever they are mentioned they are intimate and loving.

Ammons' fascination with power of the wind has been maintained since his first book (maybe even his first poem). In "Persistences" (ACT, 51) the wind is the central force. The poet writes of the insubstantiality of holdings, walls, and divisions. A temple is in ruins and the wind "criticizes the pillars." Whether of a religious nature or not, holdings or attachments of any kind are as "insubstantial and permanent as mirage." The poet implies that the spirit of things is all: forms come and go. The wind is traditionally known as an image of the divine. Ammons recalls the premise of the title poem, that we cannot shut reality in or out, no matter how great or glamorous the walls we build. Man's imposition of limitations, whether conceptual or tangible—and here we may recall "Corson's Inlet"—is unnatural and unnecessary.

A review from The Booklist is quoted on the cover jacket of Northfield Poems, and it describes Ammons as "an American poet whose works share the subtlety and surety...of Japanese haiku." This comment could well be
applied to the author of Worldly Hopes. Ammons latest group of poems is primarily made up of short poems that operate like haiku. Their subjects are such items as "my big round yew," "my hanging strawberry pot," and "the grail trees." The book also contains a series of four longer poems (two to three pages in length). The most controversial of these is "Shit List; or Omnium-gatherum of Diversity into Unity" (WH, 27). The content is exactly what the title states. Though this poem is an easy target for criticism, Ammons makes the point that even those things which we would prefer not talking about are part of life. His blending of the humorous and the profound also takes the form of a near metaphysical shudder in "Progress Report" (WH, 16): "Now I'm/ into things/ so small/ when I/say boo/ I disappear."

The substantial lyrics in Worldly Hopes can be well represented by the opening poem, "Room Conditioner" (WH, 1). Here, a light is shone on the interrelatedness of the macrocosm and the microcosm:

After rain I
walk and looking
down glimpse
the moon: I
back up to see
and the puddle splices
onto two hundred
thousand miles of
height two
hundred thousand
miles of depth.
The significance of this type of poem, where an observation is transfigured by the poet's consciousness, can perhaps be understood through the piece "Lost & Found" (WH, 17). It was previously noted that a search for identity was the basis for Ammons' earlier work. Finding his identity in spirit, he became conscious of being in the moment, rather than vacating to the past or future. In "Lost & Found," Ammons refers to the process of awakening to his spiritual identity. He describes the quality of life in the eternal moment; a new world—heaven—opens up:

the freshwater of time breaking into now
the frail possibilities of a singular start, the re-decision to keep it up, till now (vanishing)
can become the slice constantly standing here.

Finally, Ammons welcomes others to really think, not to merely accept the status quo like robots or humanoids. He shakes up those who identify with the temporal, as in the final poem in this book, "Rivulose" (WH, 51):
not only are you not being held onto but where else could time do so well without you, what is your time where so much time is saved?

In sum, Ammons' canon may imply that we do not need our worldly hopes, because, all that we need is "breaking into now."

We have swiftly surveyed thirty years of Ammons' writing. The thesis will now turn to specific aspects and qualities of life that are manifest in the world of Ammons' poetry. The premises of the survey, such as the spiritual foundation of his work, will be elaborated. Examples will be drawn from his entire canon in this next level of consideration.
NOTES

1 Quoted by Cynthia Haythe in "An Interview with A.R. Ammons," in Contemporary Literature, 2 (1980), 181. This interview will be subsequently referred to as Haythe.


3 Haythe, p. 181.

4 Haythe, p. 182.


6 Quoted by D. I. Grossvogel in "Interview/ A. R. Ammons," in Diacritics, 3 (1973), 52. This interview will be subsequently referred to as Grossvogel.


9 A. R. Ammons, Corsons Inlet (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press, 1965).


13 Grossvogel, p. 51.


CHAPTER II
The World of A. R. Ammons' Poetry

A man's consciousness—the way in which he views the world—is reflected in the world of his poetry. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) wrote that

Poesy is the representation of the spirit, of the inner world in its totality. Even its medium, words, indicates this, for they are the outer revelation of that inner realm.

It was pointed out in the "Introduction" that Ammons' poetic world reveals his deep and abiding interest in life and his own purpose for being alive. This chapter will focus in on a number of his poems that assert the following aspects and qualities of life: (1) unity and diversity, (2) design, (3) motion, (4) integration and entropy, (5) the quotidian and the grand, and (6) sound and silence.

An initial clue to the nature of Ammons' world can be found in one of his responses during an interview held in December 1978. He was asked what time in history he would pick to live in, if he had the choice. Ammons chose the seventeenth century, in America:

I think of America when it was rural... the village rural community without cars or that
kind of transportation... with horses and streams and a nearly pure environment of streams and sky. It must have been very beautiful. Spiritually, I don't know. I think I would suddenly fly back to something Sumerian or pre-Socratic. I would like to live in a pagan, pre-Christian society.

In this passage, Ammons states his interest in the natural world, ecology, and a pagan or non-religious spirituality. These three elements are fundamental, also, to the world of his poetry. His poems affirm a divine order of which he is a part (spirituality), and which includes the rest of the world (nature and ecology). His poetry is like a blueprint of his world, shifting and expanding as his own awareness changes. His extemporaneous response demonstrates his love for a world that is pure and unadulterated by man. Likewise, the poems are concerned with the essences of the processes of life. It is much like the wholistic world view, as described by physicist and author Fritjof Capra:

... The outcome of this shift is a world view similar to that of the Eastern mystics—holistic, organic, and ecological. The universe is not seen as a gigantic machine composed of separate parts, but rather as an interdependent and harmonious whole. Because all the phenomena in our universe are viewed as being interconnected, we don't deal with objects anymore, but with patterns in a universal process. The universe is not composed of inert, lifeless, "things," but is intrinsically dynamic and composed of a web of relationships which are constantly changing.
Unity and Diversity

Ammons' poems draw webs of relationships, showing unity and diversity. The unity of all life is not a cliché for him, but a vivid reality. The poems "Ballad" (DV, 40), "Sphere" (CP, 97), and "Saliences" (NP, 16) portray unity in three distinct ways. "The One and the Many" seem to be at the forefront of Ammons' mind, and these three poems show how variously he deals with this theme.

"Ballad" exposes the difference between the concept of unity and the fact of it. In the opening lines, Ammons asserts his passion: "I want to know the unity in all things and the difference between one thing and another." His stated desire implies that he does not know unity already. Subsequently, his world reveals a similar lack, emphasizing that for most people, unity is just a concept, not their experience.

Ammons centers the poem on his conversation with a willow tree. On one level their conversation signifies a unity: there is communication between a man and a tree. However, the interesting point is that the willow wants to "get rid of" the wateroak. The oak tree blocks the willow from the sunlight. Ammons sets up the expectation that there will be unity amongst the trees; instead, there is dissent. He proposes to remind the wateroak of the unity of life, to prompt it to make room for the willow:
let's approach him with our powerful concept that all things are in all and see if he will be moved

"Ballad" raises two significant points about unity. First, Ammons expresses the common attitude that the natural world will somehow remain unaffected by man's thoughts, words, and deeds. The willow's self-centeredness is evidence of the ramifications of human attitudes. Under the simple law of cause and effect, if a man does not know unity and peace within himself, there will be disunity in his world. To quote Pascal, "the least movement affects all nature." This movement includes the discord within a man's own consciousness.

The second point is that Ammons' suggestion to approach the wateroak with the powerful concept of unity mirrors the erroneous actions of men down through the ages. For one thing, the willow harbours resentment, not love for the wateroak. Unity would be just a concept, then, not a reality for them. Also, even if Ammons and the willow were speaking of the truth in their hearts, they can not force the wateroak to agree with them. Individuals have spoken of the unity of life for centuries, but they have been as voices crying in the wilderness. Though unity can be just a word, as "Ballad" demonstrates, it is, for Ammons, a reality.

That Ammons' knowns unity is apparent by the tone and content of many other poems, In "Sphere" Ammons
brings to light the unity known by the fetus in the womb. The fetus is completely secure in the womb. The womb creates a separate and safe environment, while simultaneously connecting the fetus with the world around it. There is both completeness and unity,

In the dark original water,  
amniotic infinity  
closed  
boundless in circularity:

The poet also contemplates the time when the fetus has developed into a person and its functions have diversified. Alan Holder alleges that Ammons judges life in the womb as preferable to being born. Holder writes:

"Sphere" posits the fetus in the womb as enjoying a utopian existence. It is a state of perfect equilibrium of "warm unity" in which the self possesses a universe. Being born is a fall into multiplicity.  

Ammons does celebrate the Edenic conditions of the womb state. However, the fetus is continually growing, even before it is born. Multiplicity does not begin just after birth. Ammons, in fact, implies that protection and comfort and unity can be known outside of the womb, and forever:

foreign and far away  
your death, rivulets  
trickling  
through ripe bowels,
return to heavy water,  
infinite multiplicity, in  
the deepening, filtering  
earthen womb  
that bears you forever  
beyond  
the amnion, O barrier!)  
A warm unity, separable but  
entire,  
you the nucleus  
possessing that universe.

The poem "Saliences" is a spirited expression of unity. It has the same fluid and dynamic quality as "Corsons Inlet." This line contains the poem's essence: "The reassurance is/ that through change/ continuities sinuously work." The word "salience" is defined as "a striking point or feature: 'highlight'." For Ammons, saliences are the wonderous diversities in the overall unity. Nothing is bland. Change is continuous and unity is permanent. Ralph Waldo Emerson has written of:

that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other...  

Oneness energizes this poem. A vital connecting current runs through everything that he sees on the dunes. The poem sings with life and excited discovery:

summations of permanence!  
where not a single thing endures,  
the overall reassures;  
deaths and flights,  
shifts and sudden assaults claiming  
limited orders,
the separate particles:
earth brings to grief
much in an hour that sang, leaped, swirled,
yet keeps a round
quiet turning,
beyond loss or gain
beyond concern for the separate reach.

The final line, "beyond concern for the separate reach," defines the powerful effect that an awareness of unity has 'on the way a man lives his life. It is no small thing that unity and diversity figure so strongly in Ammons' work.

Design

Where there is unity, there is design. "The Way" is a term that Ammons uses to signify the design of life. He writes in "A Coast of Trees" (ACT, 1): "whatever it is it is in the Way and/ the Way in it, as in us, emptied full." The design is all-encompassing; nothing is excluded. The poet does not profess that he knows the exact workings of the infinite processes of life. But he knows what may well be the most important thing: that there is a design. Coincidence is an illusion: "whatever it is it is in the Way." Purpose is a given. In his current poetry there is no suggestion that man is a victim of a cruel design. Man has a purpose. In order to know and fulfill that purpose, he must relinquish—be empty of—his personal designs.

The poem "Devastation" (WH, 48), provokes its readers to think differently about their beliefs and
attachments. The title word suggests that a consciousness of reality devastates, overpowering any previous sense of separation and isolation. Ammons whittles down his own concepts, till he gets to the core. He sheds his own design so that the true design can appear:

When possibility fell from many to one to none
the place I stood in widened:
but the Way I thought is without extent
and can empty emptiness emptier
and fill earth and sky
with the abundance of its absence and stand beside me, a neighbor.

There is always more to know, and this fact calls for humility. "Devastation" suggests that what a person is conscious of now is very little. The speaker suddenly realized that he had only seen a portion of the whole picture. This movement in consciousness is expressed in the line: "the place I stood in widened."

A new level of energy is experienced when mental and emotional structures are freed up. An earlier poem "Moment" (CP, 160), describes this peak experience. The exhilaration felt by the speaker is at once destructive and blessed. The metaphysical yoking of opposites conveys intensity. Ammons asks: "what/destruction am I/
blessed by?" The destruction is the falling away of the old modes of thought, allowing him to know the blessing of "the moment's height."

Motion

Design is implicit to unity and motion. In Ammons' world, life can be equated with motion: Life is motion. There is a popular saying that the only constant is change. Alan Holder points out that "if anything is a fixture in Ammons' world, it is motion, flux." Ammons presents a dynamic world full of constant differentiation, in a perfect design. The motion is not chaotic; it comes from a divine impulse.

In "Corsons Inlet" Ammons wrote of the "order held in constant change." He also mentioned the eternal "pulsations of order" (CI, 8) -- a term that describes the divine design of life. To use an analogy, the river of life flows; it is not stagnant. Evidence of that flow or motion is everywhere. In "Appearances" (DV, 17), the poet observes the water running down a brook, and likens its motion to his own inner rhythms. The life flowing in the water corresponds to that flowing through his capacities. He is that life, and therefore he can see himself reflected in the brook. He does not identify with the water, but with life, with the manifestation of life in the water. In "Appearances" it is the flow of the water that enraptures him. He notes the different ways that the water appears--smooth, then wrinkled. The
water moves forward, maintaining its direction and adapting when "a tangled dam" diverts its course. In Ammons' consciousness, meeting up with the dam parallels meeting up with a problem: the loss of direction, the motions of his moods.

Appearances
I could believe water, is not water, and stone not stone but when

water comes down the brook corresponding with perfect
accuracy of adjustment to the brookbed, spreading like a pane over slate

or wrinkling into muscles to skirt a tilt or balking

into a deep loss of direction behind a tangled dam and when

I feel those motions correspond to my own, my running quick and thin and stalling broody, I think a real brook and I in some missing mirror meet.

In this poem, the words and images flow like the water down the brook, touching the reader one by one, while
maintaining a rhythm that culminates in the concluding alliteration.

A similar sense of correspondence is evoked in "Casadilla Falls" (CP, 206): Walking by the "stream below the falls," Ammons picks up a stone--"a handsized stone/ kidney-shaped, testicular." The description of the stone suggests correspondences. Ammons thinks of the motions that the still stone undergoes: "the 800 mph earth spin,/ the 190-million-mile yearly/ displacement around the sun." Ammons, also being on earth, participates in these motions. He does not feel insular, even though he is walking alone by a country creek. He is aware of the larger cycles that are occurring. When he drops "the stone to dead rest," it is not inert, because the water from the stream passes over it: "the stream from other motions/ broke/ rushing over it." Nothing is isolated, separate. Ammons concludes the poem by confessing that he does not know where his life--by the single creek--is leading to. Left with that statement, at the end of the poem, the reader may sense, in the lapping silence, that Ammons does not need to worry about where he is going: he is simply going with the flow of life.

Dr. John Waskom, a professor of geology, speaks of motion and design, in a way that echoes, or agrees with, the poetry of A. R. Ammons:
All things are alive since they are part of the spiral pattern and have a purpose—even rocks, which are, after all, the expression of something or they would not exist.

We call the Earth, "Mother Earth." That's very basic. We do not live on a "dead piece of rock." The plants are its lungs, the oceans and streams its heart and arteries. Prick your skin and you get blood, dig a few inches in the ground and you hit water. The contents of your blood are the same as the ocean.

I'm suggesting that all of nature is interrelated. People think things are haphazard, but they don't "just happen." Nature has order and purpose and reveals a design... fundamentally, we all want to know that we are part of something greater and are related.

Integration and Entropy

After a cursory reading, Ammons' world may sound idyllic, but with a closer reading the poems themselves testify that he is not looking at the world with rose-coloured glasses. The ruggedness, the adventure, and the risk of living thrive in his poetry. Ammons' has a passion for life; he celebrates it. He does not fill his poems with superficial pleasantries. He does write about the "pretty" bluejays, but he also writes about the not-so-pretty worms. For instance, the first line in "Catalyst" (CP, 110), is "Honour the maggot." Ammons' world includes the creatures and processes which may not appeal to certain cultural tastes, but which are, nonetheless, part of life now. Ammons' understanding of life cycles may have been furthered by his studies in biology. Integration and disintegration, or entropy, are
the two sides of one coin, and as Ammons' poetry demonstrates, both are above judgment.

In the poem "Neighbours" (ACT, 27), Ammons describes a pine tree that has been cracked, and trees that had their tops broken off in an ice-storm. These occurrences are not cause for desolation in Ammons' world. There is new growth:

an ice storm some years ago broke the tops off several trees that now splinter into sprouts:

ivy has made Ann Pollard's pine an ivy tree:

Life has its way. Ammons does not conceal the natural processes; there is no reason to. He acknowledges the adaptability of nature. Ammons calls the woods "neighbours." He evokes the love and appreciation that people intuitively feel, but rarely express. The woods go unmentioned, but they are an invaluable part of the environment. For Ammons, the woods are steadfast and dependable neighbours. Whatever else happens, the woods are there: "I can't regain/ the lost idyllic at all, but the woods are here with us."

In his earlier poems, like "The Sap is Gone Out of the Trees" (CP, 1), Ammons strongly resists and fears death. This attitude changes, and by the time of Worldly Hopes, we can recognize that Ammons accepts death with a new understanding. The lyric "Oblivion's Bloom" (WH,
37), concerning the death of a bee, is about life:

Struck head to ground in first cold the bumblebee turns in the sweetest nectar yet

The "sweetest nectar" is not the actual liquid from a plant; it is the bumblebee's life. The bee passed away in the cold, in a natural manner, but that passing away is not lamented. Rather, the bee's life is celebrated: Ammons refers to it as "the sweetest nectar." This precise lyric is a statement of the poet's trust in the supremacy of spirit. The title of the poem yokes two opposites: "oblivion" referring to death, and "bloom" referring to life. Here, death is the birth of a new phase of things.

The death of a human being is handled with equanimity in Ammons' more mature poetry. As his own identity is in spirit, rather than in earthly heredity and form, he can accept death. In "In Memoriam Mae Noblitt" (ACT, 6), a friend's death initiates his meditation. He begins the poem by stating that "this is just a place," asserting that life on earth is not all there is. He assumes the stance of a visitor on the planet:

our home which defines us is elsewhere but not
so far away we have
forgotten it:
this is just a place.

Ammons does not imply that he is an extra-terrestrial,
simply that identity is not limited to that which we
know according to our cultural and social background.
His perspective is not the same as a religious concept
about life after death. He imparts an awareness of the
divine identity of man.

Ammons repeats the phrase "this is just a place,"
four times. The repetition reinforces the truth for him,
at a time when grief threatens to wash over him.
Repeating the phrase also stresses the point he wishes
to communicate to his readers. Beyond his attachment to
Mae Noblit, and the feeling of grief, is the reality he
knows: "the reality we agree with,/ that agrees with
us,/ outbounding this, arrives/ to touch, joining with/
us from far away."

The Quotidian and the Grand

It was at the time of Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads
that the quotidian, or commonplace, became an acceptable
subject for poetry. Wordsworth wrote that poems should
concern themselves with "incidents and situations from
common life." Wordsworth described the poet's task:

... he will feel that there is no necessity to
trick out or to elevate nature: and the more
industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which his fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.10

Being is enough. The poet is not required to falsify any aspect of what he writes about. The "emanations of reality and truth" should not be tampered with. Ammons is obedient to the poetic process set forth by Wordsworth. Ammons and Wordsworth both show a concern not to abuse the objects of their attention. Their motto might be, "Let things be," and they record their perception of that being. Ammons writes about this "letting" in "Hibernaculum" (CP, 379):

nothingness, far from being failure's puzzlement,

is really the point of lovely liberation, when gloriously every object in and on earth becomes just itself, total and marvellous in its exact scope

Ammons reflects on the contents of his poetry in "Circles" (CP, 235). His poems center on incidents and situations from common life, and he pauses to ascertain "whether/the backyard stuff's/central or irrelevant." This posture of indecision is resolved as the poem proceeds. The mint, the iris stalks, and the pansies that Ammons sees in the garden exhibit unity, motion, and design. The closing imagery suggests the creative/
sexual impulse that gives relevance to the "backyard stuff":

tips pushing hard into
doing the same, last
year again, the year before:
something nearer than
the pleasure of
circles drives into the next
moment and the next.

In his article, "The Courage of the Quotidian in Recent American Poetry," Richard Gustafson praises Richard Wilbur, A. R. Ammons, and W. S. Merwin who show "in their execution of these mundane subjects, the wondertment of the child and the sage and the painter's sense of excitement." With a caring hand, Ammons brings the quotidian onto the printed page. Significance is not based in outer grandeur, but in intrinsic greatness. The quotidian can represent a significant theme because its essence is perceived as the expression of truth. Ammons does not have to seek out the foreign, the past, or the abstract to convey something of value. Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Circles," described this perception as the "transcendentalism of common life." In such a world there is no possibility for boredom.

Many natural scenes are admittedly breathtaking. But any ordinary event is magical when the perceiver is conscious of the magic of life itself. Ammons' "Morning
Glory" (C1, 34), expresses the natural beauty of the morning scene:

Dew was heavy last night:
sun-up broke beads into running water: under over and against, the mockingbird fluffing amorously bathes in leaves

The imagery is kinetic, describing the energy of that moment. There is activity, beginning with the sun changing the dew into running water, and continuing with the mockingbird's bath. There is a line of connection between the dew, the sun, the water, and the fluffing bird. Many motions interrelate. Ammons' word choice is precise. The words "fluffing," "amorously," "bathes," and "leaves" contain soft consonants, creating an euphony. In this poem, the commonplace is not mundane, but splendid.

Approximately twenty years after writing "Morning Glory," Ammons published "Snow Roost," which also works with kinetic imagery. "Snow Roost" (WH, 10), is one of
many recent poems that evoke the dynamism of the quotidian. In "Snow Roost" the falling and blowing snow is compared to the movements of birds. The motion begins with the snow filling the cedar trees, and peaks in the explosion of snow in the wind. Some readers might question the relevance of such a poem. Its significance is that it unleashes the vital expression of life that Ammons perceived in that scene. The scene is its radiant self:

Last night the fluffiest inhabitant filled the cedars deep, but this clear morning windy, flurries blizzard-thick explode flight into local bindings.

In 1973, Josephine Jacobsen aptly noted of Ammons that "no poet now writing in English has so thoroughly created on the page the huge suggestion of the whole through its most minute components."[13] I would continue by saying that Ammons' world can be compared to a hologram, which is "an image in which all parts are cotangent and therefore the whole is resident in each of its parts."[14] Emerson had referred to the holographic nature of the universe, before the term was coined: "These appearances indicate the fact that the universe is represented in every one of its particles."[15] Ammons' poems exude this wholeness. As he noted in "Still" (CP,
140), "everything is magnificent with existence."

The spiritual life and the daily life are not separate. It has often been assumed that spiritual matters were somehow severed from daily affairs and restricted to Sundays or brief periods of meditation. For Ammons, life is spiritual. Star-gazing and raking the leaves can both be opportunities to know attunement with life. In "Dominion" (CP, 201), Ammons sets two activities side by side: watching a comet and tending to chores around the house. The poet asks his neighbour, Mr. Shafer, if he had been watching the comet, but Shafer is not interested:

he has leaves to rake
and the
plunger on his washing machine isn't working right;
he's not amused
by ten-million-mile tails
or any million-mile-an-hour
universal swoosh

Ammons does not criticize Mr. Shafer; neither does he criticize those who watch comets. The poem suggests that man has a responsibility to be conscious of both. If a person ignores his daily chores to star-gaze, his vision is myopic; if he limits his world to his own backyard and ignores the rest of the world, including the universe of which the earth is a part, then, again his vision is myopic. Ammons' world includes the "universal swoosh" and the responsibilities in his own
backyard. Balance is advocated.

There is a saying that "if it isn't practical, it isn't spiritual." That saying rings true throughout this poet's canon. Ammons has a sense of humour when it comes to the esoteric. His poem "Levitation" (CP, 197), reports with amusement the discomfort and fears of a "levitator" who was "cramped in abstraction's gilded loft/ and/ tried to think of something beautiful to say." Later, in "Breaking Out" (ACT, 32), Ammons' balloons burst, and he realizes that despite his great ideas, he has to deal with what is right in front of him. This simple lyric, "Metaphysic" (DV, 30), implies that one does not have to fly back to Sumeria; there is fulfillment in being right where one is:

Because I am
here I am
(nowhere)
else

Science has also been thought of as an esoteric practice. Ammons studied science—biology, chemistry, and pre-med—in college, and later worked in the biological glass industry. Often science has been considered the antithesis of art or religion. But, in Ammons' poetry, science is simply a vehicle for understanding or describing the commonplace. The science in his poetry does not jar with the deeper implications of the poems; rather, it contributes to an understanding of the nature
of life. The old views of science as a means for manipulation are not present in this poetry. Ammons refutes the Cartesian view of a mechanistic universe. As science begins to reveal processes that were before known only intuitively, new attitudes towards science develop. For instance, Fritjof Capra points out that

quantum theory has done away with the idea of fundamentally separate objects and has recast the universe as a web of interconnected events. Relativity theory has revealed the essentially dynamic character of that cosmic web.

Science, then, can be demystified. Ammons' poem "Subsumption" (WH, 4), celebrates clarity and simplicity over the bewildering science and esthetics that have been known in the past, and continue to be accepted by most people:

From
scientific and esthetic
ramblings & bewilderings,
voice, the clearing
tone,
will sometimes
just do
something, blow
a leaf off a
branch
without
ambiguity or equivocation
or, a rose,
unwind
into clarity
simply
Sound and Silence

Ammons listens. His poems convey a world full of
sounds. They are not like silent movies. The reader can
hear the brook flow, or the rain drop. Sound, like
motion, is an expression of life:

From silence to silence:
as a woods stream
over a
rock holding on
breaks into clusters of sound
("Breaks", CP, 204)

Ammons' attention to sound echoes the concerns of Henry
David Thoreau who wrote the following thoughts in his
essay "Solitude:

In the midst of a gentle rain while these
thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of
such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in
the very pattering of drops, and in every sound
and sight around my house, an infinite and
unaccountable friendliness all at once like an
atmosphere sustaining me...

The sounds which Ammons writes of are an integral part
of the vibrant world he perceives. Ammons closes
"Breaks" with these lines:

I stand up,
fracturing the equilibrium,
hold on,

my disturbing, skinny speech
declaring
the cosmos.
This passage suggests an uncertainty about his own relevance in the "beneficent society of nature." In this and other early poems Ammons' voice is not confident and strong like Whitman's. But through his listening, understanding eventually comes.

The power of the Word, man's ability to express, is a fact that caused some fear in Ammons when he began having his poetry published. This fear is adduced from the poetry rather than from any of Ammons' personal admissions. The following quotations are several instances where he writes of a loss of voice:

"the wind whipped my throat/ gaming for the sounds of my voice/... the words were swallowed up..." ("So I Said I am Ezra" CP, 1)

"I closed up all the natural throats of earth." ("Some Months Ago" CP, 4)

"The pieces of my voice have been thrown/away." ("Rack" CP, 5)

"and the arrow sang to my throat." ("The Whaleboat Struck" CP, 9)

"her lips took the words from my throat." ("Turning" CP, 11)

"let submission kiss off/ the asking words from my lips." ("Libation" CP, 12)

"the sound of my voice/ is a firmamental flaw... we learn the vowels of silence..." ("Doxology II" CP, 16)

"Come word/ I said/ azalea word." ("I Struck a Diminished Seventh" CP, 22)

It is not surprising to find such doubt expressed in the
poet's initial publication. He was unsure of his poetic talents and how his first book would be received. As it turned out, Ommateum received virtually no critical attention, though now the sixty copies of the book are collectors' items. By the time of Corson's Inlet, and even to some extent Expressions of Sea Level, Ammons has gained confidence in his poetic abilities and in himself. The tone of his poetry changed and the nightmarish references to the voice and the throat vanished from his verse.

In the poet's world, the sounds of nature are a type of music. Sounds blend with silence in the constant expression of the tone of life. The title of "Country Music" (ACT, 38), could denote country and western music, but Ammons is referring to the literal music of the country. Nature's music is brought to focus in one country scene in this poem. A gentle ecstasy cascades through "Country Music." There is joy in the listening, as with this passage:

bending white spill-arc
hooks over the ledge!

oh, the lolling, timeless

music, inharmony so
various it finds harmony's
underlying mix:

Ammons' attention to sound results in titles like these: "Hymn," "Hymn V," "The March Song," "Spring
Song," "Composing," "Mule Song," "Coon Song," "First Carolina Said-Song," "Dark Song," "Small Song," and "Autumn Song." He calls upon his Muse to give him the song, the poetry:

help me: 
I have this & 
no other comfort: 
the song 
the slight, inner 
unmistakable song you 
give me

(Tape, 45)

Music not only relates to the sounds in nature, but also to his work as a poet. Words are not plain or monotonous; there is a harmony in them, compelling them forward into poems. Over three hundred years ago, Sir Thomas Browne wrote these words about music and life. His spirit resonates with Ammons':

For there is music wherever there is harmony, order or proportion; and thus far we may maintain the music of the spheres; for those well ordered motions and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the ear, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony. 18

The atmosphere of Ammons' world has been sensed. The next chapter discusses how Ammons orchestrates his poems on the page: the poetic technique and rhythms, his artistic predecessors, and the significance of recurring images.
NOTES

2 Haythe, pp. 184-185.
7 Holder, p. 51.
8 Dr. John D. Waskom--text found in promotional material for Dr. Waskom's Ontario lecture tour on parenting and whole education, January, 1983.
9 Wordsworth, p. 734.
10 Wordsworth, p. 737.
16 Miller, p. 13.
CHAPTER III
Form, Imagery and Wholeness

Ralph Waldo Emerson has defined poetry as

the perpetual endeavor to express the spirit of
the thing, to pass the brute body and search
the life and reason which causes it to
exist.... It is a presence of mind that gives a
miraculous command of all means of uttering the
thought and feeling of the moment.¹

Ammons has been praised for his capacity to "express the
spirit of the thing." He does so not just by what he
says in a poem, but how he says it. Content and form
work in cooperation. These two comments about Ammons'
work cast light on the integrative quality of the poems:

This discipline of perfect notation is almost
monklike, and, monklike, it takes what comes
each day as the day's revelation of, so to
speak, the will of God. (Helen Vendler, 1973)²

I'd say a sense of God's reality, whether as
immanent or as deus absconditus, is everywhere
present in the poems and should be recognized,
for it does more than anything else (of the
many factors at work, some unknown, some unknow-
able,) to give the poems their special kind of
"vision." (Hyatt H. Waggoner, 1973)³

A poem, then, must be considered in its wholeness. One poem
would not be expected to repeat the form of
another. Every poem has a unique form, natural to it. In
this way, the poem can utter the distinct "thought and feeling of the moment."

Open form, predominant in contemporary verse, has replaced the closed form of previous literary periods. But even open form can become a paralyzing structure if there is not creative thought behind it. X. J. Kennedy's definition of open form suits Ammons' poetry:

The poet who writes in open form usually seeks no final click. Often, such a poet views the writing of a poem as a process, rather than a quest for an absolute. Free to use white space for emphasis, able to shorten or lengthen lines as the sense seems to require, the poet lets the poem discover its shape as it goes along, moving as water flows downhill, adjusting to its terrain.

Open form allows the poet to select pauses, use line breaks for emphasis, and create rhythms appropriate to the sense. Kennedy calls the result "a fusion of meaning and form: indeed, an "intelligent music."\(^5\) Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams are two major poets whose unique work in poetry liberated the art into a new dimension where content and form are one. Commentators on Ammons' poetry have noted that he has incorporated the pioneering work of these two men into his verse. It is not a matter of influence; rather, Ammons continues in what these men initiated in the expression of a poetry based in a new consciousness.

William Carlos Williams, coming after Walt Whitman,
praised Whitman, but felt that the poet's lines were too undisciplined. Williams was against the way that Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot compromised free verse and traditional verse, still employing fixed patterns in their poetry. According to Williams, Pound and Eliot looked to the past for precedents. Williams was interested in the poetry of America and of the present moment. His sentiment is clear in the following passage which parallels Ammons' sense of the significance of the quotidian:

I'm not the type of poet who looks only at the rare thing. I want to use the words we speak and to describe the things we see, as far as it can be done.... Poetry should be brought into the world where we live and not be so recondite, so removed from the people. To bring poetry out of the clouds and down to earth I still believe possible.

Ammons has been considered the son of William Carlos Williams, favouring the variable foot, which calls for the placement of meaningful pauses wherever they are needed. The variable foot requires that no set metrical pattern be followed. Instead, each poem has its own rhythm natural to itself. The variable foot has been described by James Guimond as

a rather long, Whitmanesque natural speech line which is broken into three steps or segments.... the triadic line is a good compromise between the regularity which Williams considered necessary in poetry and the
looseness of free verse which makes complete fidelity to spoken language possible.

Williams chose, and Ammons has since chosen, to write in the American speaking voice. Speech has a natural rise and fall, involving an alteration between accented and unaccented syllables. Williams stressed that the poet must let the rhythms come forth, not impose them. His conviction was manifest in his attention to the American idiom allowing the rhythms of that idiom to create the form of the poem. He trusted the order in the apparent disorder:

If the foot itself is variable it allows order in so-called free verse. Thus the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable, as all things in life properly are.

In an article about Williams' influence on Ammons, Thomas J. Wolf calls Ammons "a master of style." Wolf emphasizes that Ammons is concerned with the appropriate placement of stresses, margins, and control—"how and when to begin lines." In Ammons' poetry, the subject determines the form. I am not referring to a distinct visible shape, like George Herbert's "Easter Wings" (though certainly Herbert's poem was significant in light of his own literary milieu), but to a less conspicuous placement of words that allows for fitting pauses and emphases. A poem is not just words or thought: it is how the words appear on the page. "Corsons Inlet" is one
of the finest examples of Ammons' ability to express oneness of form and content, to create a whole poem (see Chapter One, pp.9-10).

Open form characterizes poems of any length. "White Dwarf" (ACT, 23) illustrates how Ammons effectively uses open form in a short poem:

As I grow older
arcs swollen inside
now and then fall
back, collapsing, into
forming walls:
the temperature shoots
up with what I am not
and am: from
multiplicites, dark
knots, twanging twists,
structures come into sight,
chief of these
a blade of fire only now
so late, so sharp and standing,
burning confusion up.

"White Dwarf" represents the movement of thought. Ideas and images flow or "come into sight" and build to a climax. The first four lines evoke the sense of a collapse because the words are separated in a way that gives a choppy and downward-moving rhythm. Intensity builds with the words "shoots up" and with the short beats of the phrase "with what I am not/ and am." The next section pushes together images of confusion: "multiplicites, dark/ knots, twanging twists." This compression--mirroring the confusion--is eased off in the next line: "structures come into sight." In the
final section, the numerous vowels, the alliteration of the "s," and the breath required to say "so late, so sharp and standing" suggest the awe that the poet feels about the "blade of fire" within.

An example of how rhythm works in a longer poem is seen in "Essay on Poetics" (CP, 315). Ammons divides the poem into three-line sections. The break-off point of each line suggests a turning in the mind, a movement in the flow of thought. It does not necessarily correspond with a pause for breath or make the sense clear. However, there is a sense of order so the reader is not left treading water, so to speak, in a whirlpool of words. Ammons does not strictly adhere to the three-line pattern. Some sections are arranged like short poems, and the initial triads are made up of shorter lines than those that follow. This excerpt exemplifies the pattern of division in the lines, and concerns flow and form in poetry:

effect and economy between the high level of oneness and the numerous subordinations and divisions of diversity: it is simply good to have the mind exposed to and reflected by such examples:

it firms the mind, organizes its energy, and lets the controlled flows occur: that is simple good in itself: I can't stress that enough: it is not good for something else—although of course

it is good for infinite things else: so my point is that the poem is the symbolical representation of the ideal organization, whether the cell, the body politic, the business, the religious

There is a definite flow to the language in this poem.
The three-line pattern helps to cut down on the intensity of the continuous stream of thought. Ammons' statement that one must let "the controlled flow occur" sums up the essence of his poetic form or style. Control accompanies flow. A river flows when it is under the control of its source and the banks of the land. It floods when these controls go awry or are displaced by storms.

Flow in American poetry finds its source in Walt Whitman. This remark by Bernice Slote may here be applied to the relationship between Whitman and Ammons:

Studies in the Whitman tradition must be of relationships, affinities, definitions, rather than influence. The tradition is made when several on the open road nod in recognition; when all make poems out of the wholeness of man and reject the broken halves of the New Puritanism.¹¹

Whitman made flowing verse acceptable. Philip Fried points out that Ammons "tries to subvert the notion that the poem is an artifact, apart from the flow of life."¹² Ammons continues up the open road.

Ammons employs the colon as a rudder in the poems, indicating a change in direction and avoiding the period that, in this analogy, is more like an anchor. The colon signals that something else is coming which is connected to what has just been read, while adding something new. The abundant use of the colon implies the poet's
faithfulness to the representation of life's inherent motion. With the colon, Ammons acknowledges that life keeps going. The poem does not end; it continues on in the reader's mind and by reason of its suggestions and ramifications. In many of his poems, Ammons will use no punctuation at the end. In this way he also emphasizes that there is "no final click." The colon is like an open door into the next room, the next experience of the continuing moment.

There are forty-six colons in the four-page poem "Carsons Inlet." There is one period at the end of the poem. Ammons gives the words space, just like the space on the sand dunes. There is, as he writes in the poem, no route shut." This excerpt illustrates how the colon operates:

in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab: snail shell:
pulsations of order
in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed, broken down, transferred through membranes to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no lines or changless shapes:

In this passage, the colon serves to introduce another image, as if Ammons held a movie camera, focusing on one thing and then another. As a second example, the poem "Room Conditioner" (WH, 1) has only one punctuation mark: the colon, placed in the fourth of eleven lines.
In Ammons' poems the words often self-punctuate. The poem "Reflective" (NP, 5) has no punctuation, but the arrangement of words allows for fitting pauses or self-punctuation. The poem contains four verses of three lines each. The parallel structure works as a control element. The first and last verses contain the word "weed," and the second and third verses contain the word "mirror." The two words are repeated, and reflection is the theme. Though Ammons does not rely on conventional punctuation, he does not adhere to a policy of no punctuation. His concern is with what is appropriate for a particular poem. Without traditional devices he still has a definite order:

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Reflective
I found a weed that had a mirror in it and that mirror looked in at a mirror in me that had a weed in it.
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As Karl Shapiro wrote in his reflections on William Carlos Williams, "Each poem is its own form, as it must be. The poem is unique and unrepeatable." After
Whitman, poetry was released from the chains of set patterns and given to spontaneity, life, and risk. Spiritual sensitivity is combined with control. Though Whitman has been criticized for his overabundance—his uncontrolled gush of words—he too celebrated simplicity in poetry. Certainly his form or style was perfect for the type of individual he was, and undoubtedly he would not encourage anyone to write the same as he did, but to write as the spirit genuinely moved them. Whitman wrote that

The art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity....to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art.14

Simplicity and flow do co-exist. A simple lyric can accurately reveal a flow when it does not freeze a moment, but places a suggestion or evocation of life on the page. The poem is alive in the moment it is written, in the moment it is read, and thereafter in the consciousness of writer and reader. Its life or meaning is as unique as the person reading it. A poem may be called organic because it grows first through the writer and then through the reader. To experience a poem as a co-ordinated whole, a reader first must accept its wholeness. If the poet has done his job correctly, the reader
will perceive a simultaneous simplicity and flow. Ammons' lyric "The Flaw" (DV, 59) stands as an example of what Whitman may have been referring to as "the flawless triumph of art":

I never saw anything like it—
such a day:
coolish, dry, bright,
the sky deep blue,
trees and bushes a hard
dark green:
now
an hour before sundown
were it not
for the robin's song
rippling out along the pear limb
everything would be glass.

Ammons paints a scenic picture of the day. That the scene is real and not a "picture" is proven by a sound. The sound is referred to as if it were a motion: "rippling out along the pear limb." For Ammons, both sound and movement are vibrations. Both reveal life. There is a connection drawn between the bird's song and glass. Sound at a certain pitch can crack glass. In the poem, the bird's song cracks the glass-like image of the day. The poem, too, is not glass, not a still-life. It is a living expression when written and read.

In spite of the lack of a standard rhythm or meter in Ammons' verse, sound is still a strong and essential element. In his poems, sounds are free of the structure of predetermined stanzaic patterns. The sounds evoke,
instead, new parallels and associations. Ammons uses phonetic devices though I do not think that he sets out to use such devices. The sound effects occur naturally as he crafts the poem into an expressive whole. The short lyric, "Precious Wheat Fields" (WH, 12) illustrates how similar sounds suggest connections:

Mercy's so slight it's like
a glitter-bit in granite or a single,
pane-sun in snow flint or the warp-weave of
slice-light netting a shallows stone.

All the words in this poem fit snugly together. Ammons puts image next to image, offering a fistful of metaphors. He invents words by bringing two words together with a hyphen: "glitter-bit," "pane-sun," "warp-weave," and "slice-light." The hyphen itself visually has a thin shape, suggestive also of the poem's statement about the slightness of mercy. Mercy is compared to light through the words "glitter," "sun," and "light." These references hint at the true value of mercy: a bit of mercy, like gold, is enough. The twenty-five words are compact, and their sounds empower the poem.

On the page opposite to "Precious Wheat Fields" is another lyric whose effect is enhanced by the sounds of words and their arrangement. "Night Chill" (WH, 13) is somewhat more readable than the former piece. In the latter, the "u" sound has a particular impact, as the
"i" sound did in the former. The long vowel sound of the subject of the poem—the yew tree—sets the tone for the many words that follow. As well, the words "my" and "round" that precede "yew" have long vowels. This elongated sound contributes to the description of the thick yew tree. The thickness is also conveyed with the hypnotic repetition of the word "through", which also rhymes with "yew":

Night Chill
My big round yew
can stand a gust
into a million
presences: too
many needles
to get through
to get through
except drift through:
birds in there peep and sleep,
puffy in the slow hurry.

The repetition of the vowels and soft consonants is apt for the description of the great, impenetrable tree. The tree is a place where birds "peep and sleep," an example of internal rhyme. The closing sentence is also phonetically significant. "Puffy" and "hurry" partially rhyme, "slow" and "hurry" are juxtaposed, "slow" has a long vowel sound, and "puffy" suggests a soft or billowy texture. By reason of Ammons' description, the tree seems gentle. It is a sanctuary for the birds. At the same time, it is strong, able to stand "a gust into a million presences." In its greatness, it is a world unto
itself—a warm place, away from the "night chill."

Many of the numerous short lyrics in Worldy Hopes could be used as examples of how each word, in its wholeness, contributes to the wholeness of the poem. "Spruce Woods" (WH, 8) will serve as such an example:

It's so still
today that a
dipping bough means
a squirrel
has gone through.

The separation of the words "still" and "today" gives a sense of stillness. The same is true for the pause between "means" and "a." The word "dipping" has a spring to it, as if one could feel the touch of the squirrel's foot leaping off the bough. The words "bough" and "through" are connected by eye rhyme. Also, Ammons places "a squirrel" on a single line, again emphasizing that though the squirrel was not seen, its presence is known by reason of the dipping bough. The day is still. There is no wind, so only the scampering of a squirrel could have caused the bough to dip. With powerful economy, Ammons shows how he finds delight in the ordinary and magic in the backyard.

So far, in this chapter, we have noticed that Ammons writes with a speaking voice or in the language of thought. The level of language is colloquial (barring the scientific terms), but it is administered with an
awareness of the ramifications of each chosen word for its sound, meaning, tone, and visual significance. The same control is evident in the line and verse patterns. All of the references in the preceding pages have been made with a sense of the whole poem. Rather than a dissecting criticism, I have suggested a focused appreciation. Ammons is right in stating that "criticism does not enable you to embrace the whole work of art at an instant." The approach which has been used up to this point will be continued as we look at the recurring images in the poems.

The music, rhythm, sound, and visual appearance of a poem are important elements in Ammons' work. Another vital part of the whole poem is the imagery. Our purpose in the rest of this chapter is to consider what is conveyed by certain recurring images. It would be difficult to deny the presence of brooks, the wind, mountains and trees, and fire and light in Ammons' poetry. With these images, Ammons brings to focus particular aspects of life—the elements water, air, earth, and fire. These natural elements suggest Ammons' interest in ecology, life cycles, and his awareness of the whole. Walt Whitman noted the place for natural elements in the poetry of the future:

The poetry of the future aims at the free expression of emotion... It is more akin likewise to outside life and landscape, real sun and gale, and woods and shores—to the elements
themselves—not sitting at ease in parlor or library listening to a good tale of them, told in good rhyme.

Whitman's reference to "outside life and landscape" does not reflect an external orientation, but rather an inner consciousness of living in harmony with the natural world and of the greater life cycles beyond the narrow confines of the man-made world. The subsequent discussion concerns the images relating to four areas: the brook, the wind, the earth, and the light.

The Brook

In Ammons, a brook is always pure and naturally beautiful. It conveys the simplicity of life outside of the city. It is motion in the still earth, liquid in the solid, and music in the quiet. In the poem "Extrication" (WH, 7) the brook is a sanctuary for Ammons.

I tangled with the world to let it go but couldn't free it: so I made words to wrestle in my stead and went off silent to the quick flow of brooks, the slow flow of stone

Ammons escapes his worldly troubles by going off to the brook. The brook is hardly mentioned in this poem, but
its presence is important to the author. The brook is a place where he can be himself, truly and silently. It is a refreshing place where the manifestation of life moves unhindered. Ammons states that he writes poems to fulfill his role in society and is then free to go to the brook. The poems wrestle for him, implying conflict in his life. He knows peace at the brook, sensing even the life inherent in the stones. Ammons' desire for the rural setting and even for a release from his poetry suggests that something is lacking in his experience. This sentiment is also imparted in "Scribbles" (WH, 24) where Ammons admits to the possibility of an innate greatness that even makes his writing pale: "perplexity is such that sometimes it must be embraced before it will clear... I may put writing aside someday to seek to know."

In "Getting Through" (ACT, 13), another poem that concerns a brook, Ammons again asserts the innate intelligence of life, by observing how the brook functions. He notices that the brook has "worked out the prominence of a bend so as to find curvature's sliding speed." It gets through heaps and shambles easily. Ammons recognizes that the humanly-made concept of time does not affect the brook. The poet asks, "how much time does a brook have?" and then realizes "how much time a brook has." The brook is not limited by time. The brook
in Ammons is the eternal and the perfect. It is the water of truth.

The poem "Appearances" also follows the movement of a brook and culminates in Ammons' sense of unity (see Chapter Two, pp. 34-35). In describing how the "water comes down the brook," Ammons places the words on the page so that they carry the rhythm of a brooks' current. This passage exhibits that rhythm:

water comes
down the brook
corresponding with
perfect
accuracy of adjustment
to the brookbed,
spreading like a pane
over slate
or wrinkling into
muscles to skirt
a tilt
or balking
into a deep loss of
direction

The several "ing" suffixes contribute to the rhythm. The concluding alliteration—"missing mirror meet"—creates a lapping effect. In Ammons' poetry, a brook is, in a sense, impenetrable. It keeps going, though its course may become changed. In a humble brook, Ammons hears "country music" and finds a representation of the truth that he knows in his own heart.

The Wind

Wind is present by name or indirectly in most of
Ammons' poems and in nearly all of the poems in the recent *Worldly Hopes*, Ammons honors the wind in an earlier and major poem, "Saliences" (NP, 16). This passage from "Saliences" portrays the constancy of the wind:

wind, a variable, soft wind, hard steady wind, wind shaped and kept in the bent of trees, the prevailing dipping seaward of reeds, the kept and erased sandcrab trails: wind, the variable to the gull's flight, ...........
wind, from the sea, high surf and cool weather;
...........
wind alone as a variable, as a factor in millions of events, leaves no two moments on the dunes the same:

Ammons' strong description defines the wind as a creative force that keeps things in invariable change. It causes differentiation every moment.

In other earlier poems, Ammons depicted the wind as a harmful and threatening force. For example, he wrote in the 1950's in "The Sap is Gone Out of the Trees" (CP, 1),

The wind whipped at my carcass saying How shall I coming from these fields water the fields of earth and I said Oh and fell down in the dust
The images are rough: "whipped," "carcass," and "fell down in the dust." For comparison, the more recent "Volitions" (WH, 45) shows a change in perception. Thirty years later, Ammons still acknowledges the power of the wind, but he knows that he can choose stillness or peace when the wind bears down:

Volitions

The wind turned me round and round all day, so cold it planed me, quick it polished me down: a spindle by dusk, too lean to bear the open dark,

I said, sky, drive me into the ground here, still me with the ground.

Ammons longs for the stillness that is represented by the ground. In "Volitions" he is not torn apart by the wind as in "The Sap." His desire for stillness gives indication that he no longer feels completely helpless due to the motions of the wind.

The wind in the two above poems refers to inner motions not physical conditions. The wind is pressure within him—pressure to change and to maintain inner stillness while change occurs. The wind or the air is
also known as a symbol for spirit. Ammons' fascination with the wind attests to his interest in invisible factors. Even when he writes of the wind outdoors, he is concerned with the greater implications. In "Project" (B, 62) Ammons suggests that it is natural to be sensitive to the spiritual dimensions and presumptuous to live solely on the basis of a material dimension. The invisible is made manifest in the visible world.

Project
My subject's 
still the wind still 
difficult to 
present 
being invisible: 
nevertheless should I 
presume it not 
I'd be compelled 
to say 
how the honeysuckle bushlimbs 
wave themselves: 
difficult 
beyond presumption

It is interesting that Ammons surrounds "the wind" with the word "still" in the second line, perhaps knowing that the wind and stillness are not at odds, but harmonious parts of a whole. The wind is invigorating, revealing the spirit of things, making itself known, without presumption.

The Earth
Things in the earth are not static. The mountains in Ammons' poetry speak and move, the trees wave and
grow, the birds sing and fly, and the spiders spin webs and win flies. The earth is the place where birds can nest, where the wind makes itself visible, where the sun can be reflected, and where the water can be shaped and flow. The earth is a home for living things. It too is in constant flux, though it appears solid. In a discussion of 1977 Nobel Prize Winner Ilya Prigogine's work on dissipative structures, author Marilyn Ferguson points out that "at a deep level of nature, nothing is fixed. These patterns are in constant motion. Even a rock is a dance of electrons." 17

Ammons' "February Beach" (NP, 31) concerns the constant motion in the earth. He writes of the transformation of solid into liquid: the frozen rain on the dunes will eventually melt. The poem depicts the change in the substances of the earth. Ammons observes the many processes that occur simultaneously. The melting process is not isolated; activity is abundant. February is a month of transition from winter to spring, and the beach is a busy place at that time, according to Ammons' meticulous observations. The following excerpts combine the details of a scientist with the expression of a poet:

Underneath, the dunes are solid, frozen with rain the sand held and let go deep without losing
till a clearing freeze
left water the keeper of sand:

warm days since
have intervened,
softened

the surface,

evaporated
the thaw
and let grains loose:

the waves will lap with broken, separate,
quiet sounds:
let the thaw that will come, come: the dissolved
reorganizes
to resilience.

The weaving arrangement of the lines parallels the flux
or the "dance of electrons" that usually goes unnoticed
or is taken for granted. Though it might be thought that
there is nothing happening on a February beach, Ammons
reminds us that there is.

Ammons' references to change often relate to trees.
He writes of their growth or destruction, their seasonal
changes, and their interplay with the elements and
animals. For example, he pays attention to the transform-
ing colours of leaves and their falling cycle in the
cooler weather. (The cover jackets of both Briefings and
Diversifications are composed of photographs of autumn
leaves.) One description of seasonal transformation is
in "Poem" (DV, 24):

In a high wind the
leaves don't
fall but fly
straight out of the
tree like birds

The comparison of leaves and birds is effective. Both
the migration of birds and the falling of leaves
announce the coming of winter. Ammons pays close atten-
tion to the change of seasons and even of daily weather.
Some of his poems are veritable weather forecasts. The
main point, though, is that in his world the same tree
could evoke a new poem every season, or in fact, every
moment. The earth is a place of fullness, variety, and
wonder.

The Light
Light streams through Ammons' poetry. Light is a
traditional symbol for God or love. Marilyn Ferguson
points out that

Light is the oldest and most pervasive metaphor
in spiritual experience. We speak of enlighten-
ment, the city of light, the Light of the
World, children of light, "the white-light,
experience."18

The poet focuses on the expression or radiance of light,
conscious of an inner light flowing outwards. "Two
Motions" (NP, 25) articulates man's responsibility to do
more than receive light. Man radiates light; he gives
love. This passage from "Two Motions" itself radiates
Ammons' understanding of the true nature of being:
It is not enough to be willing to come out of the dark and stand in the light, all hidden things brought into sight, the damp black spaces, where fear, arms over its head, trembles into blindness, invaded by truth-seeking light:

it is not enough to desire radiance, to be struck by radiance: external light throws darkness behind its brilliance, the division nearly half and half:

it is only when the inner light kindles to a source, radiates from its sphere to all points outwardly: then, though surrounding things are half and half with light and darkness, all that is visible from the source is light:

it is not enough to wish to cash light: as much darkness as light is made that way: it is only enough to touch the inner light of each surrounding thing and hope it will itself be stirred to radiance, eliminating the shadows that all lights give it and realizing its own full sphere:

it is only enough to radiate the sufficient light within that men for a long time have told about, the constant source, the light beyond all possibility of night.

This exquisite passage can stand with no need for further comment.

"Two Motions" was published in 1966 and since that time Ammons has continued emphasizing light and radiance in new ways. In an early piece entitled "Looking for My White Self" (CP, 37) Ammons portrays the light of his being, comparing the apex of his conscious experience to a mountain: "so look for my white self, age clear, time cleaned:/ there is the mountain." In the more recent "White Dwarf" (ACT, 23) the light represents his rejuvenation. Within what he considers to be the darkness of aging, there is "a blade of fire only now/ so late, so
sharp and standing, / burning confusion up." Over and over again, light or whiteness represent true identity.

In the poem "An Improvisation for the Stately Dwelling," (ACT, 47) Ammons writes of a man who is dying of cancer. People speak "extra-brightly" to the man. They can convey their love to him more easily or strongly because he is dying. But the truth of the man is unaffected by the cancer; he is physically suffering, but "his spirit [is] a boulder of light." Ammons refers several times to light. The scene, for instance, is an autumn day, mirroring the autumn cycle in the life of the man. The sky is "regioned here and there with ivory/ light," suggesting a heavenly atmosphere. Fire is used as the central image for the outdoors, conveying something of the energy of his approaching transition or death: "The flames of climbing vines are/ shedding out, falling back/ stringing fire." It is with fire--passion and love--that this man passes on; so that he does not die out, but rises up.

The inner light that Ammons speaks of is contained in everything that makes up his world. The poem "Locus" (B, 32) is centered on a small oak tree that stands in transfiguring beauty before Ammons' eyes:

Here
it is
the middle of April
(and a day or so, more)
and
the small oak
down in
the
hollow is
lit up (winter-burned, ice-gold
leaves on)
at Sundown,
ruin transfigured to

stillest shining;
I let it as center
go
and
can't believe
our peripheral
speed:

Ammons asserts that the actions of human nature
are out of tune with the central radiance that he has
seen explicitly in the oak tree. He cannot "believe/
our peripheral speed." People live on the surface of
things, swift and ignorant. The true place or locus is
at the radiant center. The tree reflects the poet's own
"stillest shining."

As mentioned in Chapter One (pp. 19-20), the poem
"The City Limits" (B, 105) is a powerful hymn to the
all-inclusive radiance of the sun and to what the sun
symbolizes: the spirit of love. I would suggest that
the words "love" and "radiance" are interchangeable,
and we may see this by substituting the two words in
the first passage of "The City Limits": "When you
consider love, that it does not withhold/ itself but
pours its, abundance without selection into every/ nook
and cranny...." "Love" has been a misused word; perhaps using the word "radiance" can convey the experience of loving without the burden of the conceptual trappings that go along with the word "love." Radiance suggests the natural and easy movement of love out into the world. Light, sometimes as fire, signifies the great passion and compassion that are at the heart of Ammons' poetry and life.

Walt Whitman once quoted Saint-Beuve as writing that

The greatest poet is not he who has done the best; it is he who suggests the most; he not all of whose meaning is at first obvious, and who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn.

Saint-Beuve is describing a participatory poetry; one that acknowledges the role of the reader in a co-operative art. Such a poetry is radiant; that is, it radiates meaning without concern for traditional patterns or simple appeal. The spirit of the poem determines the form. Ammons is sensitive to the spirit of things, as was pointed out in the opening of this chapter, and his perception is evident in the form of his poetry. The structure of his poems is integrative. His words in "Corson Inlet" can be applied to his work:

I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
straght lines, blocks, boxes, binds.
of thought into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing beams and blends of sight:

Poetic form is an expression of the "pulsations of order." The form represents the poet's translation of the current of life in the moment. Being sensitive to the potentials of poetry in 1983 requires a conscious control and a willingness to move as Ammons is moving, from a cloudy periphery to the expression of a radiant center.

In the final chapter, we will look at the spiritual significance of Ammons' verse, the parallels his work has with various spiritual writings, and how his poetry reflects an awakening in consciousness that is taking place around the world today.
NOTES

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," 
   Letters and Social Aims, The Complete Works of Ralph 
   Waldo Emerson Vol. 3. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 

2 Helen Vendler, "Poetry: Ammons, Berryman, 

3 Hyatt H. Waggoner, "On A. R. Ammons," Salmagundi 
   22-23 (1973), 292.

4 X. J. Kennedy, "Closed Form, Open Form," An 
   Introduction to Poetry (Boston: Little, Brown and 

5 Kennedy, p. 170.

6 William Carlos Williams; quoted in The Art of 
   William Carlos Williams by James Guimond (Urbana, Ill.: 

7 Guimond; p. 229.

8 William Carlos Williams, quoted in I Wanted to 
   Write a Poem, reported by Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon 

9 Thomas J. Wolf, "A. R. Ammons and William Carlos 
   Williams: A Study in Style and Meaning," Contemporary 
   Poetry 1 (1977) p. 5.
10 Wolf, p. 6.


13 Karl Shapiro, "Extensions," Start with the Sun, p. 224.


15 Grossvogel, p. 48.


18 Ferguson, p. 385.

CHAPTER IV
Conclusion

The Spiritual Significance of Ammons' Poetry

The first three chapters have attempted to illuminate the spirit of Ammons' work, his universal concerns, and the nature of his poetic craft. Now, the points that have been covered will be brought together and the scope somewhat broadened to explore the spiritual significance of Ammons' work. The implication of the previous discussions is that wholeness is the natural state for man and an individual is either awake to or asleep to that reality.

In an interview, Ammons spoke of the role of the poem to awaken or remind the reader into focused awareness:

To rehearse, to alert, to freshen, to awaken the energies, not to lunacy and meaningless motion, but to concentration and focus. That is the desirable state to which art should bring you, and to the extent that the poem becomes an image of this, and a generator of it, it is a desirable thing.

The words "alert," "freshen," and "awaken" suggest vitality. Art has a creative function to remind or inspire people to know the fullness of life. Though
Ammons made that statement in 1973, a decade later his poems are still loyal to that purpose.

One way in which Ammons insures that his art fulfills this purpose is by writing with exactness. He pays attention to details, and alerts the readers to relevant facts. Clear and precise descriptions allow for the concentration and focus that he aims for. Charles Fishman has accurately noted that "no poet writing today observes with Ammons' precision—he captures each flick and rustle with clean, indelible strokes." Ammons avoids abstractions, while imbuing the particular with his sense of the whole.

"Ithaca, N.Y." (NP, 29) stands as a poem that does "alert," "freshen," and "awaken":

When the storm passed,
we listened to rain-leavings, individual drops
in
fields of surprise;
a drop here in a puddle;
the clear-cracking
drop
against a naked root;

by the window, the
muffled, elm-leaf drop,
reorganizing at the tip,
dropping in another
event to the ground:
we listen and

liveliness broke
out at a thousand quiet
points
Ammons pays close attention to the rain. This poem activates the sense of hearing as well as sight. Rain is something we hear as well as see; in fact, the sound of rain can be more memorable than the sight of it. In this poem, the storm has passed and Ammons listens. In the storm's aftermath the rain falls from the leaves as if another, gentler rain was occurring. Ammons stresses the auditory aspect of the storm, writing twice "we listen." He refers to the sound through such words as "clear-cracking," "muffled," and "quiet." A very intricate process is at work: "elm-leaf drop/ organizing at the tip,/ dropping in another/ event to the ground." The scene climaxes in the final line. One can imagine the wind suddenly shaking down a shower of rain: "liveliness broke/ out at a thousand quiet/ points."

That a poem may refresh or awaken is partly due to the element of surprise. Ammons abides by his assertion that "a new walk is a new walk." Expectations have to dissolve. One can never know what to expect in a poem. As a result, Ammons offers a fresh view. There is no room for boredom in Ammons' world. It is because Ammons lives with a consciousness of the newness of each moment that he trusts the relevance of details. He casts his eye somewhere and can see ten thousand processes in motion. His word is very simple: wake up to what is here and now. One does not have to go to Walden Pond to have
a direct and meaningful experience of life. Ammons has such an experience in his own backyard.

Ammons participates in an awakening process and his poems encourage his readers to do the same. In an address, later published under the title "A Poem is a Walk," Ammons said that art is a vehicle for "bringing us the experience of a 'real' world that is also a reconciled, a unified, real world."³ "Ithaca, N.Y." presents a unified, real world, where harmony can be directly perceived with the senses, such as hearing and sight. A portrayal of this unified world opens Ammons' most recent volume, Worldly Hopes. In "Room Conditioner" (WH, 1) Ammons' sense of space, or room, is conditioned by the appearance of the moon in the puddle (see page 26 for the poem in its entirety). The moon is simultaneously distant and immediate, vast and small. A seemingly mundane subject—the puddle—and a figure that has been repeatedly used in poetry—the moon—are seen freshly, and unexpectedly together. In an article about Ammons' Tape for the Turn of the Year, William Harmon pointed out that

The details of the immediate day—weather, meals, stray memories—would shrivel into unredeemable triviality without a macrocosmic perspective, just as the general cosmology would vaporize into unredeemable gaseousness without the mundane pedestrian, diurnal detail.⁴

Harmon makes a valid point: the microcosmic and the
macrocosmic cannot be separated. It is only in consciousness that any man separates the immediate circumstances from the greater whole. They are, in reality, one.

While Ammons wishes to bring the reader to a state of concentration, the poems themselves are, so to speak, highly concentrated. Each word strengthens the whole. As discussed in Chapter Three, the words in Ammons' poems convey meaning in a variety of ways: through their connotations, denotations, sound, visual appearance, and relationship to the surrounding words. The poet must attain a certain level of concentration in order to write a poem that evokes in others that sense of focus. Like a Zen Buddhist, Ammons simply and patiently pays attention. It requires a stillness of mind to write what and how Ammons writes. The poem "Going Without Saying" (WH, 47) illustrates the poet's steadiness and imparts both concentration and ease at once:

What to make of a breeze---
a spruce bough in large measure nods:
maple leaves flicker
or break (go) out with sparse wobbles: poplars as in shivering loft shake flip-side bright
and rattle glistening mix's wind and light:
willow sheathes seep the air unjangling through.

Ammons had to at least have been still long enough.
to trace, as it were, the passage of the breeze. His poems represent a place of stillness, a place where there can be concentration and focus because the mind is not wandering off with every passing thought. In "Going Without Saying," Ammons observes the breeze by reason of its varied effects. Its effect on each tree is different: the spruce nods, the maple leaves flicker, the poplars shake, and the willow sheathes seep the air. Ammons has picked out choice action words to portray with accuracy the movement of the breeze. Also in this poem, he refers to the sound of the motion, not just its appearance. The words "break," "shake," "rattle," and "unjangling" contribute to the full sensory portrayal.

The experience of awakening which Ammons' poetry is concerned with can be paralleled with Emerson's transcendentalism. The transcendental experience is not limited to a school of thought. Ammons recognizes the correspondences between his perspective and Emerson's for example. He has discovered his own likeness in Emerson's writing. Ammons acknowledges his kinship with men like Emerson; Thoreau, Whitman, and (as far back as) Lao Tsu. Though the times and the terms have changed, there is a continuity in spirit. It will be valuable to read how Ammons relates to his literary and spiritual forebears. This passage is from the interview with Grossvogel held in 1973:
But Emerson led me to the same sources that he discovered himself—to Indian and Chinese philosophy which, when I was younger, I read a good deal, finally coming to Lao Tze, whom I mentioned earlier. That's my philosophical source in its most complete version. So that when I look back at Emerson, Emerson looks derivative to me of certain of those oriental traditions in the same way as I am derivative of them. In an immediate sense my forebears are Whitman and Emerson, but in a larger sense my source is the same as theirs.

Ammons reinforced his assertion five years later in the interview held with Cynthia Haythe in 1978:

I really didn't read Emerson that much or that well before Harold Bloom started speaking of him. When Harold began to speak of my connection to Emerson, I went back myself to try and confirm or renounce this thing, and I found, in nearly every paragraph, a man speaking my central concerns more beautifully than I could say them myself. There's just no doubt about it. I would love to renounce it because no one wishes to be that much like or influenced by anyone. But Emerson says the very thoughts that I think I've come up with on my own. I certainly haven't paid much attention to him, but I can open his work at almost any place and see a better thinker and a better writer saying my material for me, for the most part.

Ammons has great respect for Eastern philosophy, and in particular for Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. There has been a gradual turning in the West toward Eastern thought, and this merging of East and West has speeded up tremendously in the past thirty years. The aspects and qualities of life that were highlighted in Chapter Two can be seen to mirror those in the world of Lao
Tsu's Tao. Scant critical attention has been given to the similarities between the worlds of Ammons and Lao Tsu. The following brief discussion will attempt to substantiate Ammons' professed accord with the ancient master, Lao Tsu.

The Tao is thought of as the mother of all things, indescribable, and a unity beyond multiplicity. Alan Watts wrote that "one could also think of it as an intelligent rhythm." Watts' metaphor parallels Ammons' term: "pulsations of order." Lao Tsu made it clear that "the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." This nameless reality informs the breeze in "Going Without Saying"; it informs the rain of "Ithaca, N.Y."; and it finds conscious expression through the poet who can praise and magnify it. It is said in the Tao te Ching that

The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right. The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back. It fulfills its purpose silently and makes no claim.

... it does not show greatness, and is therefore truly great.

(Chapter Thirty-four)

The natural ease of the Tao is found in Ammons' verse.

An earlier poem "Visit" (CI, 1) conveys the nature of the Tao, or the one reality. Ammons has not out-rightly stated the relationship of his poems to Lao
Tsu's tenets, but his poems suggest that relationship themselves. "Visit" is an invitation to an island where the speaker in the poem lives. It is also an invitation to silence, stillness, and natural simplicity. The island could be seen to represent the place in consciousness where those qualities are known to be real. Ammons suggests that the visitor should hire a man who cannot speak to row the boat to the island because such a man would "attract the reflections and silences under the leaves." The voyage across the water is to be magnificent—the speaker presumes that the visitor will be open to the wonders that can be known on such a journey. Significantly, the flow of water is a principal metaphor for the Tao. Ammons also presents an alternative route over land.

Ammons' final word in the poem is "come," and it evokes a response that is anything but final. The concluding tone is one of welcome. The Tao Te Ching describes a life characterized by "plainness, tranquillity, and purity," and these qualities are surely present in "Visit." To live in the Tao is "to see the simplicity, to realize one's true nature"—a life that "Visit" implies awaits us now:

Visit

It is not far to my place: you can come smallboat,
pausing under shade in the eddies
or going ashore
to rest, regard the leaves
or talk with birds and
shore weeds: hire a full-grown man not
late in years to oar you
and choose a canoe-like thin ship;
(a dumb man is better and no
costlier; he will attract
the reflections and silences under leaves:)
travel light: a single book, some twine;
the river is muscled at rapids with trout
and a laurel limb
will make a suitable spit: if you
leave in the forenoon, you will arrive
with plenty of light
the afternoon of the third day: I will
come down to the landing
(tell your man to look for it,
the dumb have clear sight and are free of
visions) to greet you with some made
wine and a special verse:
or you can come by shore:
choose the right: there the rocks
cascade less frequently, the grade more gradual:
treat yourself gently: the ascent thins both
mind and blood and you must
keep still a dense reserve
of silence we can poise against
conversation: there is little news:
I found last month a root with shape and
have heard a new sound among
the insects: come.

Lao Tsu articulated the characteristics of an experience of life which Ammons knows now, centuries later. Ammons does not refer directly to Taoism in his poems, perhaps because "the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." Neither does Ammons often refer to God;
yet, as Hyatt Waggoner pointed out in an article on Ammons, "a sense of God's reality is everywhere present in the poems."

Readers do not have to go as far back as Lao Tsu or even Emerson to relate Ammons' poetry to a spiritual perspective. It may be more appropriate to consider a contemporary writer in his own milieu. One contemporary American poet, David Ish, has written on the subject of poetry and spiritual expression. Ish articulates a conscious understanding of what poetry reveals about a person's sense of identity. For Ish, poetry is a perfect vehicle for describing "one's underlying sense of the wholeness and unity of life." Ammons' transformation from a sense of separation to unity was described in Chapter One. In these lines Ish asserts a sense of purpose that mirrors Ammons' deep sense of responsibility.

the vast majority of contemporary poets have no vision of wholeness but see and feel themselves to be separate from the structures and forms of both language and life. But for me to give expression through poetry is to recognize and affirm in the small space I inhabit the 'continuous, ongoing rhythm of the whole of life.'

Poetry is spiritual. Emerson has put it succinctly: "Poetry must be affirmative.... 'Thus said the Lord' should begin the song."

Ammons is one of the most prominent poets to effect-
ively, express a "vision of wholeness." Contemporary writing is either life-enhancing, life-denying, or lifeless. As pointed out in the introductory chapter, Ammons has been consistently interested in the spiritual nature of life, and his poems record the pains and victories of his ongoing ventures and discoveries. In an article entitled "The Talk of Giants," Josephine Jacobsen praises the oneness and flexibility that Ammons has maintained:

Ammons has moved circularly, in the manner of seasons and tides, reinforcing the nature, the manner, the approaches of his poetry. New growth constantly appears, compelling changes by development, variation, richness, penetration. But what is happening is unmistakably, organically, what was happening in his very first poems. It is not just that one can identify an Ammons poem by its essential tone and flavour; it is that the concerns, the self-admonitions, the scrupulous search, the vast undertaking, are exactly that to which his first poems were addressed. To be able to control so much renewal, to strengthen and deepen new insights and hints, upon so permanent a project, to maintain so much oneness and flexibility in such an unrelentingly coherent poetic purpose, is, perhaps the most solid of Ammons' achievements.16

Jacobsen uses the symbol of a circle to describe the growth of Ammons' poetry, but his description is actually more akin to a spiral. On a spiral, a similar point can be returned to ("Ammons has moved circularly"—Jacobsen), but it is passed from a higher level, or perhaps in this case, from a new level of
Ammons summarizes his approach to poetry in the article "A Poem is a Walk." In this article he stresses the experiential over the conceptual. As Ammons puts it: "the purpose of a poem is to go past telling, to be recognized by burning."\textsuperscript{17} The value of a poem is its inner fire. With this premise, an analytical approach to poetry is meaningless. Ammons stresses that poetry cannot be taught by "induction or deduction." He encourages people to teach that poetry "is a mode of discourse that differs from logical exposition."\textsuperscript{18} It "leads us to the unstructured sources of our beings."\textsuperscript{19} With this view, no critical analysis can exhaust a poem. Clearly, Ammons calls for an organic approach to an organic art.

Ammons' correlation of a poem and a walk gives insight to his writing. He compares both a walk and a poem to an inward seeking or journey. We may recall Ammons' abundant references to motion, discussed in Chapter Two. Moreover, a poem is not just a mental or emotional activity, just as a walk is not just a physical activity:

... as with a walk, a poem is not simply a mental activity; it has body, rhythm, feeling, sound, and mind, conscious and subconscious. The pace at which a poet walks (and thinks), his natural breath-length, the line he pursues, whether forthright and straight or weaving and meditative, his whole "air," whether of
aimlessness or purpose—all these things and many more figure into the "physiology" of the poem he writes. 20

A second resemblance is that neither a poem nor a walk are reproducible—again, Ammons emphasizes the new. Thirdly, the shape of the poem or the walk unfolds. A person never knows exactly where he will be walking, and neither does a poet know exactly the aim of his poem. However, the poem does have an intrinsic direction, alluded to in Chapter Three. Daniel M. Fogel has linked Ammons' faith in organic form to Coleridge's theory.

Ammons' descriptions of the ecology of poems (as in "Essay on Poetics"), though resonant with such Emersonian notions as "the instant dependence of form upon soul," derive directly from Coleridge's theory of organic form and from the vegetative metaphors through which Coleridge developed his concept of poesis. Ammons' notion that every poem generates the laws of its own becoming follows from Coleridge's discovery "that poetry, even that of the loftiest, and seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science." 21

Finally, Ammons professes that a poem must be experienced to be known. Every person will experience a poem differently, just as a walk is different to every person though two may follow a similar route. Ammons writes that "there is only one way to know it and that is to enter into it." The analogy of the walk is apt and reinforces the qualities of Ammons' poetics which have been
detailed in the previous chapters.

In many of Ammons' poems, the speaker is walking and observing and often comes to some realization by the end of the poem. The outer movement maps the inner movement. In the poem "Still" (CP, 140), for instance, Ammons begins with a lack of self-worth. He searches for something lowly to identify with and match his feelings. But, as he looks and walks, he discovers that "everything is magnificent with existence." He awakens to the magnificence of his own being.

Still

I said I will find what is lowly and put the roots of my identity down there:
each day I'll wake up and find the lowly nearby, a handy focus and reminder
a ready measure of my significance, the voice by which I would be heard, the wills, the kinds of selfishness I could freely adopt as my own:

but though I have looked everywhere, I can find nothing to give myself to: everything is magnificent with existence, is in surfeit of glory:
nothing is diminished, nothing has been diminished for me:

I said what is more lowly than the grass: ah, underneath, a ground-crust of dry-burnt moss: I looked at it closely and said this can be my habitat: but nestling in I
Ammons' illusions are dissolved as he discovers that there is "nothing lowly in the universe." He finds thundering life where he least expected it: the "green mechanisms beyond intellect/ awaiting resurrection in rain," and the strength of the crippled beggar: "love shook his body like a devastation." There is ecstasy in the man who "whirled through transfigurations." Suddenly awake to the pervading "pulsations of order," he comes to a still point of acute wonder. This poem perhaps best represents Ammons capacity to penetrate and purge the inadequacies of the human condition. "Still" is quintessential A. R. Ammons.

Another poem which markedly illustrates the transition from a state of separation to a realization of
unity is "Easter Morning" (ACT, 19). The first half of the poem depicts the conflicting emotions that Ammons felt on his return to his hometown for a family reunion. His emotions are heavily strained as the memories of the death of his younger brother and the barrenness of his family surge over him. Ammons writes:

we all buy the bitter
incompletions, pick up the knots of horror, silently raving, and go on
crashing into empty ends, not completions...

But Ammons then turns his attention away from the memories to the present, and he finds that "it is a picture-book, letter-perfect/ Easter morning." The beauty is not superficial. Ammons writes that he has been for a walk and the tranquility of the earth was confirmed. He goes on to describe the two eagles that he saw soaring through the sky:

it was a sight of bountiful
majesty and integrity: the having
patterns and routes, breaking
from them to explore other patterns or
better ways to routes, and then the
return: a dance sacred as the sap in
the trees, permanent in its descriptions
as the ripples round the brook's
ripplestone: fresh as this particular
flood of burn breaking across us now
from the sun.

The poet is awed by the graceful flight of the birds--their patterns and flexibility to test new
patterns. He calls their "dance" "permanent" because it is part of him now, an unforgettable sight. Remembering the glorious eagles does not detract Ammons from the present moment. The last lines stress that Ammons is intensely aware of the present bounty, as the sun sends a "flood of burn breaking across us now." Ammons knows the majesty and integrity of the two eagles because he knows that majesty and integrity in himself. As the fox said in "Antoine de Saint Exupery's The Little Prince: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Ammons' compassion must finally be recognized as the central force behind his poetry. Genuine feeling impowers his poetry, and Ammons loves enough to be a well-disciplined artist. His poems are not blurred with emotion but crafted with intelligence and respect for his medium. The resulting poems are deeply felt and artistically sound. In an article entitled "The Spirit in Mid-Winter Rises," Robert McDowell praises Ammons for his compassion: 

His compassion is unquestionable... It is the major Whitmanesque achievement of an uncommonly big-hearted man who embraces his country and sees in it material for a still better place... He is as huge as the country he inhabits, as compassionate as it would like to be.... He knows and communicates his knowledge in a way that is untainted by self-interest. There are valuable lessons to be culled from his experience. Readers and writer of poetry everywhere would do well to heed them."
Almost any of Ammons' poems could be used to exemplify his spirit of compassion. The early poem "The Foot-Washing" (NP, 22) will be used for that purpose. This poem has received virtually no critical commentary, but it gives insight to the heart of Ammons' canon. In "The Foot-Washing," Ammons meets with his fellowmen. This meeting in itself is unique, because though Ammons' poetry is intensely concerned with humanity, people are seldom mentioned. The paramount vision of the poem is the coming together of individuals in humility and unconditional love. Genuine love or compassion works like water to cleanse, and forgiveness washes away the friction between those involved in the foot washing. The words are simple and convey, unhindered, the exquisite qualities of this unique human exchange:

The Foot-Washing

Now you have come,
the roads
humbling your feet with dust:

I ask you to
sit by this
spring:

I will wash your feet
with springwater
and silver care:

I lift leaking handbowl
to your ankles:
O ablutions!

Who are you
sir
who are my brother?
I dry your feet
with sweetgum
and mint leaves:

the odor of your feet
is newly earthen,
honeysuckled:

bloodwork in blue
raisures over the white
skinny anklebone:

if I have wronged you
cleanse me with the falling
water of forgiveness.

And woman, your flat feet
yellow, gray with dust,
your orphaned udders flat,

lift your dress
up to your knees
and I will wash your feet:

feel the serenity
cool as cool springwater
and hard to find:

if I have failed to know
the grief in your gone time,
forgive me wakened now.

The descriptions are concise and vivid: "the odor of your feet/ is newly earthen, / honeysuckled:/ bloodwork in blue/ raisures over the white/ skinny anklebone." Humility is intrinsic to the foot-washing ritual, and there is no trace of shame in washing the feet of another. Ammons depicts a life of sensitivity and "silver care." The poem's direct and simple language, along with other factors, such as the pauses between the short verses, impart the "cool, springwater" of serenity.
known by one "wakened now."

The six poems discussed in this chapter are like fine threads spun into a silken cloth. They summarize the essences of Ammons' poetics. The thrust of this thesis has been to explore how Ammons' themes, forms, content, and imagery work like cells in a living body. The preceding pages have detailed the coordinated and organic functioning of these various elements in the poetic whole. Ammons writes in a way that is appropriate to his vision. Aware of the newness and value of each moment, Ammons' poems are imbued with and reflect that newness and value.

Ammons' poetry reflects a world of unity and diversity and integration and entropy. It is a world of constant change and motion. His poems uphold the grandeur of the quotidian and deal with the particular in light of the greater whole. In the world of Ammons' poetry, all means of perception open to man are utilized—all the senses. Then, even sounds like the running brook and the bird's song reveal the harmonious expression of the "pulsations of order."

A. R. Ammons takes risks. His poems are true to the flame of the moment, rather than literary convention. His motto may well be, "Let "the controlled flows occur" ("Essay on Poetics, "CP, 315). He affirms the necessity to flow in an age that suffers from rigidity. Ammons has
written poems which are dozens of pages long, or book-length, and others which are short lyrics. He carries forward from literary masters like Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, writing poems that, as Bernice Slote described, are made "out of the wholeness of man." Ammons' poems are rich in the experiential rather than the conceptual. His imagery returns continuously to the four elements: water, air, earth, and fire.

The simple experience of being informs his poems, revealing a new state, a transformation in consciousness, for mankind as a whole. Ammons maintains his conviction that poems are participatory, focusing on the living moment, rather than theory. He takes risks by not following the well-trodden path, by avoiding the popular confessional mode, by employing scientific terms, and by allowing laughter to be a natural part of the world of his poetry.

A stance of humility and emerging dignity characterizes the canon of A. R. Ammons. These qualities are expressed not by platitudes or in imitative poetic structures, but by an intelligent and dynamic presentation of one man's realization of the "pulsations of order." His poetry conveys the experience of seeing "into the life of things" ("Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth). One valid reason for writing about a poet is that he sounds a tone of truth that resonates within us. This
tone compels Ammons' poetry, and in this passage from
Tape for the Turn of the Year, he sets forth his
intentions:

may this song be plain as
day, exact and bright!

............
let this song -
make
complex things salient
saliences clear, so
there can be some
understanding:

A. R. Ammons is a courageous poet who invites us to
embrace each vivid moment of life. It is poets of
spiritual vision who significantly represent their time,
assured of the divine origin of man, and for this reason
we may listen to Ammons who calmly writes that "whatever
it is it is in the Way and/ the Way in it, as in us,
emptied full" (ACT, 1).
NOTES

5. Grossvogel, p. 51.
11. Lao-Tsu, Chapter nineteen.
12. Waggoner, p. 292
13. David Ish, quoted from "About the Authors, "The

14 Ish, "About the Authors."
15 Emerson, "Poetry and Imagination," p. 64.
16 Jacobsen; p. 36.
17 "A Poem is a Walk," p. 114.
18 "A Poem is a Walk," p. 119.
19 "A Poem is a Walk," p. 119.
20 "A Poem is a Walk," p. 117.
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