The Common Life: A. R. Ammons and Pastoral

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Abstract

This thesis proposes the pastoral as a useful frame for understanding the poems of A. R. Ammons. The connection I want to draw is not the one that might be expected: namely, that Ammons is a pastoral poet in the sense that his poems deal with nature rather than with the urban world. Instead, I follow Paul Alpers and William Empson and approach pastoral as a matter of poetic self-understanding and self-representation. The centrality to the mode of the figure of the singing shepherd indicates that what is often at issue in pastorals is a meditation on literature itself. Imagining the poet as shepherd, writers in this mode affirm an idea of poetry as engaged in the cultivation of forms of cultural, moral, or spiritual value—but locate this capacity, not in acts of powerful or original self-enunciation, but in continuing process or effort. I argue that such a concept of the poetic echoes that to be found in Ammons’s poems: proceeding from an ontology of temporality—or, as he calls it, “motion”—Ammons likewise hopes that poetry might foster forms of value or moments of insight, but finds these to be the achievements of temporal action or practice. I present as an important register of this mutuality of interests Ammons’s recourse to what he calls “the common life”, a phrase that speaks at once to an idea of the fundamental ordinariness of the poet; to a notion of the immediacy of poetic truth or value; and to a concept of temporal repetition or dailiness.

The thesis has two parts. I begin by addressing what I take to be the commanding theme of Ammons’s work, an idea of motion, and propose that the key imperative of many of his poems is that of finding an appropriate stance relative to constant flux. Pastoral, too, reflects upon this question, and in the second half of Part One I provide an outline of my understanding of the pastoral mode. In Part Two, I locate Ammons’s work with reference to a line in American letters—including such writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—that, insofar as it makes use of an idea of the writer as ordinary, may be considered a latter-day “version of pastoral” (as Empson would have it). Focusing on a tendency—shared by Thoreau, Frost, and Ammons—to present poetic enterprises as forms of labour, I examine Ammons’s rendering of poetic truth and poetic value as products of continuing effort. I then return to the concept of temporality with which I began, and consider Ammons’s development of an “everyday” approach to poetics—a notion of writing as a daily practice.
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This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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None.
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Introduction

Why Pastoral?

This thesis pursues a connection between the literary pastoral and the poems of A. R. Ammons. That connection is not, perhaps, the one that might be anticipated—namely, that Ammons is a pastoral poet in the sense that his poems deal with nature and not with the urban world. Nor do I intend to suggest a direct and conscious engagement with the pastoral tradition on Ammons’s part. The twentieth century played host to poets who were inspired by, and sought to reinvigorate, the eclogue forms of Theocritus, Virgil, and their Renaissance imitators (Paul Alpers counts Yeats, Frost, and MacNeice among their number)—but Ammons is not one of them. His poems are not dialogic, as Frost’s often are, nor do they make use of pastoral’s conventional accoutrements (shepherds and so on). Instead, in these pages I argue for a slightly looser concept of pastoral, approaching it primarily as a matter of authorial self-representation and self-understanding. The centrality to the mode of the figure of the singing shepherd indicates that what is often at issue in pastorals is a sustained meditation on literature itself. Imagining the poet as shepherd, writers of pastoral adhere to an idea of poetry as engaged in the cultivation of forms of cultural, moral, or spiritual value—but locate this capacity, not (as in the vatic tradition) in acts of powerful or original self-enunciation, but in something like continuing process or effort. My main claim is that such a conception of the poetic speaks to the impulses and priorities of Ammons’s poems: proceeding from an ontology of temporality—or, as he calls it, “motion”—Ammons likewise hopes that poetry might foster forms of value and moments of insight, but finds these to be the achievements of temporal action or practice. I also venture a secondary claim, one that, in a document of this length, must remain something of a sketch: that attending to this sort of connection between Ammons’s poetry and the pastoral tradition invites a reassessment of “American pastoral” as that concept has often been envisaged.

My attention to pastoral themes in Ammons’s poetry is prompted by William Empson’s Some Versions of Pastoral (1935) and by Paul Alpers’s treatments of the topic in What is Pastoral? (1996) and elsewhere. Again, this might seem an odd choice for a thesis on a poet of nature like Ammons: Empson in particular is mostly associated with a social, if not straightforwardly political, understanding of pastoral as “imply[ing] a beautiful relation between rich and poor” (11), as against the many studies of pastoral (some of which I

1 See his “Modern Eclogues”.
consider below) that emphasise country life and the human relation to nature. Yet I am inclined to agree with Alpers, himself one of Empson’s best readers, that *Some Versions* remains “the profoundest consideration of its subject” (“Modern Eclogues” 44). Empson is less interested in the conventions of pastoral (shepherds, song contests, idyllic landscapes) than in the complexities of “feeling” (18) those conventions suggest and the modes of aesthetic action they exemplify. Alpers *is* interested in the conventions—but, as we will see, he finds them to be in service of the forms of feeling identified by Empson. One of the key propositions ventured by Empson, and taken up in a more explicit way by Alpers, is that pastoral is ultimately about the work artists do in the world, for themselves and for others. For Empson, and for Alpers after him, that work is properly one of ecumenism, steadfastness, and affirmation—what I will call an ethic of cultivation. In pastoral, such an ethic is closely bound up with—indeed emerges from—engagements with the lowly or humble: placing poetic voice in the mouths of shepherds or other “simple people” (Empson 11) serves to affirm the prospects of freedom and agency “within acknowledged, sometimes deeply felt, limitations” (Alpers, “Empson on Pastoral” 102). I argue that Ammons’s poetry is likewise animated by an ethic of cultivation, and submit as a register of this mutual interest Ammons’s adherence to what, in the long poem *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, he calls “the common life / & commonplace” (143)—a phrase that speaks at once to an idea of the fundamental ordinariness of the poet; to a notion of the immediacy of poetic truth or value; and to a concept of temporal repetition or dailiness.

If pastoral still speaks meaningfully to modern writers and modern readers, this is because, as Alpers has emphasised, poems in this mode were “from their very beginnings … conceived as modern” (“Modern Eclogues” 20). By this Alpers means that pastoral arose from, and has been repeatedly used with reference to, a kind of “modernism” that has inhabited Western literary history since Ancient Greece: modernism not as a cultural and aesthetic moment but as a self-conscious relation to the cultural past and its aesthetic products—an impression of “belatedness” (in the critic Harold Bloom’s sense) (Alpers 20), and a consequent felt need to cultivate forms or styles of art suited to one’s own “post-heroic, cosmopolitan” times (*What is Pastoral?* 51). From Theocritus to Virgil to Milton, pastoral’s most famous practitioners have been writers invested in the ways in which different modes of aesthetic representation suggest, or make available, different social, political, or philosophical orientations towards lived realities. (As we will see, this is also a central theme for Ammons.) To the question of Frost’s *Oven Bird*, “what to make of a
diminished thing[?]” (116), writers of pastoral have offered Pound’s answer: make it new. For them (as for Pound), however, newness meant not so much a starting over from scratch as a reworking of the materials left behind by literary history (Pound’s famous call to novelty is borrowed from the work of the twelfth-century neo-Confucian scholar Chu Hsi).2

Pastoral notionally begins with the *Idylls* of Theocritus, a series of twenty-two short poems composed in Alexandria around the mid-to early third century B.C. Touching upon a variety of themes both recognizably pastoral (the goatherds of *Idylls* 1 and 7) and not (the spell of Simaetha in *Idyll* 2), the *Idylls* are products of a literary and critical moment that sought to reinvent Greek epic tradition in terms appropriate to an urbanized, and urbane, Alexandrian culture conscious of its distance from the towering achievements of Homer (Lombardo xv-vi; Alpers, “Modern Eclogues” 20; Hubbard 5).3 Under the patronage of the Ptolemies, Theocritus and his contemporaries embraced a deliberately reduced, highly refined style. This “modernist” spirit receives manifesto-like treatment in the work of Callimachus. Responding, in the prologue to his *Aetia*, to those readers “muttering about my poetry again … because I have not consummated a continuous epic of thousands of lines on heroes and lords”, Callimachus writes:

> When I first put a tablet on my knees, the Wolf-God
> Apollo appeared and said:
> “Fatten your animal for sacrifice, poet,
> but keep your muse slender.”
> And
> “follow trails unrutted by wagons,
> don’t drive your chariot down public highways,
> but keep to the back roads though the going is narrow.
> We are the poets for those who love
> the cricket’s high chirping, not the noise of the jackass.” (65)

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2 Chu was himself editing older works of Confucian philosophy and Chinese history; see Michael North’s account in *Novelty: A History of the New* (162-63).

3 Indeed, it is at this time that the phrase “poet-critic”, applied to the Alexandrian scholar and poet Philetas of Cos, first appears in Western literary criticism (Halperin 195).
Apollo’s encouraging the poet to attend a slender muse (an image that recurs in various guises in the work of Virgil and Milton); the use of the humble figure (here, the cricket) as representative of the poet; the rhetorical (but rarely actual) preference for private life—in all of these features we find the beginnings of much of what would become characteristic of pastoral. As David Halperin has indicated, with Theocritus the Alexandrian preference for the reduced, the private, the lowly issued in a highly sophisticated recuperation of previously marginal epic themes and topics. Short where their source material was long, and playful where it was serious, the Idylls feature “unheroic moments, humorous circumstances, and forgotten episodes” from the Homeric epics, articulated “with a fullness, exquisite refinement, and delicate irony, sufficiently expressive to make [these poems] worthy offshoots, in their way, of the venerable tradition from which they derive” (176). Thus in the eleventh Idyll we find Polyphemus, the Cyclops of the Odyssey, not feasting upon Odysseus’s companions, but pining hopelessly for the sea-nymph Galatea, while the first Idyll engages the conventionally heroic literary device of ekphrasis but applies it not to an artifact of martial glory (as in Homer’s description of the Shield of Achilles [Iliad 18.478–608]) but to a rustic wooden cup (176-77). Written in the dactylic hexameter of Greek epic, and therefore belonging, according to the scholarly thinking of the time, to that genre, the Idylls are, to suggest a phrase, “post-epic”.

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4 The topos of Apollo’s address to the poet recurs in Virgil’s sixth Eclogue, where the god tells the shepherd Tityrus that “a countryman should be / Concerned to put flesh on his sheep and keep his poetry spare” (4-5). Milton in “Lycidas” departs from the formula somewhat, with Phoebus touching the “trembling ears” of the poet not to caution him against overweening ambition but only to remind him that “Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil” (248).

5 Halperin notes “Theocritus’ major innovation in his treatment of epic themes: his substitution of an erotic for a heroic subject and his removal of agonistic strife from the battlefield to the everyday world of amorous and poetic competition” (178).

6 See the discussion of poetic metre as defining genre for the Alexandrians in Halperin, 193-216. Halperin concludes that “it can be determined that the bucolic poems of Theocritus belonged in antiquity to the genre of epos and that our poet is likely to have regarded his own compositions as a kind of ‘epic’ poetry” (216).
As Alpers has emphasised, this “pattern of poetic motive and self-consciousness” (“Modern Eclogues” 21)—the deliberate shrinking of the themes and topics of one’s illustrious precursors—was to become characteristic of the subsequent trajectory of pastoral writing. Virgil, “separated even more than Theocritus was from the Hellenic epics and tragedies” that, even in the late Roman Republic, remained “the measure of poetic achievement” (21), responded to the civil war attendant upon the death of Julius Caesar with the Eclogues, a series of partial, but highly refined, imitations of Theocritus (the word eclogue means, literally, “selection”, as of fragments). If the Alexandrians’ attenuation of Homeric epic provided the initial inspiration for pastoral, readers tend to agree that it was with Virgil’s ten poems, composed between 42 and 39 BC, that the diverse topics and styles of Theocritan bucolic solidified into the set of generic conventions we know as pastoral—representations of shepherds; a reliance on dialogic form (typically thematised as a song contest); an emphasis on love and on loss; an insistence on natural setting.⁷ Alpers goes on to note the importance of these same conventions in the development of vernacular literatures during the European Renaissance—Sannazaro in Italy, Spenser and Sidney in England. Pastoral “capture the tension inherent in the classicizing project—between the boldness of emulating and appropriating ancient poetic forms and the anxieties of belatedness, the felt inadequacies of one’s language and culture, as well as one’s self” (21). These are works about making do with what is left over, which is to say that they are at once about the past and the future—an idea to which I will return.

This trajectory suggests that it makes little sense to posit the existence of a “true” pastoral—an original iteration of the mode that was not self-conscious as regards its own thematic and stylistic choices. It casts doubt, too, on the notion that pastoral is based on a single key idea (nostalgia for a lost Golden Age, the moral authority of the poor, the

⁷ Alpers writes that “pastoral was, as the horse-breeders say, by Virgil out of Theocritus …. one can derive from the Eclogues the formula which established pastoral as a poetic kind and which at the same time made possible its historical variety” (What is Pastoral? 137-8). Paul Kane confirms that Virgil “inaugurates our normative sense of pastoral” (270). See also Kermode 22; Patterson 7. The main argument of Halperin’s book is that, although Theocritus “invented” the term “bucolic”, “[t]here is no clear evidence that [he] understood the word … and its derivatives in a formal, generic sense …. Perhaps Theocritus did not even conceive of himself to have invented a new kind of poetry” (ix).
rejuvenating power of nature) inaugurated by Virgil (if not by Theocritus) and subsequently adapted by Renaissance and modern writers. The Alexandrian origin suggests that pastoral was, from the very beginning, adaptation all the way down. Milton’s “Lycidas” is often read as a commentary on pastoral convention, and so it is—but so are all pastorals, at least those that have achieved canonical status. Pastoral is then “modern”, not only because it has a self-conscious relation to its literary heritage, but because it assumes a state of relationality and change as its starting point. This is an important idea when it comes to the topic of twentieth-century and contemporary pastoral, because it makes our question not one of how, if at all, a set of conventions to do with leisured shepherds and idyllic landscapes might be utilized in a time of ecological and economic crisis, but rather a question of what “pastoral” itself means, now—what its value is. Insofar as the mode has always been about taking what is useful from the past and reshaping it to serve the needs of the present, we might say that there is no “true” or “original” pastoral (to do with shepherds, nature, or anything else), but only appropriations of pastoral—uses of it. This is what Annabel Patterson is getting at when she proposes, in a reception history of the Eclogues, that “it is not what pastoral is that should matter to us” (7, original emphasis). Instead of seeking to define the nature of the mode, Patterson suggests, readers should focus on “what pastoral since Virgil can do and has always done; or rather, to put the agency back where it belongs—how writers, artists, and

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8 For better or for worse: the idea that there was an original pastoral (that of Virgil) that was later corrupted is central to some of the most famous criticisms of the form. Johnson’s complaint about the pastoralism of “Lycidas” (“easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting”) is well known (Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets 279); less familiar is his suggestion, in a Rambler essay of July 1750, that this is a recent perversion of an originally less artificial form: “In writing or judging of pastoral poetry, neither the authors nor critics of latter times seem to have paid sufficient regard to the originals left us by antiquity, but have entangled themselves with unnecessary difficulties by advancing principles which … hav[e] no foundation in the nature of things” (82). Similarly, Raymond Williams’s argument is not with pastoral per se, but with the “Renaissance adaptation” (18) of it: where in the Eclogues “tones and images of an ideal kind” exist in “tension with other kinds of experience”, in later uses of pastoral, such as Jonson’s To Penshurst, “these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world” (18).
intellectuals of all persuasions have used pastoral for a range of functions and intentions that the Eclogues first articulated” (7, original emphasis). Privileging the question of reception in this way might seem to empty individual pastorals of their subject matter: to read the mode’s conventions as “historical hall[s] of mirrors” (Alpers, What is Pastoral? 161) that have little thematic resonance beyond locating their authors with reference to earlier practitioners of the form. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, these themes of relationality and temporality are actually encoded in the conventions themselves, so that it is precisely the shepherds, song contests, and landscapes of pastoral that suggest its continuing relevance for modern writing.

In this thesis, I follow Empson and Alpers and treat pastoral as primarily a matter of poetic self-representation and self-understanding. I suggest that this is finally a more useful way of approaching the mode than that which finds it to be about landscape or the human relation to nature. Prioritizing these themes in our reading, we find pastoral to be a fatally weak kind of writing: its often-idealised representations of landscape, and its apparent tendency to efface the real labour of the lives of those it depicts, do not recommend it to us. It is because he focuses on pastoral as a particular type of nature writing that Terry Gifford, in one of the most influential guides to the mode, can only advise, not a return to pastoral, but the development of a “post-pastoral” that is “aware of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised but which finds a language to outflank those dangers” (Pastoral 149; see generally 147-74). 9 Understood as a matter of self-representation, however, pastoral comes alive as raising and sustaining a range of questions to do with the nature of poetic authority and the relation between the poet and his or her audience or public. Imagining the poet as shepherd (as in the Eclogues), as mower (as in Marvell’s and Frost’s poems), as planter (as in Thoreau’s Walden, which I consider in some detail in Part Two), writers in this mode affirm an idea of poetry as engaged in the cultivation of forms of cultural, moral, or spiritual value, but locate this capacity in something like continuing process or effort. It is this concept of poetry, I suggest, that speaks to Ammons’s poems.

In pursuing a “version of pastoral” in Ammons’s poetry, I put him into dialogue with some of his precursors—in particular, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Ammons’s indebtedness to Emerson is well-established: it was by positioning him “as a descendant of the great originals of American Romantic tradition, Emerson and Whitman”

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9 For Gifford this ecologically self-aware “post-pastoral” is exemplified by the poetry of Ted Hughes; see “Gods of Mud: Hughes and the Post-pastoral”, in particular 134-40.
that Harold Bloom helped to forge Ammons’s reputation as a major writer in the early 1970s (Ringers in the Tower 257). Notwithstanding the positing of some counter-genealogies (usually involving Williams or Pound), the connection between Ammons and Emerson is one that has been confirmed by later readers. In the years since Bloom wrote his major essays on Ammons, Emerson’s work has undergone something of a critical renaissance, with recent scholarship finding in essays like “Circles”, “Self-Reliance”, and “Experience” a movement beyond metaphysics and representationalist modes of philosophical thinking toward concepts of process. Such re-readings have focused in particular on Emerson’s theorizations of subjectivity: where once the Emersonian self was seen as monadic, powerful, and expansive (the commonplace understanding of his phrase “self-reliance”), scholars are now inclined to attend to the ways in which it is partial, mobile, or transitive, “the exercise not of power but of reception” (Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson” 134-35; see also the essays collected in Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe’s The Other Emerson, as well as Arsić’s own On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson). Since motion, fluidity, and partiality of vision are signal themes for Ammons, this shift in approaches to Emerson is suggestive where the Emerson-Ammons connection is concerned. But in these pages I mostly leave these debates aside, and focus instead on a few key ideas in Emerson’s writing that resonate with the kinds of themes I want to draw out in Ammons, and in the pastoral tradition more generally: chiefly, his idea of the writer as ordinary or “common”, and his treatment of the question of the writer’s “representativeness”. Thoreau is less frequently invoked in relation to Ammons, but his mode of self-representation in Walden—one that makes abundant use of an idea of the poet as agricultural labourer—speaks fruitfully to the ideas that interest me here.

10 See also the essay “A. R. Ammons: The Breaking of the Vessels” in Figures of Capable Imagination, where Bloom characterizes Ammons as a “poet of the Romantic sublime” (220) and writes that “when most himself Ammons is a fierce Emersonian” (210).
11 Roger Gilbert, Bonnie Costello, and Steven Schneider have all actively affirmed the importance of Emerson to Ammons’s poetry. Stephen Cushman reads Ammons’s “rigorously enjammed, short-line stanza” and “commitment to the minimally noted fact” as evidence of the poet’s indebtedness to Williams (155; generally 154-59). Bloom himself raises the spectre of Pound, noting Ammons’s “experimentation with Poundian cadences” in Ommateum (Ringers 257).
I begin by considering the commanding theme of Ammons’s poetry, an idea of “motion”, and propose that the key imperative (stylistic and thematic) of many of his poems is that of finding an appropriate stance relative to constant flux. Pastoral, too, reflects upon this question, and in the second half of Part One I detail my understanding of the pastoral mode, attending in particular to what seems to be richest and most important in this tradition of writing—its representation of the poet as a figure of cultivation. In Part Two, I locate Ammons with reference to a line in American letters—including Emerson and Thoreau—that, insofar as it makes use of an idea of poet, scholar, or philosopher as ordinary, may be considered a latter-day “version of pastoral”. Focusing in particular on a tendency, shared by Thoreau, Frost, and Ammons, to present poetic enterprises as modes of labour (that is, as “works”), I explore Ammons’s depiction of poetic truth and poetic value as products of ongoing effort. I then take up once more the concept of temporality, and consider Ammons’s development of an “everyday” approach to poetics—a notion of writing as a daily practice.
I
Ammons and Pastoral

In this chapter, I offer an account of the key themes, gestures, and modes of feeling of Ammons’s poetry, focusing in particular on the poet’s ontology of temporality, or, as he calls it, “motion”. I suggest that one of the main questions Ammons puts to poetry is that of how one best orients one’s self towards, or in relation to, a world in flux—the practice of poetry therefore being a matter of a continual venturing or testing of a range of possible responses to the world. Here we find Ammons vacillating between two poles: on the one hand, a commitment to this concept of motion, which proposes the absolute solubility of all phenomena in time; and, on the other, a desire for steadfastness, for what remains fixed in time. Pastoral, I submit, also meditates upon such a dialectic, and in the second part of this chapter I consider some of the more significant themes and motifs of that mode of writing.

Into Motion
One reason critics have been reluctant to apply the pastoral moniker to Ammons is that the poems seem too thorny in their representations of nature—too keenly aware of the unassailable gap between subjectivity and the natural world. What nature is not, in the poetry, is a preserve of the ideal or the idyllic: there is no image of a lost Golden Age to be found there. There is also very little nostalgia for the poet’s own past. After the early allegorical pieces collected in 1955’s Ommateum, with Doxology, Ammons applied himself to a series of poems recalling the hardships sustained during his childhood in Depression-era North Carolina. The family owned a cash-crop farm outside Whiteville in the eastern part of the state, and all hands were expected to pitch in:

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1 Bonnie Costello, for instance, calls Ammons’ poetry an “antipastoral” that “test[s] the pastoral’s comfortable balances with frank images of intrusion and threat, disease and despoliation” (152), while David Kalstone, observing that “pastoral is hard reading today” (13), sees Ammons as engaging the mode while keeping one eye on its difficulties: the poet’s “distinction” lies in his having “invented a pastoral poem at once jagged and discontinuous, but still open to radiance” (13).
Every evening, down into the hardweed going,
the slop bucket heavy, held-out, wire handle
freezing in the hand, put it down a minute, the jerky
smooth unspilling levelness of the knees,
meditation of a bucket rim,
lest the wheat meal,
floating on clear greasewater, spill,
down the grown-up path:

don’t forget to slop the hogs,
feed the chickens,
water the mule,
cut the kindling,
build the fire,
call up the cow:
supper is over, it’s starting to get
dark early,
better get the scraps together, mix a little meal in,
nothing but swill. (Collected Poems 1951-1971, 66)

As in many Ammons poems, rhythm and lineation carry theme in these opening lines of “Hardweed Path Going”: the piling up of short descriptive phrases and imperatives, “jerky / smooth” like the resting of the slop bucket against the boy’s knees, suggest the poverty and tedium of 1930s rural life, its grittiness and early darknesses. Death is everywhere, as the poet recalls the setting free of a pet bird (“Better turn him loose / before cold weather comes on” [CP 67]) and, finally, as the season turns, the slaughter of a “favorite hog”:

Oh, Sparkle, when the axe tomorrow morning falls
and the rush is made to open your throat,
I will sing, watching dry-eyed as a man, sing my
love for you in the tender feedings. (CP 68)
The idealization of childhood or of the rural origins of one’s culture feature prominently in many accounts of pastoral, but poems like these forbid romanticisation of the past. Writing out of, and against, a Romantic tradition that had sometimes portrayed childhood, country life, and even rural poverty as wellsprings of spiritual authenticity, the Ammons of “Hardweed Path Going” forces recognition of poverty, mortality, and hard work.

The later poetry moves away from this kind of realism to strike a more meditative, sometimes visionary, note, and the emphasis on physical sensation—the wire in the hand, the slipperiness of the path, the growing darkness and chill—gives way to an intense interest in perception. Yet, as “obstinate commemorations of reality” (the phrase is Helen Vendler’s [The Music of What Happens 313]), these early efforts inaugurate many of the attitudes and gestures that underpin the mature work: an adherence to the rhythms of everyday life, a sense of the poet as deeply involved in his immediate environment, and, above all, an interest in time, change, and, ultimately, death, worked out through observation of the natural world.

After serving in the Pacific during the Second World War, Ammons lived in New Jersey before relocating to Ithaca, where he taught poetry at Cornell from 1965 until his retirement in 1998 (he died in Ithaca in 2001). The poetry charts this northward migration, and the gradual attunement of the poet’s sensibilities to the specificities of his immediate environment: Jersey’s coastal regions in collections like Expressions of Sea Level and Corsons Inlet; seasonal change in Ithaca in both the short lyrics of the 1970s and 1980s, and the long, expansive poems of Ammons’s middle and late career: The Snow Poems; The

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2 In The Country and the City, Raymond Williams sees “neo-pastoral” (that is, post-classical and particularly post-Renaissance pastoral) in English writing as being about nostalgia for a rural past, one always felt to have only just vanished. Pastoral is famously problematic for Williams because it effaces, by mythologising as “natural”, the real economic conditions of rural communities (see for example his readings of the country house poems of Jonson and Carew [26-34]). Empson notes with regret that modern pastoral “take[s] refuge in child cult” because changes in English society since the seventeenth century have eroded the power of art works to communicate across social classes (12-13).

3 “In that condition”, wrote Wordsworth in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (597); think of the singing labourer in “The Solitary Reaper”.

Ridge Farm; Garbage. In the bulk of these works, local nature figures in one way or another as necessity, the ground—as much literal as figurative—in which the imagination is rooted, and to which it must adhere. The Ridge Farm, from the 1987 collection Sumerian Vistas, gathers its meditations on form, perception, and the human position in the world around the geographical feature of the title. The “high farm out by Mecklenburg … / … starts high and keeps getting / higher,” as the ridge becomes a kind of mental escarpment that “beseeches” the mind, its rising “roll”, or wave of stone, “my fixed ocean” (Sumerian Vistas 26, 36, 10):

... I like the ridge: it was a line
  in the minds of hundreds of generations
  of cold Indians: it was there
  approximately then what it is now
  five hundred years ago when the white
  man was a whisper on the continent:
  it is what I come up against: (SV 10)

Closer to the ground, the local is urgent, visceral, and functions as a check to the mind’s more visionary flights:

I was this
  morning affrighted past loafing
  by the small blood
  lining the squirrel’s mouth
  where he lay on the highway’s edge
  his legs spraddled stiff into space
  the high eye full of the morning sun
  the other scrinching wide open on grainy macadam (SV 25)

Ammons more than once commented to the effect that “Whitman was a tremendous liberation to me” (Set in Motion 63), and many readers have traced his quotidian sensibility precisely to Whitman. Here, the earlier poet’s more visionary, expansive bent (“I celebrate myself and sing myself … I loafe and invite my soul” [Whitman 63]) is made to answer to Ammons’s insistence upon mortality and necessity. To lie (as Ammons and Whitman would have the poet do) with eyes wide open between the grainy macadam and the morning sun—that is, to view at once the solid particulars of one’s immediate environment and the brilliant glare of what Ammons elsewhere calls “spirit” or “radiance”, that which underlies and
transcends all things—is to come face to face with the transience of life, and in particular of one’s own subjectivity, the “I” (eye).

Or rather, to receive this sort of vision is to recognise that radiance is predicated on transience—that the two are in fact one and the same. What both constitutes and transcends material things is precisely impermanence itself. Local nature is privileged in Ammons insofar as its every aspect reveals to him the universality of entropy, or, as he more frequently terms it, “motion”. Death, decay, and the passing of time are all varieties of motion, and no topic preoccupies him more throughout his career. Motion is a destabilizing force in the poetry, naming as it does the ultimate solubility of all physical things. Tethering the mind and the eye to the grainy macadam of reality, works like The Ridge Farm might suggest that Ammons favours a poetry of the concrete over that of the abstract or visionary. But entropy means that concretion is itself as insubstantial and fleeting as its alternatives. As he writes in another poem, Tombstones, from the same volume:

the things of earth are not objects,
there is no nature,
no nature of stones and brooks, stumps, and ditches,

for these are pools of energy cooled into place,
or they are starlight pressed
to store,

or they are speeding light held still:
the woods are a fire green-slow
and the pathway of solid earthwork

is just light concentrated blind (SV 50-51)

Or, as Heraclitus had it, “everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed” (qtd. in Wheelwright 29). From the perspective of human time, the ridge might be what the mind “comes up against”, enduring as it does beyond recorded history. But in the larger view it too is in motion, already passing away:

4 Ammons noted the importance of the Pre-Socratics to him in his 1994 interview with David Lehman for The Paris Review (Set in Motion 106).
a pulse in one of earth’s orbits
beats once in four hundred thousand years:

in certain orders of time
stones blow by like the wind:
starlight pricks them like bubbles  (SV 50)

In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton has noted the mind’s resistance to the finitude of the physical universe. It is easier to imagine abstract infinity, embodied in a God or other transcendent force, than to imagine the vast, but nonetheless finite, scales of time and space that envelop us (40): 13.8 billion years (the estimated age of the universe) or “four hundred billion / stars in our galaxy alone” (*Glare* 4). Ammons, who studied the natural sciences as an undergraduate, and who sought to integrate the language of science with that of poetry, makes such thinking a primary business of his work. As a physical and philosophical principle, motion discloses the interrelatedness of matter and time: what we experience as temporality is really the endless rearrangement of material forms, and what we experience as materiality is only the temporary catching of infinitesimally tiny particles in flow. If such a matrix flows in only one direction—if time passes—this is because in a closed system (such as our universe is held to be) phenomena tend toward greater and greater levels of disorder. Momentarily ordered states (stones and brooks, stumps and ditches) are possible, but only at the expense of greater disorder elsewhere in the system.5 The “things of earth” are not objects because they are *events*, brief knots in a fabric of energy moving ever further toward chaos. Forms, Ammons asserts often, are “slowed motion” (“Motion’s Holdings”, *SV* 113):

I guess it’s because of the downward
slide of everything towards entropy,

the momentum of the downglide, that
forms are like foam cast up onto

---

5 This is a gloss of the second law of thermodynamics. For the importance of science in Ammons’s poetry, see Steven Schneider’s *A. R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope* (1994) and the essays collected in Part Two of Schneider’s *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A. R. Ammons’s Longer Poems* (1999).
floats of pause:  \((Glare\ 110)\)

Thus what we call nature is for Ammons not a thing, nor even a shifting arrangement of things, but a process. In all his nature poems, he is interested in location as a verb rather than as a noun: a locality, like a rock or a star, is an event, and one that involves the body and mind of the human observer as much as what is apparently outside him. Indeed, insofar as he is embodied, the observer and inhabitant of a landscape is himself an event of sorts. As Ammons writes elsewhere:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{we are, as bodies,} \\
\text{“localizations”} \\
\text{supported by barriers,} \\
\text{holding in} & \& \\
\text{shutting out:} \\
\text{systems of exclusion, permitting} \\
\text{certain inlets, outlets:} \\
\text{we are} \\
\text{“held together”:} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\((Tape\ for\ the\ Turn\ of\ the\ Year\ 53)\)

I alluded above to Ammons’s frequent use of such terms as “spirit” and “radiance”. Suggestive of the soul or similar mystical essence, such terms take on a distinctively scientific connotation in the poetry. In an interview with Steven Schneider, Ammons clarified that “when I say ‘spirit,’ I mean something like twentieth-century physics. I mean energy and things like that … By spirit, I mean motion” (“Interview” 330). Thus, and importantly, “spirit” refers not so much to some mystical life force as to the idea that objects in the world (animate and inanimate) are always moving, and have no essence other than this movement.6 The fact that concretion is illusory, and spirit merely another name for motion, means that the poems often reach for a kind of monism. Ammons writes in, and of, his 1993 long work \textit{Garbage}:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{this is just a poem with a job to do: and that} \\
\text{is to declare, however roundabout, sideways,} \\
\text{or meanderingly (or in those ways) the perfect} \\
\end{align*}
\]

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6 Compare Robert Pogue Harrison’s summary of the argument of \textit{Tombstones}: “Nothing that comes to be has any other nature than that by which it comes to be” (“Tombstones” 172).
scientific and materialistic notion of the
spindle of energy: when energy is gross,

rocklike, it resembles the gross, and when
fine it mists away into mystical refinements,

sometimes passes right out of material
recognizability and becomes, what?, motion,

spirit, all forms translated into energy, as at
the bottom of Dante’s hell all motion is

translated into form: (24-25)

Motion is not a force that affects pre-existing objects, as the wind blows in the trees or the
gravity of a large object affects the movement through space of a smaller one. Rather, the
things of earth are their motion. Nature is the “gross” condition of motion—motion become
available to perception. I suggested above that nature reveals to Ammons the universality of
entropy. It would be more accurate to say that, insofar as objects are “held” or “gross”
motion, nature is the means by which entropy reveals itself (thus “declare” in the lines just
quoted bears the sense not just of “say” but of “show forth”).

But even “reveal” is the wrong word here. Ammons’s commitment to scientific
monism often leads to him a view that there is nothing hidden in the world, no
transcendental values or inner truths to be revealed. “I ran my motor fast much of my life
seeking the saving absolute”, he wrote to his friend Harold Bloom, in February 1971. “There
is no such item to be found” (Letters and Journals 375). Breaking down a distinction
between existence and essence, Ammons perceives a universe in which the “things of earth”
wear their innermost natures on their sleeves. This is the other reason why he says, in
Tombstones, that “there is no nature”—not just because physical environments are only
temporary catchings of energy, but because there is no essential, transcendental “nature of
things” to be abstracted from the particularities of phenomena occurring in time. As we will
see, one important upshot of this is his suggestion that the perception of “spirit” or
“radiance” requires no inherently special kind of vision, poetic or otherwise, but instead is the achievement of modes of effort or temporal practice.

If Ammons’s main theme is motion, the task he puts to poetry—stylistic as well as thematic—is that of orienting the self in relation to instability. How does one stand in relation to a world in motion, and how might poetry reflect this standing, or suggest new and better ways of standing? The whole question of orientation is at the forefront of his earliest poems:

So I said I am Ezra
and the wind whipped my throat
gaming for the sound of my voice
I listened to the wind
go up over my head and up into the night
Turning to the sea I said
I am Ezra (CP 1)

With “So I Said I Am Ezra”, the opening poem in his first collection Ommateum, Ammons begins in medias res, in the mode of response (“So I said …”). The movement of wind in sand is Ammons’s most sustained figure for motion, and here signifies the dispersal of poetic voice, the speaker’s self-articulation unable to take root: “The words were swallowed up / in the voice of the surf / or leaping over the swells / lost themselves oceanward” (1).7 The key action of the poem, one repeated throughout the early poems,8 is the speaker’s “turning”—first toward the sea, then “from the wind” (1), and, finally, from the scene as a whole:

so I Ezra went out into the night
like a drift of sand
and splashed among the windy oats
that clutch the dunes
of unremembered seas (CP 1)

The speaker’s constant movement is suggestive of a restless, apparently endless, search for an appropriate stance from which to address the world. The title Ommateum means

7 The figure of “Ezra” in the Ommateum poems apparently is not the biblical prophet, nor an allusion to Pound, but a childhood friend of Ammons’s who died in the Second World War; see Bloom, Ringers 256-7.
8 See also “Rack”, “Turning a Moment to Say So Long”, and “Turning”.
“compound eye” (as of an insect), and the obvious pun on “I” is drawn out in Ammons’s Preface to the collection:

> While maintaining a perspective from the hub, the poet ventures out in each poem to explore one of the numberless radii of experience. The poems suggest a many-sided view of reality; an adoption of tentative, provisional attitudes, replacing the partial, unified, prejudicial, and rigid[.] (Set in Motion 5)

“Turn” is of course the literal meaning of trope, and with their reliance on this particular gesture the Ommateum poems look forward to a career-long interest in the ways in which poetic devices and styles not only express, but also afford, modes of thinking, knowledge, and ethical comportment. “Corsons Inlet”, from the 1965 collection of the same name, may be read as an extended meditation on this theme. As much ars poetica as nature description, the poem has become Ammons’s most anthologized, and readers of a variety of critical persuasions have argued for its centrality to the poet’s project as a whole, its manifesto-like declaration of his themes and concerns. ⁹ In the context of my comments so far, we might begin by noting the poem’s grounding in the specificities of a particular environment and its use of Ammons’s language of “turning”, this time worked out with reference to a real-life situation: “Corsons Inlet” describes a walk taken along the beach of the title, in southern New Jersey:

> I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning

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⁹ Just what these themes and concerns are taken to be varies considerably from reader to reader. For Roger Gilbert, the poem dramatizes the possible interactions between mind and nature, providing a view of “the way consciousness opens on to reality” (Walks in the World 210). In Bloom’s conception, “Corsons Inlet” represents a “large and noble acknowledgement of dark limitations”, to be followed by a triumphant starting over in the form of “Saliences”. Between them, the poems chart Ammons’s “swerve away from Emerson” (Ringers 277). In John Elder’s ecocritical reading, the poem is a cornerstone of Ammons’s “ecologically-balanced art” (145). We might then attribute the poem’s centrality not only to its forthright declaration of the poet’s themes, but also to its openness to a variety of interpretations. Vendler alone among Ammons’s major critics has had relatively little to say about “Corsons Inlet”, lingering instead over the more personal and confessional poems, in particular “Easter Morning”.

to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf
rounded a naked headland
and returned

along the inlet shore:

it was muggy sunny, the wind from the sea steady and high,
crisp in the running sand,
some breakthroughs of sun
but after a bit
continuous overcast: \textit{(CP 147-48)}

As Roger Gilbert notes, Ammons originally published the poem under the less-than-compelling title “A Nature Walk”; the choice of “Corsons Inlet” instead “announces his fidelity to the particulars of his walk, his refusal to synthesize them into a larger conception that would replace or dissolve them” (\textit{Walks in the World} 212). Once again, the movement of wind in sand, “chang[ing] the dune’s shape that will not be the same shape / tomorrow” (\textit{CP 149}) is Ammons’s preferred figure for motion, displaying in macrocosm what is observable in microcosm, the ongoing shift and flow of things in nature. The speaker apprehends orders or nodes of form—nature is “not chaos” (\textit{CP 150})—but these are fleeting, always on the verge of dissolution:

the news to my left over the dunes and
reeds and bayberry clumps was
fall: thousands of tree swallows
gathering for flight:
an order held
in constant change: a congregation
rich with entropy:

[...]
in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
tiny blue 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 changeless shapes: (CP 150)

The poem works by pitting perception against preconception. Fronting entropy as the loafer of *The Ridge Farm* fronts the dead squirrel, our first inclination might be to seek generalities, to impose lines and changeless shapes where none exist. But the speaker announces his intention not to attempt to contain motion in the “straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds / of thought” (148), but rather to adapt to it, to embrace the “flowing bends and blends / of sight” (148). Just as the wind rips through the dunes, pushing grains of sand into new accumulations, so the poet must be “willing to go along, to accept / the becoming / thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish / no walls” (149). The motif of the beach walk is vital here, as it allows Ammons to locate perception precisely in motion itself: we do not “stand” in relation to the world at all, rather we move alongside it—as a part of it, but also, because we are reflexive, self-interpreting beings, at somewhat of a distance. The walk serves to measure the movement of the speaker’s consciousness against the movement of nature:

        the small
white blacklegged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks and spears
        the shallows, darts to shore
        to stab—what? I couldn’t

see against the black mudflats—a frightened
fiddler crab? (CP 149-50)

The speaker here moves from aesthetic reflection on nature—“how beautiful”—toward an idea of thinking as an ongoing accretion of percepts and conjectures. Cognition becomes an effect of motion, like the creation of a sand dune: “to stab—what? I couldn’t / see…”

Poetic utterance is all-important here. In a brief but significant essay published in 1968, Ammons affirmed a close connection between walking and poetry. Like walking, poetry for Ammons is peripatetic and fundamentally occasional: the motion of poems and
walks “occurs only in the body of the walker or in the body of the words. It can’t be extracted and contemplated. It is nonreproducible and nonlogical” (“A Poem is a Walk”, *Set in Motion* 18). Inherently antithetical to the boxes and binds of precondition, poetry is the “becoming thought” that the walker at Corsons Inlet seeks. Because it is specific to its moment-to-moment realization, the meaning and form of the poem, what Ammons calls its “pattern”, cannot be known beforehand; instead it “is to come true, is to be recognized, discovered” in the course of the writing (17). Poetry, like walking, is then essayistic in the traditional sense of that word: an experiment or attempt. Again, this is imagined in terms of a restless “turning”: “each [poem] turns, one or more times, and eventually returns …. the turns and returns … give shape to the walk and to the poem” (17, original emphasis). An act of aesthetic troping, like the one Ammons engages in when he takes a walk along the beach as a metaphor for thought, is a testing of a particular perspective upon things. The concreteness of register of a work like “Corsons Inlet”—its laying of the concept of trope over the literal turns of the poet’s body—impresses upon us Ammons’s sense that such testings are always embodied and temporal. The idea that a poem is a process or action, rather than a static object, had been central to the theorisation of American modernist poetics: the Objectivist Louis Zukovsky called poems “object[s] in process” (15), while William Carlos Williams, in a phrase that Ammons appropriates in “Corsons Inlet”, found poetry to be “a field of action” (280). In *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*, Wallace Stevens wrote that “the poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it” (404). In 1952, the art critic Harold Rosenberg identified a similar impulse in the work of those he famously dubbed the “American action painters”:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object … What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (25)

Reviewing Ammons’s *Collected Poems* in 1971, John Ashbery offered that it was Ammons’s poetry, rather than that of “the so-called ‘New York School’ of poets” (Ashbery himself, Frank O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, and others) that “seems a much closer and more successful approximation of … art as process” (“In the American Grain” n.p.). Certainly the elevation of an idea of “event” over an idea of “expression” echoes Ammons’s sense, described above, that all phenomena are best understood as events. Poetry for him is a
privileged kind of utterance because it allows us properly to think about, and indeed in, motion:

I allow myself eddies of meaning
yield to a direction of significance
running
like a stream through the geography of my work:
you can find
in my sayings
swerves of action
like the inlet’s cutting edge:
there are dunes of motion,
organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
in the overall wandering of mirroring mind:

but Overall is beyond me: it is the sum of these events
I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting
beyond the account: (CP 148)

It takes effort to yield, to resist the fixing of thought; the poet’s craft really is a kind of “work”, a tilling of the soil of his mental geography (this is a theme to which I will return). Ammons’s affection for open form and enjambment, and his mimetic approach to typography (in this poem at least), make literal the idea of “the geography of my work”, especially if we take “geography” in the literal sense of “earth writing”. There are few full stops in Ammons; his career-long devotion to the comma and, especially, the colon suggests an ongoing deferral of final meaning. The “Overall” is a ledger that cannot be kept because for Ammons the purpose of writing is exactly to move on, to “dwell”, as he wrote in another essay, “in the ongoing, onbreaking wave” (“Surfaces”, Set in Motion 21).

All well and good. But the enthusiastic embrace of motion in “Corsons Inlet” is by no means straightforward. Gilbert finds the poem rather shrill in its denial of the overall perspective: Ammons spends more time “obsessively telling us that … [he] will ‘accept the becoming thought’” than he spends actually doing so, indicating an “insatiable penchant for generality” (Walks 225, 216; original emphasis). In rhetoric, if not in argument, “Corsons Inlet” suggests that the mind seeks closure, steadiness, unity. For every gesture toward motion in Ammons, there is an equal and opposite impulse towards stability, a desire to
reach out to what remains fixed in the flow of time. Despite its scientific grounding, entropy is less a scientific principle than a state of being—the closest Ammons gets to a general ontology—and as such has profound human effects. Elsewhere in the poetry this is something that preoccupies him a great deal. Human life is finite, and motion, the inevitable dissolution of all things in time, is felt as an awareness of finitude. “The people of my time are passing away”, he writes in the late poem “In View of the Fact” (*Bosh and Flapdoodle* 29), and the fact that always returns to view is exactly that of death (recall the image of the dead squirrel in *The Ridge Farm*). “Corsons Inlet” rehearses the theme of death in nature, in the image of the egret that silently stalks the shallows for prey. But no number of platitudes regarding the giving of the self over to entropy can palliate the shock of one’s own mortality:

sometimes old people snap back into life for a
streak and start making plans, ridiculous, you know,

when they will suddenly think of death again
and they will see their coffins plunge upward

like whales out of the refused depths of their
minds and the change will feel so shockingly
different—from the warm movement of a possibility
to a cold acknowledgment—they will seem not
to understand for a minute:                (*Garbage* 53)

Like most of Ammons’s abiding topics, the “cold acknowledgement” of what motion snatches from us seems to go back to the childhood in rural North Carolina. Speaking to an interviewer in 1989, he recalled a scene from his early life:

It was when my little brother, who was two and a half years younger than I, died at eighteen months. My mother some days later found his footprint in the yard and tried to build something over it to keep the wind from blowing it away. That’s the most powerful image I’ve ever known. (*Set in Motion* 71)

What the wind carries away is not only our mortal lives but the very trace of our presence on the earth. Inscribed in dust, the footprint is the very figure of poetry, at least in Ammons’s conception of it. It is the mark left behind by the walker at Corsons Inlet, but a mark that
cannot last: the “Overall” cannot be “kept” in poetry because language is itself in time, and therefore refuses containment or petrification. For Ammons, there are no gilded monuments, only dunes of sand.\(^\text{10}\) The loss of his brother seems to have affected the young Ammons badly—it is, as Kevin McGuirk notes, “the signal biographical event of the poetry” (“A. R. Ammons and the ‘Only Terrible Health’ of Poetics” n.p.), and the one that most frequently pushes the poet from the philosophical mode of poems like “Corsons Inlet” to the confessional one of, for example, the 1978 elegy “Easter Morning”. First drafted on Easter Sunday of 1977,\(^\text{11}\) and dealing in the themes of death and resurrection proper to that date in the Christian calendar, the poem collapses several losses—of family, of homeland—into that early one. Where Ammons’s epistemological poems rarely posit absolute origins, preferring a conception of life and thought as “surfing” upon waves of “bottomless entropy” (Set in Motion 21; CP 316), works like “Easter Morning” find him courting a certain psychological essentialism. Grief becomes a foundation, something to which the speaker must, as he says, “return and return”:

I have a life that did not become,  
that turned aside and stopped,  
astonished:  
I hold it in me like a pregnancy or  
as on my lap a child  
not to grow or grow old but dwell on  

it is to his grave that I most  
frequently return and return  
to ask what is wrong, what was  
wrong, to see it all by  
the light of a different necessity  
but the grave will not heal  
and the child,  

\(^\text{10}\) See Harrison, “Tombstones”, particularly 167-71, and Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 215-16.  
\(^\text{11}\) See manuscript dated 10 April 1977 in untitled sequence, March-June 1977, Archie Ammons Papers 1945-2010, Box 73. I discuss this sequence in Part Two.
stirring, must share my grave
with me, an old man having
gotten by on what was left (A Coast of Trees 19)

Here the death of one brother—not mentioned directly until the penultimate stanza—is carried forth in time as a stunting of the other; the grave to which the adult speaker compulsively returns is at once the literal place of interment and the part of his own self that “turned aside and stopped / astonished” (i.e., turned to stone) with that interment. The irony registered in “Easter Morning” is that everything is lost to time except the fact of loss itself. Ammons’s late poems, which meditate on the poet’s own mortality as well as that of others, come back to this point repeatedly. Revisiting his brother’s death in Glare (1997), he recalls the family’s last-ditch attempt to save the child by means of an obscure folk custom:

I see the child carried off in arms to the woods,

see the sapling split and the child passed through and the tree bound back: as the tree knits, the young rupture heals: (94)

That “sapling” is an old literary word for “child” was probably at the back of Ammons’s mind in writing these lines (if not in the minds of those performing the ritual). Aside from providing a symbol (in the full Romantic sense) for the hoped-for transfer of energies between tree and child, the use of “sapling split” echoes the splitting of the self in “Easter Morning,” into the “child, / stirring”, and the old man “having / gotten by on what was left” (Coast 19). But readers of that earlier poem know how the story ends, and the speaker goes on to lament that memory, “great mother of / the muses,” will not permit him forgetfulness: feeling that is so

fleeting is carved in stone across the gut: I can’t float or heave it

---

12 The OED reminds us of Shakespeare’s use of it in Titus Andronicus: “Peace, tender sapling, thou art made of tears” (3.2.50).
out: it has become a foundation:
whatever is now passes like early snow

on a warm boulder: but the
boulder over and over is revealed

its grainy size and weight a glare:  (Glare 94-95)

Time runs in one direction, towards death and decay, but precisely because of this it also
runs backward, in the form of memory. The motif of blinding light for which Glare is named
recalls the image of the dead squirrel in The Ridge Farm, “high eye full of the morning sun /
the other / scrunching wide open on grainy macadam” (SV 25). “Revealed” here carries the
weight of religious revelation: this is another, more personal, version of the necessity that
was the theme of that earlier poem. Both uses echo Thoreau’s famous passage on vision in
Walden: “If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer
on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the
heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career” (66). Carved in
stone, losses become foundations:

I stand on a stump
of a child, whether myself
or my little brother who died, and
yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for
for me it is the dearest and the worst,
it is life nearest to life which is
life lost: it is my place where
I must stand and fail  (“Easter Morning”, Coast 21)

As long as I am alive, what is nearest to me (“close, close as burrowing / under skin”, he
says [20]) is awareness of the loss of life. Ammons suggests that we are far more intimate
with the dead than with the living, no doubt because they remind us of our own mortality.
The fact that the “mishap” (“Easter Morning”, Coast 20) referred to in these poems
happened in the poet’s childhood, and thus makes a fitting substratum for the adult speaker,
only emphasizes what I take to be his more general proposition: the sense that, as mortals,
we all have a life that failed to become, and is now gone. The lost child is something we
“dwell on”, in all senses of the phrase: it underlies our thinking and our writing, and is our habitation, or mode of being in the world. Ammons partakes of the traditions of high tragedy in his occasional conviction that to be human is to be perpetually at odds with the conditions of life (chiefly, its finitude):

short of the cycle of
the natural ongoing is the human, a stream broken, bent,
stalled, re-begun that began back with the first transmissible
molecule and is sticking to time and motion still: (Sphere 22)

Yet the desire for steadfastness remains, and, if poems are footprints left behind in sand, they are also the structures that, however temporarily, house those footprints and attempt to protect them. It is this identification of poetry with the cultivation of provisional forms of stability that constitutes Ammons’s main connection with the pastoral mode.

Poetry as cultivation: pastoral

Empson’s Some Versions of Pastoral and Alpers’s What is Pastoral? represent two of the fullest attempts to think through the philosophical seriousness of pastoral writing. Rejecting the notion that pastoral texts are idealistic depictions of a lost Golden Age, both critics affirm the centrality to pastoral of the kinds of real-world themes I have discussed in relation to Ammons: death, loss, and the passing of time. The pastoral vision is not one of material entropy, of the flow of energy into and out of form. Yet, like Ammons in the poems discussed above, writers of pastoral probe the question of how one stands in relation to a world that is felt to be unanchored. The stance such writers approach is that of the human figure as essentially shepherd-like: humble, powerless, threatened by forces beyond his or her control, and yet possessed of the capacity for affirmation and recuperation in face of sorrow and loss. Alpers and Empson are by no means saying the same thing—Empson’s account is more wide-ranging, and for all his social emphases, he places far more weight on the metaphysical than Alpers permits—but in the context of this essay their thinking is sufficiently similar to warrant a combined treatment.

“Process” (22), “machinery” (63), and “trick of thought” (23) are some of the phrases Empson uses to describe the workings of the pastoral mode. Their deployment gets around the problem of pastoral’s apparent disregard for realism and allows us to take seriously the
philosophical and literary claims of its most recognizable motif, the singing shepherd. Reading Empson’s *Some Versions* and Alpers’s *What is Pastoral?*, we are asked to imagine pastoral writing, not as an attempt to render in a realistic way the textures and pleasures of a given natural scene—an effort of *ecomimesis*, to use Timothy Morton’s phrase (*Ecology Without Nature* 8 and passim)—but as a particular (and particularly literary) way of organizing human experience. Empson especially is less interested in the specific motifs of what he calls the “old”, that is, highly conventional, pastoral (11)—nymphs, idyllic landscapes, love songs—than in the structures and moods those motifs imply. As Lars Engle has explained, Empson sees literary works, not as what Ammons (in a complaint about the literary criticism of the 1970s and 1980s) called “decentered ‘texts’ first of all” (*Set in Motion* 33), but as part of an actual historical person’s “struggle to live well, often a struggle to understand, embrace, combat, or reconcile himself or herself to particular opportunities and cruelties of the social, moral, or natural order” (Engle 163). This is why Empson is much given to biographical speculation (for example, about Shakespeare—see Engle’s discussion 169-75): appreciating the tonal complexities of works means keeping an eye on, and where necessary interpolating, the kinds of life situations that may have given rise to them. Alpers, writing after Empson, calls this an understanding of pastoral that privileges “ethical stability in one’s present world, rather than a yearning for one’s past” (*What is Pastoral?* 37).

For Empson and Alpers, then, “pastoral” is the name for a certain kind of aesthetic action: to wit, a conscious engagement with the humble, lowly, or modest. Empson’s oft-cited notion of “the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple” (22 and passim) defines the pastoral as a form of representation in which the “simple” or humble figures in a given society are made to function as “fundamental symbols for humanity” as a whole (22, 29). In this regard, pastoral resembles what Empson calls the “heroic” (12 and passim), by which he means epic and high tragic, modes, in which some metaphysical or epistemological problem deemed universal to the “conditions of life” (114) is routinely (or ritualistically) played out in the triumphs and afflictions of a particular individual. For Empson all three modes are products of a peculiarly Western tendency toward specificity: a will to individualise, or render material and particular, metaphysical or otherwise abstract concepts:

One can make a list of European ideas with the … purpose … of making the immediate thing real, all of which stress the individual more or less directly and are denied in the East. [For example, that] God is a person; each separate individual is immortal, with the character he has acquired in his life; so that
one must continually worry about whether he is free; and he is born in sin so that he must make efforts; and because of this only a God, individual like the rest of us, is worthy to be sacrificed to God. (21)

As this last example suggests, Christianity, in particular the doctrine of the Incarnation, is for Empson the “supreme form” (21) of this Western preference for the specific: Christ as “the Logos who was an individual man” (81). What distinguishes pastoral from epic and tragedy is that its imaginative moves into particularity take the form of engagements with the humble or ordinary. In pastoral, it is the lowly person, the herdsman or shepherd or (as in “urban” iterations of the mode) industrial worker, rather than the warrior or king, whose situation in the world is deemed the appropriate site for the working through of these problems.13

The pastoral rendering of the lives of “simple” people as representative of apparently universal concerns is why Alpers, after Angus Fletcher, characterizes pastoral as a “mode” rather than a “genre”: where “genre” insists upon a particular pairing of form and subject matter, “mode” speaks more generally to ideas about “man’s nature and situation” (What is Pastoral? 50; see Fletcher, “Utopian History and the Anatomy of Criticism” 34-35)—ideas embodied in the representative figure and his relation to his world (49-50; see generally 44-78).14 Like other modes—tragedy, comedy, epic—pastoral represents a particular “take” on

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13 The identification of “urban” forms of pastoral has proved one of the most productive approaches to the overall question of what a modern pastoralism might consist in. For Empson, writing about the proletariat, even by its own members, usually tends toward “Covert Pastoral” (13); this is a theme to which I return in the Conclusion. Other treatments of urban pastoral have lingered upon the critical or emancipatory possibilities of urban space: see Timothy Gray’s “Semiotic Shepherds”, on Gary Snyder and Frank O’Hara, and Terence Diggory, “Allen Ginsberg’s Urban Pastoral”.

14 General in the twentieth century, this approach reaches back to Friedrich Schiller’s 1795 work On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry. There Schiller developed a typology of literature based not on formal markers or specific content but on the Empfindungsweisen—modes of feeling or perception—implied in the writer’s treatment of his subject matter. For the Romantic Schiller, different Empfindungsweisen work out as different kinds of relation to nature: where “naïve” poetry represents an unmediated or “authentic” relation to the natural (typified, for Schiller, by the epics of Homer), the “sentimental” literature of modernity is characterized by a feeling of alienation: “The poet … either is nature or he will seek her”
human life—an overall view of life and of those factors deemed most important to it—love, death, our capacity for hope and for freedom, and so forth. Its choice of the humble figure as “fundamental symbol for humanity” suggests a view that human life is essentially limited in its capabilities. Pastoral is in many respects the inversion of epic and tragedy; yet at the same time, Alpers and Empson insist that true pastorals never forget, and indeed are often underpinned by, tragedy’s insights. Early on in Some Versions, Empson muses that a tragic view of life amounts to something of a “permanent truth”: “the waste even in a fortunate life, the isolation even of a life rich in intimacy, cannot but be felt deeply … anything [by which he means any artwork or philosophical system] of value must accept this because it must not prostitute itself” (5). In their vulnerability to war and dispossession (Eclogues 1 and 9), and in the longing of their love songs (Eclogue 2), Virgil’s shepherds are, as Alpers says, “felt to be representative [of human life] precisely in figuring every or any man’s strength relative to the world” (What is Pastoral? 50). Like tragedy, pastoral supposes that the desires we hold for life are inevitably in excess of its actual conditions—that there is in each of us “a life that did not become”, to use Ammons’s phrase from “Easter Morning”. As Empson puts it, “the feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral” (114-15).

But even in their humble circumstances, pastoral’s representative figures possess powers of recuperation and commitment that constitute a serious challenge to the tragic perspective. Speaking from a position of loss and “distaste for the conditions of life” (Empson 114), the pastoral ethic is enduringly one of cultivation and affirmation. Pastoral is

(110, original emphasis). Concerned as it is with “represent[ing] man in a state of innocence, i.e., in a condition of harmony and of peace with himself and with his environment” (146-47), pastoral (or, as Schiller calls it, “idyll”), belongs to the latter type. Empson makes no reference to Schiller, and Alpers views On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry as overly nostalgic and nature-focused (see What is Pastoral? 28-37). Yet, as David Halperin observes, Schiller’s loosening of pastoral from generic strictures “constitutes the intellectual foundation of all modern approaches” to the mode (43)—witness such statements as W. W. Greg’s 1905 proposal that pastoral’s “importance is to be sought in the fact that the form is the expression of instincts and impulses deep-rooted in the nature of humanity” (2), and Leo Marx’s sense that the pastoral dialectic of civilisation and nature represents “a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today” (4).
marked by a willingness to locate reserves of “strength” (the word is used by both Empson and Alpers) in the steady, if humble, rituals of daily life and in that most instrumentally useless of pursuits, the creation of song. The “good life”—by which Empson means not so much the moral life as the full and satisfactory one—must avoid “saying” its tragic state because the best and proper function of speech is to aver the potential for human agency, not deny it. Dialogic in character and grounded in performance—the shepherds of works like the *Idylls* and the *Eclogues* typically sing to and for one another—song is experienced as a binding force, uniting pastoral communities in order to affirm what remains, and therefore sustains, in face of loss. As Alpers writes: “it is of the essence of traditional pastoral to find styles of speech that express the possibilities of freedom and community within acknowledged, sometimes deeply felt, limitations” (“Empson on Pastoral” 102). Under this view, pastoral texts are conventional, not so much because they are static and predictable, as because they thematise human attempts at unification through speech acts: “conventions” such as the song contest typically serve as “convenings”, “occasions for songs and colloquies that express and therefore seek to redress separation, absence, or loss” (Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* 81). Elegy, the literary response to that most profound of limits, death, is therefore native ground for pastoral. Embarking on an extended reading of Milton’s “Lycidas”, Alpers argues for the poem’s grounding in the real world of human grief. Characterising Milton’s “central purpose” as that of “finding the proper commemorative song for a human world” (110), he writes that the poem “gives assurance to ‘all that wander in that perilous flood’,” and thereby “sustains the human world, enabling it to continue both despite and in light of what it has lost” (112).

It is therefore not entirely fanciful to imagine something like a stoic streak at the heart of pastoral, a will to endure and an insistence on resilience in even the most reduced of circumstances. We are all bucolic figures, in the sense that our “strength relative to the world” is inevitably curtailed, if only by death. Yet it is our task, and indeed our virtue, to find ways of fostering what abides and sustains. Literature itself is clearly at issue here. The thematic centrality of song makes pastoral a deeply—perhaps inherently—self-reflexive style of writing. In effect, the mode as I have described it works by laying the function of the shepherd over that of the poet. One way of approaching this set of ideas is to say, as Empson does of the “old” pastoral, that it is marked by a “clash between style and theme” (12), such that the work derives much of its meaning, and all of its irony, from the disparity between the poet’s elegant locutions and the rusticity of the shepherd. But the movement is one of
unification as much as juxtaposition: conflating shepherd and poet, pastoral imagines the poet’s role as one of guidance and cultivation. Commenting on the prospects of pastoral in contemporary writing, Susan Stewart suggests that “in the end, these works call for new ways of thinking about the kind of work that artists do” (Stewart and Kinsella, “An Epistolary Pastoral” 7). The model of poetry “we turn to here is … that of the poet/artist as the person who shepherds forms of life” (7). Thus Alpers remarks that “pastoral is a form that arose from and has continually mediated” the question of “literature and its claim on us” (What is Pastoral? xi).

What is really celebrated in pastoral, then, is the capacity of literature to foster stability and social solidarity in face of uncertainty. The implication of this form of writing is that any poet, singing her song, may affirm the value of life against time, mortality, and tragic disappointment. An idea of literature as a mode of cultivation is perhaps why the image of the human in nature has featured so prominently in the pastoral tradition. In their implied interactions with natural environments— their tending of sheep or goats or (as in Theocritus’s tenth Idyll or the poems of Marvell and Frost) their mowing of the grass—these figures perform with their bodies what is performed in their songs. For the embodiment of song is precisely what is at issue here: poetry, pastoral texts suggest, has a certain affective, if not actually physical, reality; it makes things happen.15

15 As the example just given of the mower suggests, for the purposes of my argument I will be treating pastoral (usually understood as preoccupied with leisure, love, and song, and often taking the form of a dialogue) and georgic (traditionally concerned with labour and factual detail, and presented in a didactic mode) as compatible, rather than competing, modes of self-representation. Alastair Fowler has argued for the “displacement of pastoral by georgic” in seventeenth-century English literary culture (84); yet, as Nigel Smith observes in his notes to Marvell’s Mower poems, georgic figures like the mower had been present in pastoral since Theocritus, and the Renaissance theorist Julius Caesar Scaliger had in his Poetices libri septum of 1561 categorised poems about reapers as a subset of pastoral poetry (Smith 128). As Robert Faggen writes, “works in both modes have rarely proved to be pure”; he notes the blending of pastoral and georgic in Milton’s poetry, particularly Comus and Paradise Lost (54). Stewart, in her Introduction, with John Kinsella, to a collection of essays on modern forms of pastoral, places “eclogue” and “georgic” together under the general heading of “pastoral” (6).
The idea of poetry as that which fosters steadfastness and stability seems to me to resonate with Ammons’s image of the footprint in the dust, and particularly with the attempt to improvise a shelter so as to protect the cherished mark of human existence, to preserve what we can from time and mortality. Pastoral affirms the value of such makeshift structures, even while acknowledging that they can never house the footprint permanently. Empson’s and Alpers’s commentaries prompt me to ask whether Ammons’s poetry might not be similarly animated by an “ethic of cultivation”.16 Here I would return to my comments above about his interest in the ways in which literary styles or devices imply or afford particular philosophical orientations—an interest conveyed, in works like “So I Said I Am Ezra” and “Corsons Inlet”, by Ammons’s frequent recourse to a language of “turning”, suggestive at once of an act of literary troping or figuration and of the taking up of a stance in relation to the world. In the short essay “Poetry is Action”, of 1994, he returns to this theme in a more explicit manner, arguing that aesthetic choices are suggestive of “style[s] of life” (33):

I say that the behavior of a poem, good or bad behavior, gives us access to a knowledge of the meaning of behavior in our time. For example, heroic couplet, reasoned and rhymed, is characteristic of a certain style of mind and action that identifies a period. A short poem, pure to the exclusion of every challenge, is one style of life. A sprawling, inclusive poem tells us what it is in addition to what it says or says it is …. The question I ask of a poem is:

16 I borrow this phrase from Robert Pogue Harrison’s Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition (81). There, it is used to denote the attitude of continuing “care” that in Harrison’s Heideggerian analysis is the proper (and, indeed, inevitable) response to a “human condition” of historical and temporal locatedness—Heidegger’s notion of Dasein as “thrown” (Harrison x). Harrison does not mention pastoral, but his understanding of the vocation of the gardener as a “figure” (51) for, variously, the philosopher, the educator, the writer, matches the pastoral emphasis on the poet as shepherd. He attends to gardens that, although withdrawn from the vexed conditions of social and political life, exist in dynamic relation to those conditions—indeed, represent an assertion of “cultural, ethical, and civil virtue” (x) over against them.
What way of life does this poem seem to be representing? (Set in Motion 33, original emphasis)\textsuperscript{17}

This is why poetry is “action”—not just because, as we have already seen in the context of the earlier essay “A Poem is a Walk”, it is a process, carried out in time, that involves the body as well as the mind—but because that process achieves something, makes available a particular perspective (philosophical, moral, ethical) on things: poems “are at once actions themselves and symbolic actions, representative models of behavior” (33).\textsuperscript{18} What he has in mind is not political action (that poetry has little or no political efficacy is a view he expressed repeatedly), nor even a looser moral intervention in the world: “this is perhaps least of all to imply good behavior” (29). Instead, his claim is that poets, in their stylistic manipulations of their materials, exemplify human capacities for action, or agency, as such: poetry “stands not as an isolated, esoteric activity but as a formal and substantive essentializing of all action” (29). He goes on to say that “Value is represented in poems” (33); here I take him to mean, not only that poems are valuable or that they depict pre-existing values, but that the poet’s action represents, or instantiates, our very processes of valuation. In her particular arrangement of the linguistic materials at her disposal, the poet draws attention to the ways in which we make the world a place of meaning and value:

[T]he primary motion of the poet is to put things together and touch a source that feels like life—at times even more powerful than life. It is a synthesis of analogies and associations that promotes, in the best hands, and even when disjunctive, a sense of renewed vitality. (31)

Ammons appears to be using “value” in the extended sense intended by Charles Altieri in his study of Wallace Stevens’s “phenomenology of value”: values not as particular creeds or moral systems, but as loosely embodied affective possibilities or “auras of significance” (7)

\textsuperscript{17} Likewise David Bromwich has recommended that, in reading modern poetry, we restore to our concept of literary “style” the “twentieth-century use of the word … in an extended sense, to denote an accent or inflection of character” (xiv).

\textsuperscript{18} The phrase “symbolic action” is borrowed from Kenneth Burke. Ammons’s allusion is probably to Burke’s concept of “dramatism”, “[a] technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than as means of conveying information” (Language as Symbolic Action 54). Ammons dedicated the poem “Information Density”, in Sumerian Vistas, to Burke (71).
that may be realized in the twists and turns of language (in Stevens’s case, in the “intricate evasions of as” [An Ordinary Evening in New Haven 415]—i.e., the varied deployment of that particular grammatical marker) (Altieri 10-11 and passim). This patterning of ideas around concepts of action, value, feeling, and poetic style comes together in Ammons’s claim that poems are not only “expositions” (i.e., means of conveying information) but “dispositions” (32)—a word suggestive at once of an arrangement of parts and a particular attitude or character.

Ammons’s characterization of poems as actions that “exist in time from the first syllable to the last” (32) and his emphasis on value as “represented in poems” suggests that, for him, values are themselves actions, matters of continuing process or effort. Here is “Dunes”, a poem written shortly after “Corsons Inlet”:

Taking root in windy sand  
is not an easy  
way  
to go about  
finding a place to stay.

A ditchbank or wood’s-edge  
has firmer ground.

In a loose world though  
something can be started—

a root touch water,  
a tip break sand—

Mounds from that can rise  
on held mounds,  
a gesture of building, keeping,  
a trapping  
into shape.

Firm ground is not available ground. (CP 157-58)
In a “loose” world like ours, the creation of something of value—an idea, a belief, a sense of “provisional stability” (“A Poem is a Walk”, Set in Motion 15)—is a haphazard business, like the chance encounter of root tip and water or the drift of sand that brings light and air to a new shoot. Ammons is keen to aver, however, that “something can be started”, as a “gesture of building, keeping, / a trapping into shape”. No gesture or shape is final, and the emphasis falls on the continuity of the process itself. The penultimate stanza of The Ridge Farm picks up the theme:

a light catches somewhere, finds human
spirit to burn on, shows its magic’s
glint lines, attracts, grows, rolls
back space and dark, stands dominant
high in the midsphere, and reality
goes into concordance or opposition, the
light already dealing with darkness
designating it darkness, opposition by
naming, and the intensity of the source
blinds out other light:
[…]
this light, tendance, neglect
is human concern working with
what is: one thing is hardly better
or worse than another: the
split hair of possible betterment makes
dedication reasonable and heroic:
the frail butterfly, a slightly
guided piece of trash, the wind takes
ten thousand miles

Poets and critics alike are fond of tracing our word “poetry” to the Greek poësis—“making”—and it seems that, in this poem at least, for Ammons that old meaning is still the best one. Here, he evokes the situation of Genesis, the creation of light and dark, day and night, through the performative action of the Word (“opposition by naming”). But for God’s transcendental utterance he substitutes an idea of “human concern working with / what is[.]” “One thing is hardly better / or worse than another” because, as we have seen, for Ammons
there are no essences (“there is no nature” [SV 50]), which means there is no absolute ground on which to judge what constitutes the good. In such a situation, it is the dedication itself that matters—the constant application of “human concern” to the world. Here, as in Empson’s concept of pastoral, there is an understanding of virtue not as the abstract moral good but as a particular practice—a way of being in the world and in time articulated by Ammons’s use of “tendance”, “concern”, “dedication”.

Alpers finds pastoral to be centrally about this idea of art as unfolding in time; for him, it is the reason for (and redeems) the notorious conventionality of the mode. Above I noted his insight that pastoral conventions, in particular that of the song contest, are grounded in a notion of “convening”—i.e., of coming together: “Literary herdsmen need each other to hear their complaints and share the sentiments and pleasures that sustain them: singing for someone … is fundamental to these poems” (81). In a similar manner, the poet’s use of those very conventions (the song contest, the exchange of gifts, the whole notion of the poet-shepherd) links her to other writers of pastoral over time, “as if the responsive singing represented in eclogues were a model of the poet’s own activity” (81). For Alpers, pastoral convention speaks less to stasis or artificiality than to a sustained attention to the ways in which literary works are both transtemporal and inherently social. The philosopher he calls upon in this context is Wittgenstein:

To assume the continuity of literary forms and expression is, in a sense, to say simply that language and literature are social phenomena and that any verbal activity occurs not de novo but in some institutional context, what Wittgenstein called a “language game”. Literary expression, in this view, is a particularly formalized or institutionalized activity, and continuity between present and past poems therefore would seem to be simply in the nature of poetry. (What is Pastoral? 12)

This is to return to the Poundian concept of “the new” to which I referred in the Introduction: newness not as a total break from the past, but as a reworking of older materials. Alpers’s insistence on the ways in which literary works exist within temporally-extended speech

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19 It is this concept of convention as appealing to a shared horizon of understanding that allows Alpers to read a highly conventional poem like “Lycidas” as genuinely addressed to the topic of communal grief; see his reading in What is Pastoral? 93-112.
communities explains why he favours concepts of pastoral that “find its identifying features in elements of voice, style, and representation” (37), rather than in depictions of nature. Yet, as my remarks above suggest, my view is that the natural settings of pastoral support the metaphorical implications of its representative figures. The poet-shepherd is a figure who enacts some kind of improvement in his environment while always remaining embedded within it: like Tityrus in Virgil’s first Eclogue, “serenading / The woodland spirit” on a “slim reed-pipe” (3), he is someone who makes do with the materials made available by his circumstances. This is to say that the use of nature in pastoral need not always be atemporal, ahistorical, or otherwise unworldly: rather, it can emphasise the ways in which literary creation is a matter of continuing engagement with available resources, rather than creation ex nihilo. The figure of the poet-shepherd and the centrality of nature to the form suggest a view of poetry as a matter of ongoing effort or work carried out in time. This is realized stylistically in the note of futurity with which these poems often end. Witness “Lycidas”:

And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new. (256)

“[S]moke arises already from the rooftops,” says Tityrus at the end of the first Eclogue, “And longer fall the shadows cast by the mountain heights” (6). The art historian Erwin Panofsky credited Virgil with having “‘discovered’ the evening” (300), but, as he himself recognized, this meant not so much a tone of conclusion as an opening up of a relation between the past and the future, the juxtaposition of which results in “that vespertinal mixture of sadness and tranquility” (300) (or, as in “Lycidas”, sadness and hope) characteristic of pastoral. I find a compelling modern version of this feeling in the final lines of Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”:

And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (56)

Downwardness is here coupled with extension, the isolation, casualness, and ambiguity of the pigeons in their flocking together, and in unison. The tone is a common one in elegy (hence “Lycidas”), and Ammons makes use of a similar feeling in the final stanza of “Easter Morning”, which likewise takes for a subject the flight paths of birds:
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. 

(County 22)

At issue in these closing lines by Virgil, Milton, Stevens, and Ammons is something like the moments of temporary composure that Robert Frost, perhaps the most prominent twentieth-century writer of pastoral (and an important poet for Ammons) famously saw as the general achievement of poetry. For Frost, a poem “ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion” (“The Figure a Poem Makes” 777)—what Ammons calls an “edd[y] of meaning” (“Corsons Inlet”) or a moment of “provisional stability” (“A Poem is a Walk”).

In the next section of this essay, I consider some of the ways in which, for Ammons as for writers of pastoral, achievements of this kind are bound up with aesthetic engagements with “the simple”—a field of interest I take to include, not just social lowliness, but ideas relating to the everyday, the temporal, and the particular. Locating him with reference to a tradition of pastoral self-representation in American literature, and highlighting Emerson and Thoreau in particular as significant precursors, I explore Ammons’s use of figures of labour in his poetry, as well as his notion of writing as a daily practice, as this is realized not only in the long poems (in particular, Tape for the Turn of the Year) but across the shorter lyrics, my prime example being the relation between “Corsons Inlet” and “Saliences”.

II
The Common Life

In Part One, I used the readings of Empson and Alpers to advance an idea of the literary pastoral as primarily a matter of authorial self-representation and self-understanding. Casting the poet as shepherd, writers in this mode affirm an idea of poetry as fostering cultural, moral, or spiritual value, but locate this capacity in something like continuing process or effort. I see this conception of poetry as echoing that to be found in Ammons’s work: committed to an ontology of motion, Ammons often finds poetic value and insight to be the achievements of a certain kind of temporal action or practice: a matter of “human concern working with / what is”, as he says in *The Ridge Farm*.

It is the general argument of these pages that the set of ideas central to pastoral provide a useful frame for understanding Ammons’s poems. Matters of poetic self-representation are important to him; and, particularly in the later poetry, he cultivates a “simple” (Empson 22) persona, an idea of the poet as ordinary. Like writers of pastoral, in poems such as *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Garbage* Ammons inverts epic form.¹ The former work opens with an allusion to the long-exiled Odysseus:

my story is how
a man comes home
from haunted
lands and transformations:
   it is
   in a way
   a great story:     *(Tape 9)*

But although great, this story is not to be one of visionary feats and sublime invocations. The kind of greatness that interests Ammons is that of ordinary life:

I’ve hated at times the

¹ In a recent review of Seamus Heaney’s translation of Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Colin Burrow notes “the tendency among 20th-century poets to recuperate epic in the register of the humdrum”, proposing that “domestification of epic … at once give[s] sanction to and emphasise[s] the small scale of an individual life” (n.p.).
self-conscious POEM:

I’ve wanted to bend
more, burrowing
with flexible path
into the common life
& commonplace: (144)

Reflecting in a journal entry of August 1973 on his relationship with Harold Bloom, Ammons wrote, “Harold wants me to be mad, intense, consistently high. I want to be ordinary, casual, a man of this world” (Letters and Journals 415, original emphasis). As noted in the previous chapter, the concrete particularity of this world had been central to his poetry since the terse biographical poems he wrote in the late 1950s and 1960s (“Silver”, “Mule Song”, etc.)—much to the dismay of Bloom, who looked askance at what he saw as the “ecological and almost geological” strain in Ammons’s work and urged his friend to abandon this “destructive impulse” toward “literalness” and embrace more fully and confidently the visionary register of poems like “The City Limits” (Ringers 270). Yet, as numerous readers have noted, what Ammons calls “the common life” assumed an increasingly central place in his work, beginning with the formal and thematic experimentation of 1964’s Tape and extending into his later career.

To cite just a few examples: Bonnie Costello, in her “A. R. Ammons: Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man”, maps out Ammons’s career in terms of gradual and overlapping transitions from the first of these personae to the second to the third; the pose of “ordinary man” enters the poetry with Tape and builds momentum with The Snow Poems (45-58). Roger Gilbert identifies a similar movement in Ammons’s writing from an emphasis on the visionary towards an emphasis on the everyday; he describes the phenomenon with reference to Ammons’s fate at the hands of two of his most prominent critics, Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom (“Vendler’s Ammons: The Snow Poems and After”). Nick Halpern, on the other hand, has attended to the ways in which Ammons’s poetry was from the outset structured around a dialogue between “everyday” and “prophetic” voices or “speech genres” (99); see Ch. 2 of his The Everyday and the Prophetic. Most recently, Andrew Epstein has framed Ammons as one of a number of poet-war American poets invested in poetry as an “everyday” practice (110-55). For discussion of Ammons’s relationship with Harold Bloom, with particular emphasis upon the pair’s “haggling over the relative merits of nature and
Following Empson and Alpers, we can see that pastoral is a mode that takes full measure of the idea of “the common life”. By focusing on what is common, in the sense of humble or demotic, pastorals draw attention to what is held in common: human life as inherently a matter of common plights and common pleasures” that are “shared and accepted” (Alpers, What is Pastoral? 93). And again, insofar as pastoral has been, since its Greek beginnings, self-consciously a matter of appropriation rather than of out-and-out originality, we might say that works in this mode point to something like the “commonness” of the literary enterprise itself: its negotiation of the products of the past and its reliance on the inventions of others. Critics have begun to revise the older view of Ammons as isolated individualist, pointing instead to the importance of social relations in his poetry, and a sense of the common life as fundamentally a shared life is certainly apparent in Tape, which frequently links the poet’s literary endeavours with his domestic circumstances:

last night, after
anger & a family tiff, I
suffered a loss & breakage
of spirit, blankness
as of plateaus: (49)

Nonetheless, with their lone speakers and epistemological emphases, the poems by Ammons I have described so far seem to me distant from the gentle pleasures of community imagined by Alpers in his account of pastoral. “I realize that it is not the same for / me as for others, that / being here to be here / with others is for others”, Ammons wrote in one poem (“Poverty”, Coast 45). In particular, he was skeptical about the capacity of his poems—indeed, anyone’s poems—to generate forms of community by speaking in ways that transcend the merely personal or contingent. At the end of Tape, he addresses his readers:

I’ve given

transcendence, the sublime and the everyday” (167), see Gilbert, “‘I Went to the Summit’: The Literary Bromance of A. R. Ammons and Harold Bloom”.

3 In an article on Sphere, Susannah Hollister proposes that Ammons’s constant shifts in perspective “generate a sense of social belonging at the same time as he holds to his experience of separateness” (663). Gilbert’s writing on Ammons has addressed the importance of emotional connection as well as abstruse philosophy in the poetry; see his “Archie’s Heart”.
you my
emptiness: it may
not be unlike
  your emptiness:
in voyages, there
  are wide reaches
  of water
  with no islands:

I’ve given you the
interstices: the
  space between
  electrons:
  I’ve given you
  the dull days
when turning & turning
revealed nothing:

[…]

the roll has lifted
from the floor &
our journey is done:
thank you
for coming: thank
you for coming along:

the sun’s bright:
the wind rocks the
  naked trees:
  so long: (Tape 204-05)

My emptiness may be like your emptiness—then again, it might not be, and Ammons’s use
of the double negative (“may / not be unlike”) suggests the latter to be the more likely
outcome. As Susan Stewart notes, in *Tape* Ammons makes ample use of Whitman’s strategy of “proleptic greeting”, the poem sent out into the future to meet its reader (“Saliences and Correspondences” 19): “thank you / for coming; thank / you for coming along”. Whitman in the concluding lines of “Song of Myself” proposes a relation between poet and audience that is bound up with the earth and, finally, with death:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh as eddies, and drift it in lacy jags,

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles. (124)

All flesh is grass, so death is the great uniter as well as the great leveller. Whitman imagines his relation with his audience in terms of the intimacy of physical closeness—the poet is a historical person, with a body, and after his death that body is be found beneath the feet of his readers (“oh, the spirit dies, but the body / lives forever, run out of its limits / though and caught up into others”, Ammons echoes in *Glare* [7]). To that extent, Whitman’s lines pursue a final ground or bedrock, death as guarantor of the possibility of unity—a virtual leitmotif, as we will see further below, of works in the Emersonian tradition to which Ammons and Whitman belong. I have suggested that Ammons in poems like “Easter Morning” and *Glare* is also interested in such a bedrock—but he tends to see it in psychological, not social, terms, and in *Tape* he imagines not solid ground but “wide reaches / of water / with no islands”. He remarked to an interviewer:

I don’t really write for an audience. I never imagined an audience. I imagine other lonely people, such as myself … It seems to me that the people who are capable of forming themselves into groups and audiences have something else to go on besides poetry. So let them go ahead … I’m really an isolationist … There is some ultimate element of loneliness in each person … Those are the pieces of loneliness I would like to share at this distance. (*Set in Motion* 65)

Susannah Hollister has insightfully identified this as a basically *private* conception of the relation between the writer and his audience: Ammons’s notion is of atomised individuals, each isolated in his or her “loneliness”, to whom the poet communicates one-on-one (673). The pieces of loneliness do not constellate into anything as coherent as an “audience”; thus in *Tape* he tells us that what he has offered are not connections between things but the gaps between them, the “interstices: the / space between / electrons”. 
Yet if Ammons queried the utility of poetry in generating forms of community, my argument is that his poetry is nonetheless motivated by what I have called an ethic of cultivation—and that, as in pastoral, notions of “the common life” were central to the expression of such an ethic. “Commonness” is multiple in Ammons: it points toward an idea of the writer as ordinary, a “man of this world”; toward a notion of value as immediate, present within the poet’s actions; and toward a concept of temporal repetition or dailiness. By exfoliating these different valences of “the common life”, and exploring their interconnectedness, we may arrive at what constitutes Ammons’s “version of pastoral”.

To pursue these themes in Ammons’s poetry is to find him in conversation with some of his most significant forebears in what is often called the “Emersonian” line in American letters. In the discussion to follow, I begin by highlighting the significance of Emerson and Thoreau to the kind of pastoral alive in Ammons’s poetry. Much more than Ammons, Emerson and Thoreau were committed to an idea of the poet or philosopher as in service of a public—but they render that commitment in ways that are suggestive for our reading of his poetry. For reasons of length my comments on this tradition will necessarily be limited; but, by focusing on a few key examples and episodes from, in particular, Thoreau’s *Walden*, I seek to draw out these three writers’ shared interest in, and valuation of, facticity, labour, and concreteness of register, all in service of a notion of literary writing as worldly action rather than passive reflection. In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the concept of the “everyday” in Ammons, and focus on the ways in which such a theme plays out as an attention to the transtemporality of poetic writing. I conclude by positing a pastoral relation between two of Ammons’s most famous poems, “Corsons Inlet” and “Saliences”.

**American versions of pastoral**

*The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Leo Marx’s classic study of pastoral as an enduring ideological apparatus in American cultural and literary history, is still the most influential account of the significance of pastoral representation in the Emersonian line in American literature. Rather than attempting to demonstrate direct influence, Marx suggests a filtering through of pastoral ideas into American authors’ understanding of themselves and their relation to their country. Writers like Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau conceived of their situation as a pastoral one, a green and nurturing “middle landscape” between city and wilderness that laid claim to the best of
both worlds. But, just as in Virgil’s first Eclogue the dispossession of Meliboeus trespasses upon Tityrus’s easy repose, so the American idyll is always threatened by the advance of technological modernity: the machine in the garden (see in particular 3-33). Marx traces the origins of this phenomenon to the eighteenth century, in which the decline of pastoral as “a fixed body of poetic conventions” (94) was coterminous with a process wherein “the pastoral ideal”—of a “reconciliation” (35 and passim) of wilderness and civilisation, instinct and rationality, nature and art—was “‘removed’ from the literary mode to which it traditionally had belonged and applied to reality” (73). There it dovetailed with such broader cultural phenomena as Jeffersonian agrarianism and “the widely accepted ethical doctrine that the ‘middle state’ [i.e., the one between animal nature and rationality] was the best of all possible human conditions” (100); the recurring motif or “pattern” (94) of retreat to nature and technological incursion in works by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Twain, and others registers the “contradiction” (4 and passim) between this bucolic conception of America and its actual (industrial) conditions. Marx’s account has been central to such more recent defences of pastoral as Lawrence Buell’s in The Environmental Imagination (1995). Observing that “some form of pastoralism is part of the conceptual apparatus of all persons with western educations interested in leading more nature-sensitive lives” (32), Buell defends Thoreau’s use of a rhetoric of pastoral retreat across Walden, “Slavery in Massachusetts”, and “Civil Disobedience” by pointing out that, for Thoreau, nature enduringly served a critical, rather than a normative, function. Against views of pastoral as necessarily conservative, Buell emphasizes that “the ideological valence of pastoral writing cannot be determined without putting the text in a contextual frame” (49; see generally 32-52).

Marx’s and Buell’s emphasis on pastoral as a long-standing rhetorical “pattern”, “design” (Marx 94) or “species of cultural equipment” (Buell 32) in American literature both resonates with, and departs from, the account of the mode I have derived from Empson and Alpers. As we have seen, Empson likewise treats pastoral as a particular kind of literary action: a “mechanism” or “trick of thought” (23) rather than an attempted mimesis of a given reality. But where Buell and Marx focus on nature and on the aesthetic “ordering of meaning and value around the contrast between two styles of life, one identified with a rural and the other with an urban setting” (Marx 94), Empson and Alpers are concerned with an idea of the socially lowly or “simple”, and with the rhetorical and ethical affordances of placing poetic voice in the mouths of such figures. My account of pastoral in the previous
chapter is in part an attempt to draw these approaches together: my sense is that pastoral’s traditional thematic emphasis on nature accords with the “social ideas” (Empson 22) of community and fellow-feeling that Alpers, in particular, sees as the essence of the mode: imagining herself as a shepherd, a mower, a planter, the poet expresses the hope that her literary enterprise might enact some material improvement in her environment.

In fact the concept of pastoral advanced by Alpers and Empson speaks fruitfully to some of the key gestures and commitments of the American writers that interest Marx and Buell. That literary languages might carry some kind of social or affective weight in the world was an important possibility for Emerson and Thoreau, as well as for later poets and philosophers like William James and Robert Frost. These writers’ affection for forms of “wilderness romance” played off against the ways in which, as Richard Poirier has emphasized, they “promulgate[d] in theory, and exercise[d] in practice, a mythology of public philosophy and public poetry” (Poetry and Pragmatism 15). “Writing”, Thoreau declared in a journal entry of January 1844, “may be either the record of a deed or a deed. It is nobler when it is a deed” (Journal 495)—that is, an act, undertaken in sight of, and for the benefit of, others. All readers know that when Thoreau took up residence at Walden Pond in the spring of the following year, this was hardly the retreat from “civilized life” (1) suggested in the opening paragraphs of Walden. Rather (and like all loudly declared acts of hermitage) it was a conscious performance of isolation that took place within the public sphere. The book’s opening image, that of a bird calling at dawn, registers this: Walden is not a personal “ode to dejection” but a public “brag”, one intended to “wake [Thoreau’s] neighbors up” to their spiritual inertia (1). Similarly, the essence of Emerson’s “The American Scholar”, delivered at Harvard in 1837, was a dismissal of the “notion that the scholar should be a recluse, and valetudinarian—as unfit for handiwork or public labor as a penknife for an axe” (49). Instead, the scholar is “he … who raises himself from private considerations and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts” (53); later essays—in particular “The Poet”, included in Emerson’s Second Series of 1844, and the chapters on Shakespeare and Plato in his Representative Men (1850)—likewise emphasise the public rather than private nature of the vocations of the poet and the philosopher: in the former work, Emerson writes that “the poet is the representative. He stands among partial men for

4 Buell 16 and passim, glancing at D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature (1923) and Leslie Fiedler’s Love and Death in the American Novel (1960).
the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (448), while, in “Plato; or the Philosopher”, he suggests that Plato “is a great average man; one who, to the best thinking, adds a proportion and equality in his faculties, so that men see in him their own dreams and glimpses made available” (644).

Following Poirier, I will refer to this line in American letters as “Emersonian pragmatism”—a phrase that, unlike the transcendental, visionary conception of Emerson favoured by Bloom (as well as, for example, Sherman Paul), locates Emerson, and with him Thoreau, in a tradition of writing much invested in the ways in which literary and philosophical writing are material practices emerging from, and relating back to, ordinary experience (“Only so much do I know, as I have lived” [“The American Scholar” 49]). Placing Emerson and Thoreau alongside philosophical pragmatists such as William James draws out the earlier writers’ interest in process, experiment, and material verification—their desire to tie philosophical and poetic truth to concrete particulars (especially natural particulars), and their willingness continually to submit such truth to reassessment. My interest lies in the ways in which these commitments were realized in pastoral forms of self-representation—that is, in attempts to present themselves, and the vocation of the writer in general, as ordinary, everyday, commonplace. In “The American Scholar”, Emerson noted with approval the willingness of artists of his time to treat the stuff of ordinary life:

Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the common, was explored and poeticized … The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of

5 In Emerson’s Angle of Vision: Man and Nature in American Experience, Paul wrote that the angle of the title “was a religious perspective and correspondence, the prism through which his natural eye spiritualised the facts of life” (230).

6 Poirier pursues pragmatist readings of Emerson, Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and others in Poetry and Pragmatism and The Renewal of Literature. Other treatments of these writers as pragmatists that I have found useful in formulating the ideas presented in this chapter include Jonathan Levin’s The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism (1999); Joan Richardson’s A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein (2007); and Kristen Case’s American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe (2011).
the time. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. (68-69)

Emerson goes on to cite Wordsworth as an example of this tendency (along with Goethe and his own personal friend Carlyle) (69), and indeed the sentiment does owe much to Wordsworth’s declared aim, with the *Lyrical Ballads*, to “chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to describe them … in a selection of language really used by men” (596-97). As Poirier has indicated, such venerations of “the common”, if sometimes actual, are in the Emersonian context best understood rhetorically, as expressions of an attempt to position the scholar, the poet, the philosopher as in service of (“embracing”, “sit[ting] at the feet of”) the “commonwealth” (Emerson 448). That such an attempt was assisted by an emphasis on concrete particulars and persistency of verification is suggested by these writers’ appeal to an idea of “common sense”. Ascending Mt Ktaadn (Katahdin) in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau grasps the dependence of truth upon material phenomena, temporally defined and commonly available:

> Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world!
> The *common* sense! *Contact!* Contact! Who are we? Where are we? (71, original emphasis)

“Where do we find ourselves?” Emerson had asked in “Experience” (471). Thoreau here refers the question to a process of coming into contact with material phenomena, against which our answers may be verified. “Sense” means thinking, and also the grounding of such thinking in sensory perception: “We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely *sensuous* life” (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* 408). In a similar manner, Emerson claims of Plato that “A great common sense is his warrant and qualification to be the world’s interpreter” (644); his Plato is a thinker who redeems sense perception by finding in appearances upward paths to the “soul” (638): “He has reason, as all the philosophic and poetic class have: but he has, also, what they have not,—this strong solving sense to reconcile his poetry with the appearances of the world, and build a bridge from the streets of cities to Atlantis” (644).

A signal instance of this patterning of ideas around a notion of the “common”—an appeal to the ordinary, the writer as in active service of a public, an emphasis on
philosophical truth as emerging from concrete particulars—is a tendency to present literary enterprises as forms of labour—“works” in the most literal sense. Poirier notes the efforts of Emerson, Thoreau, James, Frost, and others “to displace onto a general category of ‘work’—something that can be done by anyone—the aura and privilege traditionally ascribed to literary ‘texts’. The inference is that certain forms of intense labor, like apple picking, can become synonymous with literary creation” (Poetry 15). In a move that is particularly reminiscent of pastoral, the function of the poet is often folded into that of the agricultural labourer: Frost’s mowing, wall-mending, and apple-collecting in the poems of his early collections A Boy’s Will and North of Boston (to which Poirier of course alludes), Thoreau’s building of his house and hoeing of his beans in Walden. Stanley Cavell offers of Thoreau’s careful and detailed accounts of his daily activities that “they are not about something else, something past or future; they are themselves … exemplifications, modes, of philosophical life” (In Quest of the Ordinary 20); that his chores typically involve him in acts of building, planting, tending suggests that, like writers of pastoral, Thoreau feels his literary and philosophical enterprises to be modes of cultivation. In the bean field episode in Walden, Thoreau’s description of his turning of the soil, “making the earth say beans instead of grass” (105), is a description of his turning over of his own words, his sensitivity to their history and varying inflections:

As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day. They lay mingled with other natural stones, some of which bore the marks of having been burned by Indian fires, and some by the sun, and also bits of pottery and glass brought hither by the recent cultivators of the soil. When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop. (106-07)

As Robert Faggen notes in a study of the pastoralism of Frost, importing the paradigm of “work” lent muscularity, rigor, and earthiness to poetic acts of reflection and contemplation (52)—made clear that they are in fact intended as “deeds” (Thoreau, Journal 495). The bean field episode accords with Poirier’s notion, shared by Cavell, that the “mythology of public philosophy” espoused by Thoreau—his desire to “speak … like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments” (Walden 216)—was attached to a peculiarly physical
approach to writing: in their purposive troping (“turning”, reshaping and reorienting) of the materials left to them by cultural and literary history, they found not just a model, but an actual, tangible instance of cultural renewal (Poirier, *Poetry* 123-24; Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* 25-27). In this respect, Thoreau’s turning of the soil prefigures Ammons’s reliance in his poetry on a language of “turning”, which, as I have suggested, refers simultaneously to—and suggests the interdependence of—acts of aesthetic troping and the taking up of stances (philosophical, ethical) in relation to the world. The way in which, in a poem like “Corsons Inlet”, this turning plays out as a movement of the poet’s body—“I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning … turned right along / the surf … and returned / along the inlet shore” (*CP* 147-48)—suggests that for Ammons, as for Thoreau, the possibilities of reorientation offered by the poet’s turnings of thought and language are actual as much as metaphorical. It helps to recall here Ammons’s monist image of a “spindle of energy” that encompasses both material and immaterial realms—the difference between the two being a matter of greater or lesser density (*Garbage* 25). This means that there is no inherent difference between the material and the spiritual, between fact and value, between bodily action, writing, and meaning. All are to be understood as arrangements of energy, “dispositions” (“Poetry is Action”, *Set in Motion* 32).

Emphasising that writing is, after all, a “labor of [the] hands” (1) is just one of the ways in which Thoreau posits a bodily foundation for literary work. *Walden* is structured around an idea of the mutuality of one’s writing and one’s active life, what Thoreau calls “that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy” (35) (economy suggests the element of exchange between the two spheres of activity). His use of an empiricist vocabulary—“we might try our lives by a thousand simple tests” (6); the proposal that living at Walden is an “experiment” (27)—suggests a desire, shared by Emerson and, of course, the pragmatist James, to demonstrate philosophical truths in material, experiential terms. He calls this “a sacrament, that is, as the dictionary defines it, ‘outward and visible sign of an

7 Compare James’s famous formulation of pragmatism, which likewise makes use of this figure of “turning”: “A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power” (*Pragmatism* 27).
inward and spiritual grace” (46-47). Thus his careful notation, in the descriptions of the building of his house, the thriftiness of his living, and the cultivation of his crops, of his “incomings”, “outgoes”, and resultant “pecuniary profit” (33, 37, 40-41, 110): “Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account” (41). Hence, too, the book’s most famous episode, the sounding of Walden Pond:

There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it … But I can assure my readers that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half … (190).

We might characterize this as the need for some kind of process of exemplification or instantiation, and link it to the pastoral emphasis on the poet-shepherd as a figure who embodies in his vocation the hope that literature might carry some kind of affective weight in the world. There is in both instances an emphasis on something like the material availability or localness of what is most valuable or true. Thus, if you take the trouble to sound it, you will find that the pond is not bottomless, that one need not know “what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy” (Emerson 69). Emerson writes elsewhere:

The poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought. Why covet a knowledge of new facts? Day and night, house and garden, a few books, a few actions, serve as well as would all trades and all spectacles. We are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use. We can come to use them yet with a terrible simplicity. (“The Poet” 455)

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8 Compare Branka Arsić’s recent proposal that a strategy of “literalization” is central to Thoreau’s philosophical and poetic operations in *Walden* and elsewhere. Through a “twofold gesture” of “turning the word into some sort of thing, capable of affecting bodies” and “bringing words closer to objects, recovering the presence of objects in names”, Thoreau, Arsić argues, hopes to return us to a pre-metaphorical, non-ideational sense of the real—to “the suchness of things” (*Bird Relics* 8, 5).
Those who champion Emerson and his “line” have usually taken these kinds of sentiments metaphorically or philosophically, as referring to a connection between truth or value and the low, the immediate, the particular—and hence to the commonness, publicness, or democratic availability of such truth. The central name here, of course, is that of Cavell himself, who takes up Emerson and Thoreau as pursuing versions of the post-skeptical philosophical stance he calls “acknowledgement”. The alternative is to take passages like this one literally, as pointing toward the sublime cultural conservatism of writers in this tradition (where Thoreau, if not Emerson, is concerned, this second possibility is a real one). This is the same question that faces readers of pastoral.

Ammons’s labours of the hands
That writing is, after all, a “labor of the hands” (Walden 1), and that truth and value are locally present and dependent upon the kinds of lived, concrete particulars that Emerson calls “facts”, were ideas that preoccupied Ammons throughout this career. As we have seen, poetry for him presses the poet’s entire body to service:

[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. (“A Poem is a Walk”, Set in Motion 16)

As noted above, in “Corsons Inlet” he refers to “the geography of my work”, drawing a connection between the action of walking on the beach and the action of composing the poem (both involve a careful negotiation of terrain—terrestrial, mental, linguistic). A desired reciprocity between the physiology of the poet and that of his poem informs the several book-length works Ammons composed on lengths of adding machine tape: Tape for the Turn of the Year, Garbage, and Glare. Particularly in Tape, and in the first section of Glare (“Strip”), Ammons is much preoccupied with the ways in which his negotiations of his medium both permit and limit the forms and cadences, and therefore the meanings or “dispositions”, that are available to him. The tapes he used were narrow (permitting a
maximum of thirty characters per line in the case of Tape, thirty-six in “Strip”\(^9\), and he is keen to impress upon us that this makes writing hard work:

this strip is so narrow:

a rhythm cannot unwind across it:

it cracks my shoulder blades with pressing confinement: the next time

I take up prosody, I’m not going to take up this \((Glare\ 97)\)

His tendency to defer to concrete particularity as a barometer of truth is in these poems transferred to the materiality of his tape, ink, and typewriter. “I’m attracted to paper”, he writes in Tape, “visualize / kitchen napkins / scribbled / with little masterpieces” \(2\):

so

it was natural for me (in the House & Garden store one night a couple weeks ago) to contemplate this roll of adding-machine tape, so narrow, long, unbroken, and to penetrate into some fool use for it: \(2-3\)

In Glare he urges us to “note the actual ink, the pressure of / the keys against paper” \(100\):

you can’t type without dealing with the roller, the

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margins, the ribbon, the paper, the

keys—not to mention thoughts and
feelings: so it requires some attention: (102)

As with Thoreau and Frost, the emphasis on poetry as effortful action issues in representations of the poet as agricultural or horticultural labourer. Here is one of Ammons’s finest later lyrics, “Fascicle”, from the 1996 volume Brink Road:

There’s a rift of days sunny (not too windy, not too cold) between leaf- and snowfall when raking works: away on a weekend, you could

miss it and rain could sog everything slick-flat
or gusts could leave no leaf not lifting
off the ground: stick

around the house, a big sheet ready, a strong-caned
raking strung tight, and catch the sun
just when it stills the air dry: that’s likely

to be before some cold front frost-furring
the saw-edged leaves glistened brittle, clouds
tightening the horizon: then the white leaves fly. (10)

The poem alludes at once to Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and to the “fascicles” of Emily Dickinson, the hand-sewn booklets in which the bulk of Dickinson’s poems were discovered after her death in 1886. As Virginia Jackson has powerfully contended, Dickinson made no meaningful distinction between her writing of verse and other, apparently more mundane, aspects of her existence. Before she collected them in the fascicles, and before they were rendered by her editors as lyric poems, “suspended … in place and time” (90), Dickinson’s works were written as parts of letters or on the backs on envelopes, were packaged up with newspaper clippings or with dead leaves or the carcasses of insects: contexts that speak of the poetry’s origin in “a densely woven fabric of social relations” (90) to which it should
rightly be returned. Ammons appears to aim for some of that same reciprocity between life and writing in this poem, and as a result the overall movement of the poem is from straightforward metaphor into what I have been referring to as material instantiation. He begins quite straightforwardly, in the didactic mode. The implied comparison between writing and raking emphasizes poetry’s grounding in action, and also in time and space: both pursuits require you to wait until the moment is just right, find a large white sheet (either of cloth or of paper) and then to begin drawing together your materials. Toward the end of the second stanza, and into the third, the poem gets more determinedly literary, metaphoric: there is a ghostly suggestion of a boat, the result of the collocation of gusts of wind, sun, the sheet billowing, and the reference to “stringing tight”. This kind of opening on to a scene that has very little to do with the matter at hand is in fact rare in Ammons, who tends to relate phenomena in terms of similarity (as in metonymy) rather than difference (as in metaphor, which is a device of transportation—hence the boat). In the final stanza the register changes altogether, and the suggestion of a comparison with another area of experience is replaced by immediacy, physicality, density: “that’s likely / to be before some cold front frost-furring / the saw-edged leaves glistened brittle, clouds / tightening the horizon”. These lines are very difficult to parse. It is hard to sort out the tangled grammar—in particular, the use of the past-tense “glistened”, which jumps without warning from the future tense of “that’s likely / to be”; he takes another such jump with the present-tense “tightening”. The lines take effort to get one’s mind around. We fall back on reading them aloud, but again, some effort is required: there are too many clusters of consonants (“g"l”, “br”, “tle” “ged”), in general too many consonants and not enough vowels, to make the lines flow. The lines also require some decision-making on our part about where to place the emphases, what to take as noun and what as verb, and so on. All this takes the poem out of the status of metaphor or allegory, and into something like exemplification. It seems inadequate to say that, by the end of “Fascicle”, raking is a metaphor for writing. Instead, in its final lines the poem becomes an instantiation of the kinds of processes of sorting through, working out, weighing up—in general, making an effort—that, for Ammons, are central both to poetry, and to the rather more mundane task of sorting out one’s garden before winter. This thing you are doing in reading, here and now, is what the poet’s writing is.

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10 See Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery, which addresses what the author sees as the error of presumptive “lyric reading” of Dickinson’s work.
Death haunts “Fascicle”: winter is coming, the horizon is tightening and the leaves brittle. The sheet that the poet uses to collect the leaves (that is, to gather his words) might suggest to us a shroud, and the use of “stick” and “cane” at the line endings a walking stick (Costello 158). Such intimations of mortality are frequent in the Emersonian pragmatist tradition in which I am endeavouring to place Ammons. In the previous chapter, I related the title and tone of Ammons’s *Glare* to Thoreau’s lines in *Walden*: “if you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surface, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career” (66). Death is the most basic of “facts”—Emerson’s “terrible simplicity”—and the most common of experiences: thus poems like *Glare* and “Easter Morning” are rare examples of works by Ammons that place significant emphasis on his membership of a community: “when I go back to my home country in these / fresh far-away days, it’s convenient to visit everybody…” (“Easter Morning”, *Coast* 19). The action of the scythe, central to Thoreau’s self-representation in his bean field, carries the point:

Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds … Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust. (108-09)

Death has always been the basic assumed “common plight” (Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* 93) of pastoral, hence the mode’s long-standing association with elegy. Thoreau’s “acquaintance” with the weeds is “intimate” because—as in the lines from Whitman’s “Song of Myself” quoted at the beginning of this chapter—mortality is common to the hoer and what he clears away. As has been much documented, it is because he hopes that mortality and the experience of loss will provide ground for fellow feeling that Thoreau’s address to his readers in the opening chapter of *Walden*—his entreaty that we “pardon” his “obscurities”—takes the form of the famous parable about his losses: “I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail …” (11).11

Ammons also wrote a poem about mowing: “Cut the Grass”, from the late 1960s. In it, he likewise makes a connection between mortality and the common:

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11 See, for example, Cavell, *Senses* 53; Barbara Johnson 52-53; Harrison, *Forests* 230-31; Arsic, *Bird Relics* 325-29.
The wonderful workings of the world: wonderful, wonderful: I’m surprised half the time:
ground up fine, I puff if a pebble stirs:

I’m nervous: my morality’s intricate: if
a squash blossom dies, I feel withered as a stained
zucchini and blame my nature: and

when grassblades flop to the little red-ant
queens burring around trying to get aloft, I blame
my not keeping the grass short, stubble

firm: well, I learn a lot of useless stuff, meant
to be ignored: like when the sun sinking in the
west glares a plane invisible, I think how much

revelation concealment necessitates: and then I
think of the ocean, multiple to a blinding
oneness and realize that only total expression

expresses hiding: I’ll have to say everything
to take on the roundness and withdrawal of the deep dark:
less than total is a bucketful of radiant toys.  (CP 288)

The knowledge that his self is finally dust (“ground up fine, I puff if a pebble stirs”) impresses upon the poet his kinship with other beings—hence his sympathy for the squash blossom and the red-ant queens. But, as the jocund tone suggests, Ammons is uneasy about this kind of identification: he sees it as a version of the “Overall” that, in “Corsons Inlet”, he maintains is “beyond [him]” (CP 148). His identifications furnish him not a sense of fellow feeling, but an edgy, “intricate” morality that is unable to negotiate between discrete particulars and broader forms of connection. Like the statements quoted at the outset of this chapter, “Cut the Grass” gestures towards a basically private conception of the vocation of the poet: a sense of shared experience is possible, but only at the most local, specific level (this ant, that flower), and any attempt at extrapolation issues in a concept of unity that, like
the ocean, lacks texture or purchase: “multiple to a blinding oneness”. Insofar as intelligible speech also relies upon principles of texture or differentiation (the patterning of sound and silence is what differentiates utterance from pure sound), “total expression” or “say[ing]” is the same as saying nothing—which is perhaps why what is “expressed” is a “deep dark” or a “hiding”. We might interpret Ammons to mean, in these lines about totality, darkness, and saying, that the “oneness” the poet speaks of is death itself;¹² this would accord with his use, once again, of the motif of glaring light. But it is not an evocation of mortality that returns the poet to his lived, shared world, which is why the overall movement of the poem is from material particularity (the pebble, the squash blossom, the ants and grassblades) to philosophical abstraction.

What prevents Ammons from taking mortality as (at least potential) guarantor of commonality in the way that Thoreau does in Walden, or Whitman does in “Song of Myself”? At this juncture, I would like to gather together a few of the themes discussed so far in this chapter. Above, I highlighted two central ideas in Walden and in Emerson’s essays: a notion of the public, rather than private, nature of intellectual pursuits (philosophy, poetry), and an emphasis on processes of material instantiation. The two come together in the recourse to notions of writing as labour—but I would hazard that there is also another connection: namely, that embracing the latter (material instantiation) tethers the former (the poet’s or philosopher’s claim to public communicativeness). Finding in material particulars or “facts” exemplifications of more abstract truths (so that “the poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of expressing thought” [Emerson 455]), Emerson and Thoreau aim to secure more tightly a sense of their own “representative” character—their “standing among partial men for the complete man” and therefore disclosing “not … [their own] wealth, but … the commonwealth” (448). A move of this kind is made, I think, in a key passage from Emerson’s “Uses of Great Men”, the first chapter in his Representative Men. Observing the hold of the natural sciences on the human mind, he writes:

The possibility of interpretation lies in the identity of the observer with the observed. Each material thing has its celestial side; has its translation, through

¹² Compare in this regard the earlier poem “Guide”, where unity is similarly associated with death: “You cannot come to unity and remain material: / in that perception is no perceiver: / when you arrive / you have gone too far: / at the Source you are in the mouth of Death” (CP 79).
humanity, into the spiritual and necessary sphere, where it plays a part as indestructible as any other. And to these, their ends, all things continually ascend. The gases gather to the solid firmament; the chemic lump arrives at the plant, and grows; arrives at the quadruped, and walks; arrives at the man, and thinks. But also the constitutive determines the vote of the representative. He is not only representative, but participant. Like can only be known by like. The reason why he knows about them is, that he is one of them; he has just come out of nature, or from being a part of that thing. (619)

As Joan Richardson has demonstrated, Emerson’s reading in natural history (Lyell, von Humboldt, Faraday, and others) permitted him a view—fundamental, as we have seen, to Ammons’s poetry—of “the scaling continuity of matter and spirit” (99; see 66-67). In this passage, the “gathering” of natural phenomena, along with the notion that the “chemic lump” is equally present in the plant and in the thought of the man, lends empiricist density to the claim that the “representative” is also “participant” in what he claims to represent—thus carrying the overall claim of Representative Men, that in their very exceptionality Emerson’s chosen figures (Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, and others) speak to forms of commonness: “He is great who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others. But he must be related to us, and our life receive from him some promise of explanation” (617).

I have said that, in poems like “Fascicle”, Ammons similarly makes use of an idea of material instantiation: in that poem, the bodily work of raking leaves, the poet’s work in writing the poem, and our efforts in reading it, are bound together as demonstrations of, rather than metaphors for, one another. Yet I think that Ammons conceives of instantiation somewhat differently from Emerson and Thoreau. If some kind of truth or value is present in poetry—if “value is represented” there (“Poetry is Action” 33)—it is as a mode of arrangement or positioning (as in the raking of leaves). This is a different way of imagining things from the standard rhetorical and ontological figure Thoreau uses in Walden, which, with Walter Benn Michaels, I take to be one of angling downward: the sounding of the pond; Thoreau’s notion that we need to “work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion” (Walden 66); even his turning of the soil is explicitly a matter of digging down so as to bring “small implements of war and hunting”, the artifacts of the past, up to
“the light of this modern day” (106). Emerson, for his part, is more determinedly Platonist, and therefore refers, in the passage just quoted, to a “continual … ascen[t]” of material phenomena to their “spiritual and necessary … ends”. In “Kitty Hawk”, from his final collection In the Clearing (1962), Frost emphasises the theological, or more generally cultural, origin of such verticular rhetorical modes:

Pulpiteers will censure
Our instinctive venture
Into what they call
The material
When we took that fall
From the apple tree.
But God’s own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation. (446)

Like Empson in Some Versions of Pastoral, Frost identifies as specifically Western, by which he means Christian, a “design for living / Deeper into matter” (“Kitty Hawk” 447)—Empson, as we have seen, calls this a desire to “mak[e] … the immediate thing real” (21). The lines “took that fall / From the apple tree” themselves demonstrate the rewards (aesthetic, and for Frost as for Emerson, theological) of “risking spirit” in this way: the phrasing folds together the doctrine of the Fall with the physical fall of the apple from the tree, allowing us to locate spiritual or theological truth in material particularity—to “demonstrate” it.

If Frost, Emerson, and Thoreau all adopt verticular strategies of representation, Ammons is more likely to arrange phenomena horizontally, on a single plane. To see a

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13 See Michaels’s “Walden’s False Bottoms”, about the “concept or … project of a foundation” (137) in Thoreau’s book.

14 Kevin McGuirk has proposed that “Ammons works along the metonymic, horizontal axis of meaning, in which the relations that constitute meaning occur among elements in shifting and accidental contexts” (“A. R. Ammons and the Whole Earth” 144). This strategy bears
formulation of this, we can turn to section 14 of The Ridge Farm, not itself a poem of labour, but a conscious engagement with the tradition of pastoral self-representation I have described:

I’ve had all the apples out of my basket (or tossed them out, whole or spotty-rotten) I couldn’t wait to see the empty basket, light, structurally transcendent: but some mornings I get up and can make nothing of it: it is empty: I fall into it and vanish: other mornings it is the very starvation I have longed for so long to chide and mock the world with: (SV 11)

With its opening image of a “two-pointed ladder … sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still” (Frost 70), its motif of apples striking earth, and its general evocation of the scenario of the Fall, Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” makes abundant use of the theologically-inflected, verticular measures of relation that the poet would later treat in “Kitty Hawk”. Here, Ammons takes up the central question of Frost’s dream-like poem (also that of its readers)—namely, how the apples, and the acts of picking and evaluating them (“Cherish[ed] in hand, lift[ed] down, and not let fall”, Frost says [70]), might signify beyond their own local, material conditions. That Ammons’s emphasis falls not on the apples (which he happily tosses away) but on the basket that holds them (and particularly on its structure), suggests significant resemblance to another aspect of William James’s thought: the intuition (central to his formulation of radical empiricism) that, once the relations between phenomena or aspects of experience are accorded the same ontological significance as the phenomena themselves, we might do away with the need for a transcendental logic to which disparate phenomena refer (and defer). As James put it in the Preface to The Meaning of Truth (1909): “[T]he parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure” (7). Ammons’s deployment of the colon, which permits many forms of relatedness among the terms linked (equivalence, exemplification, or, as in mathematics, a ratio or proportion) may be understood to do some of the work of such “concatenation”. 
that he is primarily interested in this as an aesthetic question, rather than a theological one: he is less concerned with the spiritual meanings the apples might bear than with the kinds of poetic structures, devices, or “machinery” (to use Empson’s word about pastoral) that allow them to bear those meanings. In particular, the basket suggests metaphor (like the ghostly image of a boat in “Fascicle”, it is a device of carriage), and thus the laying, one on top of the other (another vertricularity), of two essentially dissimilar images or realms of experience—for example, the spiritual and the material. Frost thought all poetry primarily metaphorical in this way—in “The Constant Symbol” (1946) he praises poetry as “saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority” (786). “Ulteriority”, with its suggestion of hidden depths (and motives) is a fitting word for Frost’s poetry, but not so much for Ammons’s: his apple-basket resists appropriation as a figure for spiritual meanings. “I get up and can / make nothing of it: it is empty”—and its emptiness does not tell of existential “starvation”, it is just an empty basket. He goes on:

but then it is a wastebasket and I
put it out to the use of the world:
it collects the trash of the thoughty:
others (litter litterers) give
theirs to the wind, the chance and
random boys: but I don’t think
there’s much of a distinction between
saved and spent trash: trash is what
you make of it: if you throw it away
you are rid of the problem—unless
a little bit is waiting to greet you
your next day round: and there is
no way, of course, finally to
throw anything away to (SV 11)

Ammons here looks back to Tape for the Turn of the Year, where his length of adding machine tape coiled from an ashtray, through his typewriter, and into a wastebasket (“that’s symbolic”, he remarks [Tape 29]). He also looks forward to Garbage, and to that poem’s emphasis upon matter and spirit as greater and lesser accumulations of energy upon a single plane. Putting his basket—that is, his poem—“out to the use of the world”, he positions his
poetry as a form of “collect[ing]”, and contrasts it with the scattering motions of “others”, the “chance and / random boys” who “give / theirs to the wind” (perhaps a reference to some of his more vigorously experimental contemporaries). But dispersal is itself so common a motif in Ammons’s poetry as to undo the distinction, and his emphasis is finally on the dialectic between collection and dispersal—or rather, upon the dissipation of that very dialectic: “I don’t think / there’s much of a distinction between / saved and spent trash”. His allegiance is not to the shadowy dream world of “After Apple-Picking” but to another Frostian sentiment: “strongly spent is synonymous with kept” (“The Constant Symbol” 786). Substituting spatial relations (of collection and dispersal) for temporal ones (of saving and spending) permits an idea of the poem as opening on to the future: “put out … to the use of the world”. Thus his careful treatment of the word “way” at the end of the stanza: appending “to” to the otherwise standard “there is / no way … to throw anything away”, Ammons restores a concept of directedness to “way”—transforms its meaning from the abstract sense of “method” to something closer to a vector or path. It is to this sense of poetry as specifically temporal that I now wish to turn.

**Keeping Time: Poetry and the Everyday**

I want now to examine what I see as a signal instance of Ammons’s appeal to an idea of the “common life / & commonplace” (*Tape* 144)—his development of a poetry of the everyday, in the sense of the diurnal or repeated. In Part One, I noted Paul Alpers’s insight that pastoral is grounded in an idea of the transtemporality of poetry: if pastoral conventions (the poet-shepherd, his song contests) speak to an idea of poetry as in the service of human “convening”, those convenings should also be understood to occur across time, in the very deployment, repetition, and adaptation of the conventions themselves. This, for Alpers, is where pastoral lays claim to a form of modernity—it understands the new to be a product of the old, and is self-conscious as regards its own dependence on the inventions of others.

Thoreau’s rendering of himself as “*agricola laboriosus*” (*Walden* 105) is again instructive in this context. In the passage quoted above (“As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe …”), his efforts with his beans tell him something about the nature of his literary enterprise: namely—and in an echo of the underpinnings of pastoral—that it consists in rearrangement of pre-existing resources, a turning over of what has been left behind by the past, to see what good it might do for the future. Turning the soil, the writer
places older uses of words alongside those “brought hither by recent cultivators” (107). This makes his relation to his words one of cultivation or husbandry (rather than creation ex nihilo — for all the biblical echoes of Walden, one idea Thoreau rarely, if ever, employs is that of the creation of the world by means of a single word). Words have a history of prior uses, and the act of writing becomes a drawing out of these resonances and a reshaping of them to new ends. In Walden this leads to a flattening of the difference between originality and repetition. In a rare use of a conventionally pastoral motif, Thoreau muses that “the echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell [that he hears from the woods], but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph” (83). Our voices are the composites of those that we have heard. This is to say that, for him, as for writers of pastoral, literary creation is both transhistorical, and of, necessity, social: “It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise” (27).

Particularly in his later essays, Emerson evinces a (perhaps surprising) interest in this kind of account of literary and intellectual creation. In “Art”, collected in the First Series of 1844, he had owned that “the new in art is always formed out of the old” (431). The portraits of Plato and, in particular, Shakespeare proffered in Representative Men are of collaborators, synthesizers and makers-do, rather than of self-assertive originals. Plato, as we have seen, is praised as a “great average man” (644); his distinction lay not in the formulation of a new philosophical system or school, but in an achieved synthesis of what Emerson sees as the disparate philosophical traditions of the East (preoccupied, he thinks, with “infinity”) and the West (“delight[ing] in forms … in manifestation[s], in comprehensible results”) (640). And Emerson attributes the excellence of the theatre of Shakespeare’s time to its baseness and its reliance on recycled content: it was “cheap”, a matter of “soiled and tattered manuscripts” about which “it is no longer possible to say who wrote them first” (712). Shakespeare, “able to use whatever he found”, “esteemed the mass of old plays, waste stock, in which any experiment could be freely tried” (712). His plays therefore point to what Emerson seems, at least in this essay, to take as true of art in general: its reliance on the forms of the past (for material) and on its audience (for verification of its claims): “Every master has found his materials collected, and his power lay in his sympathy with his people, and his love of the materials he wrought in” (711). Hence Emerson’s claim, at the beginning of the essay, that “the greatest genius is the most indebted man” (710), and his professed admiration for
processes of translation and of gradual accretion leading to the loss of an original—the Bible, the Lord’s Prayer, folk tales, common law (715-16): instances in which “what is best written or done by genius … was no man’s work, but came about by wide social labor” (715).

To my mind this emphasis on the ways in which literary creation involves taking up the materials of the past and reshaping them to novel ends speaks fruitfully to Ammons’s procedures, and to the version of pastoral alive in his poetry. To be sure, some adjustment of Alpers’s (and, indeed, Emerson’s and Thoreau’s) terms is necessary: although allusions (particularly to Blake, Keats, Whitman, Emerson, Frost) proliferate in his poems, Ammons saw the poet’s primary relation as with the world, not with prior poets. His work partakes of what Poirier finds to be a key gesture of writers in the Emersonian tradition: a pronounced celebration of a “condition of bareness … thinness of social and cultural circumstance [that] … was supposed to be the special plight of American writers” (The Renewal of Literature 11)—what, Wallace Stevens, in the title of one poem, called “The Plain Sense of Things” (428). Interviewed by David Lehman for The Paris Review, Ammons commented that

I have tried to get rid of the Western tradition as much as possible … I never allude to persons or places or events in history. I really do want to begin with a bare space with streams and rocks and trees. I have a little, a tiny poem that says something about the only way you can do anything at all about all of Western culture is to fail to refer to it. (Set in Motion 105)

Although the interview took place in 1994, Ammons seems to refer in particular to the stripped-back mode of the early poems collected in Ommateum. With their allegorical spareness and incantatory style, works like “So I Said I am Ezra” and “Rack” do indeed appear to cultivate a certain atemporality: the poet Robert Morgan wrote that the poems were “as if … found on clay tablets in the ruins of Babylon” (52). A repeated gesture of Ommateum is that of the speaker taking his leave of the cultural and historical—and, often, the physical—universe: “When morning came / I looked at the ashes / and rose and walked out of the world” (“In Strasbourg in 1349”, CP 3; see also “Some Months Ago”; “At Dawn in 1098”; and “Turning a Moment to Say So Long”). Yet at the same time, Ammons locates his refusal to engage with “the Western tradition”, not in a conviction that it is not relevant to him, but in a belief that its proximity does not permit easy or proper treatment. The “little … tiny” poem he refers to in the interview with Lehman is probably “History”, from the 1975 collection Diversifications:
The brine-sea coupling
of the original
glutinous molecules

preserves itself all
the way up to our
immediate breaths:

we are the past
alive in its
truest telling:

while we carry it,
we’re the whole
reading out of consequence:

history is a blank. (27)

If “history is a blank”, it is not because the past is irrevocably gone from the present, but because the present is ineluctably temporal. The blankness—the meaninglessness—of the concept of “history” is one of overload (blankness is suggestive of whiteness [blanc], which is not the absence of colour but the presence of all colours). It is difficult to talk about “history” when everything is entirely historical: “we are the past”. To that extent, “History” accords with W. H. Auden’s comment about the question of tradition in modern poetry, quoted by Paul Alpers in his discussion of twentieth-century uses of eclogue: “If we talk of tradition today, we no longer mean what the eighteenth-century meant, a way of working handed down from one generation to the next; we mean a consciousness of the whole past in the present” (Alpers, “Modern Eclogues” 22).

Elsewhere, Ammons is keenly aware of the ways in which the new involves the old—is a product of it. Particularly in the later poems, his concern with absolute temporality (motion) leads to an interest in recycling. As he explained in the same interview for The Paris Review, this was his topic in Garbage: “The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again” (Set in Motion 102). That poem is dedicated to “the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers,
/ wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers”. In one of the early sections, Ammons once again echoes Thoreau’s idiom of the poet’s active turning of his materials, writing of his central metaphor, the garbage tip:

there is a mound,

too, in the poet’s mind dead language is hauled off to and burned down on, the energy held and

shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind strengthened by what it strengthens: (20)

Garbage is itself a shaping into new turns and clusters of a pre-existing “subgenre” (Spiegelman 57) of garbage poems by American authors, in particular Whitman’s “This Compost” (“Behold this compost! behold it well! / Perhaps every mite has once form’d part of a sick person” [390]) and Stevens’s “The Man on the Dump”.15 In Stevens’s poem, the over-reliance on nature in the Western aesthetic tradition has robbed certain images of their freshness, and it falls to the modern poet to return from “the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew” to the things themselves:

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky. (185)

Stevens’s account of literary history as a matter of accretion and slough16 relates to but is not the same as Ammons’s, which stresses a continual recycling of materials. Matter is not destroyed or created, only transformed, and so energy is “held / and shaped into new turns and clusters”. Stevens’s “shedding” is to Ammons a “revamp”: the later poet does not share the earlier’s concern for the possibility of a communion with the things themselves—the

15 See Spiegelman 57-60. On the tradition of garbage poetry in America, with a particular emphasis on writers of the Black Mountain School (Olson, Duncan, Creeley) see Jed Rasula’s This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry.

16 See also in this regard “The Auroras of Autumn”, where the renewal of poetic resources is figured as a serpent shedding its skin. The refrain of that poem is “Farewell to an idea…” (356).
moon rather than the idea of a moon, the man rather than man’s image (“Here was the veritable ding an sich at last”, Stevens writes in “The Comedian as the Letter C” [23]). For Ammons, there is only the continual reworking of what is already given.

All this is to say that, if Ammons is a poet of the new, the fresh, the stripped back, he is also a poet of “return[s] and return[s]”, to use the phrase from “Easter Morning”. When he refers, in Tape, to his intention to “burrow … / with flexible path / into the common life & commonplace” (144), he not only declares a preference for ordinariness of idiom and theme, concreteness of register—the poet as “a man of this world”. He also expresses an idea that writing itself ought to be approached as a “common”, diurnal activity—an “everyday” practice in the most literal sense.

Such a principle is borne out with great enthusiasm in Tape, which takes the form of a poetic journal kept over the “turn of the year” from 1963 into 1964, and which Ammons claimed (quite falsely)\(^\text{17}\) to have left unrevised, “straight out of the well—good, bad, indifferent” (Letters and Journals 240). Above I made reference to Ammons’s use of adding machine tape as the medium for Tape, Garbage, and Glare. Where in the latter two poems the tape format determined only the maximum line-length available to the poet, in Tape it also determined the total length of the poem: the poem ended when the roll ran out (on 10 January 1964). His attention to the materiality of his medium therefore goes hand-in-hand with what Stewart has found to be the central commitment of Tape and its strongest claim to experimentalism: its attempt to make poetry not (as it is usually conceived to be) a matter of extension in space, the filling out of a given form (whether conventional or organic), but a matter of temporal extension, duration over time (“Saliences and Correspondences” 12-13). One important register of this is Ammons’s intimation to the reader of the shifts and changes of his views on his own work. Some years later he would say that, with Tape, he had “tested the possibility of writing spontaneously—getting it ‘right’ the first time” (Set in Motion 43); in fact what the poem more frequently attends to are the ways in which he got it \textit{wrong}:

7 Dec:

today
I feel a bit different:
my prolog sounds phony &
posed: (5)

\(^{17}\) Stewart, “Saliences and Correspondences” 14.
The frequency of enjambment (necessitated, of course, by the narrowness of the tape) suggests the continuing passage of time, and the poet is often keen to marry lived time to the time of the poem:

11:16 a.m.: a blur of light
   just came into
   the room,
   lived a few seconds, then
   died away: (37)

Yet as his use of the past tense indicates, the writer is always, inevitably,
   lagging behind the event:
   running to catch up: to
   be at the
   crest’s break, the
   running crest,
   event becoming word: (37)

In fact writing a poetry that is conscious of its own temporality means adjudicating between these two times: time ongoing, and time as it is held in the work:

   in art, we do not run
   to keep up with random
   moments, we select
   & create the moment
   occurring forever:

   timelessness held
   at the peak of time:
   (just went back to take a leak:
   jay on the back lawn,
   hopping, looking around,
   turning leaves)

   but this may turn back on
   itself, motion by motion,
   a continuum, held in
timelessness
racing with time,, like
a napkin
burnt in the ashtray, red
beads, flameless, racing
around, splitting, dying,
turning fiber into ash:
held activity: (37-38)
Ammons’s enumerative commas count out his poem’s “race” with time (“,,,,”). These marks are “timelessness / racing with time” because they at once exuberantly propel the poem forward, and also keep it circling in one place, seeking the “right” term or combination of terms (“flameless, racing / around, splitting, dying, / turning fiber into ash:”). The napkin, previously imagined filled with scribbles, is eaten by flames. The comma is then the mark of “held activity”, the paradoxical holding and releasing movement that is at the heart of all Ammons’s poetry, the management of poetry’s simultaneous capacities for going on and piling up (as also in dunes, waves). Indeed, the enumerative gesture is itself highlighted shortly after:
& so & so & so &
so & so
&
so & so & so & so so (39)
As we saw in Part One, “so” is the first word of Ammons’s oeuvre—“So I said I am Ezra…”: suggestive as it is of response or consequentiality, the word marks his sense of poetry as at once in and behind time.

I submit that the idea of continuity in time, or of writing as foremost a temporal practice, is fundamental to a great many of Ammons’s poems. Not only his famous “long / thin” (Tape 1) poems were written on rolls of adding machine tape; many of his shorter works were as well. The manuscript collections held at Cornell University show that “Easter Morning,” “The Role of Society in the Artist”, and The Ridge Farm were originally not stand-alone works, but instead parts of a lengthy and meandering sequence written between March and June of 1977. The sequence was composed on a series of lengths of tape, and, like Tape for the Turn of the Year, different sections are carefully dated (this is how we know that “Easter Morning” was in fact written on the holiday of the title)—the difference is
that, evidently, Ammons tore off the lengths. Like Tape and Glare, the sequence moves between, on the one hand, lyrical flights—sections of text that were eventually winnowed and smoothed into poems like “Easter Morning”—and, on the other, bland descriptions of the poet’s everyday existence—

what a long wait between the class  
ended at ten and the one starting  
at four-thirty: but that’s over now:  
I’ve been to MacDonalds for my Big  
Mac, sweetie, of the day:  (13 April)

the bus came: Phyllis & John [his wife and son] are back:  
I got to the postoffice by 6:30 and  
mailed the income tax inside:  (15 April)

—as well as updates on his progress with various other projects, in particular his painting (from 1967 onwards, he produced more than a thousand watercolours, sometimes for exhibitions and other serious purposes, but often simply for his own amusement [Mills 488]): “I have done a picture or two and / hung the big one I did yesterday” (17 April); “I did two pictures today, one better than the other” (28 April). The process of composition suggests a blurring of the boundary between personal diary and lyric poetry that I would suggest speaks to Ammons’s processes more generally. Once poetry is helped down from its rarified pedestal, writing becomes less a matter of recording or performing moments of sudden, dazzling insight, than of a continual reworking of one’s experiential resources, a poetic “keeping”, to use a Thoreauvian motif, of one’s earthly “house.”

I want to propose that this idea of poetry as involved in “keeping time” is fundamental to a great many of Ammons’s poems—indeed, I would venture, to his understanding of his poetry as a coherent “project”. An idea of poetry’s “commonness” or dailiness is immediately manifest in “Corsons Inlet”: “I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning, / to the sea …” This is just one in a series of walks (i.e., poems), and the

**18** Untitled manuscript, March-June 1977, Archie Ammons Papers 1945-2010, Box 73. Subsequent quotations are taken from this manuscript; the dates are as recorded by Ammons. Gilbert reports that this sequence was originally titled “Improvisations” (“Vendler’s Ammons” 280, n13).
likelihood that the event will be repeated is something that the speaker is keen to affirm at the end of the poem. Here are the final lines:

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will
not run to that easy victory:
still around the looser, wider forces work:
I will try
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening scope, but enjoying the freedom 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.  (CP 151)

We have seen this idea before, in Part One: for Ammons, there is no total perspective, at least in the poet’s medium. But I would emphasize that the openness expressed in these final lines is one of interconnection as much as of loose ends. The probability of repetition—that there will be a new walk tomorrow, that it will bring new “widenings of scope”—speaks to the embeddedness of the event in the speaker’s experience as a whole, and to the poem’s embeddedness in the fabric of the poet’s work. If, as I have suggested, Ammons’s use of the colon suggests a deferral of closure, an opening out onto newness, it also suggests a certain equivalence between sections of a poem: each parcel of meaning is an elaboration on what has come previously, and looks forward to what will succeed it. Although “Corsons Inlet” ends with a full stop, it is bracketed by statements that intimate a connection to past and future poems.

I began this essay by proposing that the poetry stands as a record of Ammons’s gradual attunement to the landscapes in which he dwelled during his lifetime. The suggestion of repetition in poems like “Corsons Inlet”, along with the sheer volume of nature description in the poetry, indicate that Ammons saw close attention to one’s immediate environment as a sort of everyday activity, or more exactly a manifestation of “dailiness” itself: observation not as a single action among others, but as a way of inhabiting the world. Notable in this regard are the many short nature lyrics collected in the volumes of the 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s—Diversifications; A Coast of Trees; Wordly Hopes; Lake Effect Country—and in Sumerian Vistas and The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons (this last a selection from these and other volumes published in 1990). While one would not want to generalize too much about these things, these volumes tend each to feature a few major
pieces (for example, “Easter Morning” in A Coast of Trees or Ammons’s Vietnam War poem “Pray Without Ceasing” in Diversifications) surrounded by a host of shorter, we might say “minor”, lyrics that typically deal in close observation of the natural environment. Retracings and rehearsals dominate: consider, for example, the several poems that make use of an image of tree branches weighed down with rain or snow, as in “Section”, from Lake Effect Country (1983):

The branch sags low
this morning with
held rain:
when the squirrel,
traveling,
hits it
dips deeply but,
shower and squirrel
lost, woofs back
way higher than it
was, a risen road
righted thru trees—
a squirrel’s spent trail

This same sequence—a small animal or bird alights on a sagging branch, snow or rain is dislodged, the branch springs upright—is also observed in “Exchangers” (Lake Effect Country 36), and versions of the assemblage (bent branches, snow, birds) occur in “Dismantlings” and “Down Low” in the same collection (52, 53), and again in the opening section of The Ridge Farm: “The lean, far-reaching, hung-over sway / of the cedars this morning!” (SV 3). Likewise, a knot of poems in A Coast of Trees record the changes observable in a particular brook from the colder months—

The brook gives me
sparkles aplenty, an
abundance, but asks
nothing of me:
snow thickets
and scrawny
snowwork of hedgerows,
still gold weeds, and snow-bent cedar gatherings
provide
feasts of disposition       (“Strolls” 11)
— into the warmer ones:

Lee of wind-skinned rises
long drifts of
fallout snow soak in the thaw:
the brook, the sky bright
for days, steps lightly
down ledge steps:       (“Eventually is Soon Enough” 14)

These poems are unlikely to figure prominently in anyone’s final account of
Ammons’s achievement—but they alert us to a persistent thread in his operations: a
tendency toward repetition, particularly in the field of natural description. “Corsons Inlet” is
itself one of several poems Ammons wrote in 1962 and early 1963 that, with varying degrees
of explicitness, take as their subject the poet’s walks along the New Jersey shoreline.
Initially spread across the collections Expressions of Sea Level, Corsons Inlet, and Northfield
Poems, the works appear together in the Collected Poems: “Expressions of Sea Level”;
“One:Many”; “The Constant”; “Corsons Inlet”; “Saliences”; “Dunes”; “February Beach”.
Most of the poems adopt the same mimetic approach to typography in evidence in “Corsons
Inlet”; virtually all rehearse that poem’s debate between the claims of motion, which prevent
any totalising view, and the desire for some kind of overall vision or stability. Early in 1963,
Ammons sent several of the poems (including “One:Many”, “Corsons Inlet”, and
“Saliences”) to Denise Levertov. (He and Levertov had struck up a friendship in 1961, when
Levertov, then poetry editor for The Nation, had invited Ammons to submit works for
publication in that magazine.)19 Levertov liked the poems, and sent some of them on to her
close friend Robert Duncan (Letters and Journals 214). But she cautioned Ammons against
what she saw as the excessive discursivity of the work, writing that “Sometimes even when
there’s things aplenty … the concrete dissolves in talk” (215), and going on to advise him to
“be ruthless about cutting out poems or sections whose importance to you is that they are

19 Levertov later recommended Ammons for the position of poetry editor at The Nation, and
in 1963 he served two consecutive terms in the post. See Letters and Journals 216-18 and
Gilbert, “Ammons as Editor” 161-64.
part of a sequence of thought” (215, original emphasis). Levertov’s thinking in this regard owes much to that of Charles Olson, the founder of the Black Mountain school of poetry with which she was at the time associated. Drawing attention, in “Projective Verse” (1950), to what he called “the kinetics of the thing” (240, original emphasis), Olson had objected to an overzealous use of discursive phrasing in poetry, particularly description: “[t]he descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, because of their easiness … Observation of any kind is, like argument in prose, properly previous to the act of the poem” (243). Levertov wasn’t referring to “Corsons Inlet” (which she professed to “like v. much” [Letters and Journals 215]), and at several points in this essay we have seen Ammons adhering to, if not so explicitly formulating, a concept of embodied poetic action akin to Olson’s. Yet I think we will ultimately get further in understanding the poetry if we own that there is, in a general sense, something to Levertov’s comments. This much at least can be said of Ammons’s work: there is a lot of it, some 24 full volumes published during the poet’s lifetime, and another posthumously, with further material appearing since his death.20 Ammons’s productivity has alarmed even his sympathetic readers: in a review of the Collected Poems 1951-1971, Geoffrey Hartman commented that “there is a problem of bulk … Perception is enough, Ammons seems to say, or too much” (45). Ashbery, commenting on the same volume, referred more generously to the “swarming profusion” of the poems (“In the American Grain” n.p.), and Vendler wrote wryly that “never has there been a poetry so sublime above the appetite of its potential readers” (Part of Nature, Part of Us 333). McGuirk proposes that Ammons’s “proliferating lyrics ultimately constitute a kind of ongoing environment, a long poem rather than a collection of ‘works’” (“A. R. Ammons and the ‘Only Terrible Health’ of Poetics” n.p.) and as such are “properly read in bulk” rather than individually (“I/We Went to the Summit” 52).21 When he prepared his Collected Poems,


21 Bloom likewise recommends that the poems in Expressions of Sea Level (1964), Corsons Inlet (1965), and Northfield Poems (1966) “be read as a unit, since the inclusion of a poem in one or another volume seems to be a matter of whim” (Ringers 263). Majorie Perloff, for her part, reads Briefings: Poems Small and Easy as “one long poem rather than as a miscellany of occasional lyrics” (69). The idea of the “environment poem” has been theorized by Angus Fletcher, who uses it to refer to a particular style of American long poem the main purpose
Ammons arranged the works chronologically, by date of individual composition, rather than by collection, with a view to effecting a sense of experience transcribed through time—as against what he described to one interviewer as the “fabricated book” (Haythe 187). Showing what Levertov called the “sequence of thought” seems to have been important to him. He also neglected to include an index of titles (although there is one of first lines); the suggestion is that we should read the poems from beginning to end, treat them as a totality, rather than turning immediately to the well-known works. As against Olson’s notion that observation is properly previous to writing, Ammons makes observation his modus operandi. Repeated, experience becomes re-experience; writing, rewriting. As such, what the poet represents as observation of nature is perhaps more properly understood as an act of observance—that is, a continuing process carried out in time.

Ammons made good on the suggestion of dailiness in “Corsons Inlet”: the very next day, he took another walk in the same location, and wrote another poem about it. 22 That poem is “Saliences”, and, in the transition from one poem to the other, we might catch an echo of the pastoral spirit, a use of writing in its everyday aspect to cultivate a sense of stability in the face of change. The relation between the two poems is necessarily one of both familiarity and strangeness. As in the short lyrics discussed above, the poet is retracing his steps (literally and poetically) but, this being Ammons, the wind has already carried his footprints away: the mark in the sand that was the previous poem must be made anew. “Saliences” has two sections, the first of which raises the theme of motion to a pitch unprecedented in “Corsons Inlet”:

wind alone as a variable,

of which is not accurate description of a given experience or reality but the creation of an “environment” that the reader inhabits for the duration of the poem; practitioners of this form include Whitman and Ashbery. See A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination. Surprisingly, Fletcher makes only passing reference to Ammons.

22 In reading “Corsons Inlet” and “Saliences” together, I am following Gilbert in Walks in the World (209-33). Bloom, too, reads the poems alongside one another (Ringers 271-80), but is less concerned with their circumstances of composition. In 1994, Ammons confirmed in his interview with David Lehman that “Corsons Inlet” was indeed written on the day of the walk it describes, “in a single sitting” (Set in Motion 90).
as a factor in millions of events,
leaves no two moments
on the dunes the same:
keep
free to these events,
bend to these
changing weathers:
multiple as sand, events of sense
alter old dunes
of mind,
release new channel of flow,
free materials
to new forms:
wind alone as a variable
takes this neck of dunes
out of calculation’s reach:
come out of the hard
routes and ruts,
pour over the walls
of previous assessments: turn to
the open,
the unexpected, to new saliences of feature.  

(CP 153)

With renewed vigor the poet resumes his task, described in Part One, of “bend[ing]” his thinking to the motion of the dunes. The “eddies of meaning” (“Corsons Inlet”, CP 148) that had collected in the earlier poem are now outmoded, and the poet’s materials, like the grains of sand, must be rearranged, liberated “to new forms.” As in “Corsons Inlet”, this figures as a philosophical and aesthetic “turning”, a shift in perspective that is realized in, or perhaps afforded by, “turns” or tropings in language: “turn to / the open, / the unexpected, to new saliences of feature”. But although Ammons is certain of the necessity to begin again, he also affirms the possibility that something has remained, “certain things and habits / recognizable as / having lasted through the night” (CP 153). The second section of the poem registers a change in tone, and, perhaps, in outlook:

The assurance is
that through change
continuities sinuously work,
[...] when I went back to the dunes today,
saliences,
congruent to memory,
spread firmly across my sight:  

There is a palpable sense of steadiness here, which the speaker appears to attribute to the consonance of memory and observation—the “congruence” of the new events of sense thrown up by nature to what is recalled from the previous day. Memory played a role in “Corsons Inlet” (recall the “white sandy paths of remembrance” traversed by the poet [CP 148]), no doubt because that poem, too, took place with reference to earlier experience. But here it exerts a much stronger force, perhaps because what is brought to bear on “Saliences” is not only the walk of the previous day, but also the record of that walk. The poet’s materials might require rearrangement, but Ammons is keen to indicate that they are, after all, the same materials. Walking (that is, writing), the speaker documents once again the “narrow white path”, the reeds, bayberry,

and a blue, bunchy weed, deep blue,
depth into the mind the dark blue
constant:
minnows left high in the tide-deserted pocket,

fiddler crabs

bringing up pellets of drying sand,
disappearing from air’s faster events

at any close approach:  

Memory measures the space (or rather, the motion) between the events of yesterday and those of today, drawing the past into the present at the same time as acknowledging their difference. As Gilbert remarks, the new importance the weed holds for Ammons (in the previous poem it appeared rather less strikingly as the “blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed” [CP 150]) is a result of its “constancy”, its ability to “rouse an answering memory in the mind” (Walks 231). Yet although familiar, the flower also has the vivid appearance of something seen as if for the first time; its resonance, like that of “Saliences” as a whole, arises from the layering of new over old, salience over memory:
gradual shadings out or in,
motions that full
with time
do not surprise, no
abrupt leap or burst: possibility,
with meaningful development
of circumstance: (CP 153)
Ammons is using “motions” here to mean “phenomena”—a return to the idea, discussed in Part One, that time—or motion—is not an external force that plays upon discrete objects, but rather that objects are their motion. It is in this sense that phenomena are “full / with time”.
In other words, change in “Saliences” is less a matter of the dissolution of things in time than of a certain fulfillment of those things. Objects here are not ruined by time, nor is their ruin merely culmination in time; rather they are their ruin, where such ruin is imagined as something like a gradual disclosure or “meaningful development / of circumstance”.
Contrast “Easter Morning”, a poem that is precisely about the failure of things (in particular, the self) to become full with time:

… now
we all buy the bitter
incompletions, pick up the knots of
horror, silently raving, and go on
crashing into empty ends not
completions, not rondures the fullness
has come into and spent itself from (Coast 20)
The forms of partial culmination we have encountered so far—“the eddies of meaning” in “Corsons Inlet”, sections of poems separated by colons, the gathering of leaves in “Fascicle”, Tape’s mediation between time held and time running on—are manifestations of Ammons’s wider interest in what are here called “rondures”—waves of meaning or order that crest and then collapse, and yet intimate some kind of constancy. The poetic match to this is the idea of the enduring continuity of the poet’s labours. The relation between “Corsons Inlet” and “Saliences” plays out my suggestion that experience in Ammons is essentially re-experience, that writing is re-writing. Daily observation of a particular locale provides a sense of steadfastness, a feeling that, despite the falling away of things in time, “continuities
sinuously work”. At the end of the poem, Ammons even tries a perspective on the “overall”, something that he was keen to avoid in “Corsons Inlet”:

where not a single 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. (CP 155)

Previously the overall was “the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting / beyond the account” (CP 148); now it is that which “reassures”. How has the transition been made? I submit that it arises because although much remained over the unfolding of “Corsons Inlet” and “Saliences”, nothing was “kept”—nothing, that is, except time itself. For Ammons, the poet’s real work is that of the keeping of time, or, to suggest a phrase, the keeping of motion. By this, I do not mean the attempt to hold some earthly thing—an idea, the life of a beloved—back from time, or motion. Rather, I mean the measurement of time in its passing, the observance of things as they dissolve in motion. This is the same kind of “keeping” that must perforce take place in pastoral, because no song can ever bring back the dead, or adequately compensate for the loss of homeland. Virgil, it seems, was very clear about this. Eclogue 9 describes the meeting of two goatherds, Lycidas and Moeris. Asked where he is headed with his herd, Moeris replies that the animals are not his, that they belong to an “outsider”, and that he, Moeris, has been thrown off his land. Lycidas is aghast:

Can this be true? I heard that all the land, from the place where
That spur with its gentle slope just out from the recessive
Hill-line, as far as the water and the old beech-trees with
Their shattered tops—all this had been saved by Menalcas’ poetry.

Moeris:
So you heard. That rumour did get about. But poems
Stand no more chance, where the claims of soldiers are involved,
Than do the prophetic doves if an eagle swoops upon them. (38)

Cecil Day Lewis’s choice of “saved” in this translation is felicitous for my purposes: if nothing can be “kept” in poetry, so nothing can be “saved” there. As we have seen, pastoral has always been cognizant of its own inadequacies: its “claim to literary authority” lies precisely in its “self-aware modesty and sense of limitations” (Alpers, “Modern Eclogues” 20). We may return, briefly, to *Tombstones*:

nothing, though, not stone
nor light lasts
like the place I keep
the love of you in and this

though nothing can write it down
and nothing keep it:
nothingness
lasts long enough to keep it       (SV 53)

“Love” here is another name for the desire for steadfastness that is felt in Ammons’s poetry, and that underpins pastoral representation: to recall a key image in Ammons’s imaginary mentioned in Part One, it is the impulse that makes one seek to safeguard the precious footprint in the dust. But if pastoral seeks to “keep” love in songs of shepherds, it must necessarily fail at its task: Ammons suggests that love cannot be inscribed in stone, or kept in poetry, because neither of these things lasts in time. It can only be kept in nothingness.

This is a difficult passage, and “nothingness” has a variety of meanings both in this poem and in Ammons’s work generally. But one of those meanings, certainly, is that if “love” is another name for the need for steadfastness, in the same way does “nothingness” name the principle of entropy that Ammons finds in all things. So love, that which resists time and seeks to preserve what it can, can be housed only in motion. Love is kept, cherished, only in the keeping of time: the ongoing observance of time’s passing.
Conclusion
Pastoral and the Terms of the Common

We have seen that, in “Saliences”, a concept of phenomena as “full with time” (CP 153) allows Ammons a view of the “overall” (155)—a possibility he had strenuously denied in the earlier poem “Corsons Inlet”. Such a movement permits some closing remarks on Ammons’s concept of poetic vision—remarks that will lead us back to pastoral, and to the significance of that mode to Ammons and other writers in his tradition.

As noted, Ammons’s treatment of change as a certain fulfillment of things, rather than a ruination of them, issues from his ontology of motion, which finds phenomena to have no essence other than their own temporality. More particularly, I would be inclined to relate this theme of fulfillment to a point I made in Part One: that, insofar as motion is essence, Ammons perceives a universe in which things bear their innermost essences on their surfaces. One important upshot of this is a suggestion that the perception of what he calls “spirit” or “radiance” requires no inherently special, elevated kind of vision. As Hyatt Waggoner and, later, Steven Schneider, have suggested, Ammons literalises the notion of the “visionary” in poetry, returning such vision to the physical eye and its actual “act of seeing” (Waggoner 3; see also Schneider, A. R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope 71-103). When, as in poems like Garbage, spirit precipitates into form, vision need only be ordinary light reflecting off the surfaces of phenomena and hitting the retina. I take this to be what Ammons means when he writes, in the lines from Tombstones quoted earlier, that

the woods are a fire green-slow
and the pathway of solid earthwork
is just light concentrated blind (SV 51)

If woods or solid earthwork are concentrations of “light” (spirit), then what we see when we look at them is spirit. Our vision of spirit is its “blindness”—which is to say, its density or opacity. This goes a significant way toward explaining why concepts of blindness or opacity are in Ammons often suggestive of totality: as we have seen, for him “total expression / expresses hiding” (“Cut the Grass”, CP 288) and “history is a blank” because the entirety of time “preserves itself all / the way up to our / immediate breaths” (“History”, Diversifications 27). It also clarifies my suggestion that, when Ammons says in Tombstones that “nothingness” is “the place I keep / the love of you in” (SV 53), he means that he keeps
his love in motion—motion as indicative of a totality that lasts longer than stone or light, and certainly longer than writing. And, because what we are talking about here is of course time, the opacity in question is also that of death—hence the suggestion, again, of blinding light (so that the idea is, perhaps, that we have vision because we die).

This association of vision with opacity is one of Ammons’s signal departures from Emerson, who tends to imagine seeing as a matter of transparency—as in his famous lines, in *Nature*, about the “transparent eye-ball”: “I am nothing; I see all” (10). Elsewhere in that essay, Emerson writes that “[w]hen the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added, grace and expression … If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surface become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them” (*Nature* 33). (Reason in Emerson is the proper kind of seeing, to be contrasted with Understanding.) Ammons’s insistence that the essences of things reside on their surfaces registers his affinity with contemporaries like John Ashbery. Of Parmigianino’s *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524), Ashbery writes,

But your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there
And nothing can exist except what’s there.
There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
 […]
there are no words for the surface, that is,
No words to say what it really is, that it is not
Superficial but a visible core…
(“Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, *Collected Poems* 476)

I find an attention to the surfaces of things to underlie some of Ammons’s loveliest celebratory poems, such as “Hymn” (“You are on the inside of everything and on the outside” [*CP* 39]) and “The City Limits”:

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

that birds’ bones make no awful noise against the light but lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when you consider the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest
swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them, 
not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you consider 
the abundance of such resource as illuminates the glow-blue 
bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped 
guts of a natural slaughter of the coil of shit and in no 
way winces from its storms of generosity… 

Although “The City Limits” draws on a vatic tradition wherein the poet, observing a natural scene, is permitted some kind of special insight into the nature of things, Ammons’s emphasis (with Whitman, to whom this poem is much indebted in style and theme) is persistently on the seeing of the physical eye; thus his “radiance” has the character of actual light flowing “without selection” over surfaces. The qualifier “not overhung or hidden” both registers Ammons’s ambivalence as regards the vatic mode (he is, after all, “a man of this world” [Letters and Journals 415]) and suggests real light, real nooks and crannies. Vision is not penetration into things, but reception, and is located, not with the first-person “I” but with the more generalized “you”—i.e., “one”, with a subtext of “anyone”: “the / leaf does not increase itself above the grass”, he says at the end of the poem (CP 320), echoing Whitman’s conviction of poetry’s affinity with democracy. His use of the verb “consider” (rather than, say, “behold”) suggests that here, as in a poem like “Saliences”, vision is a function of time: Ammons’s scientific bent is significant in this context, because it makes vision not the property of a particular kind of person, but a matter of a particular sort of practice: a set of skills or techniques, or a type of careful reflection—what I have called “observance”. The placement of the word “just” in the lines from Tombstones quoted above (“the pathway of solid earthwork / is just light concentrated blind”) carries something of this: applied to light rather than to earthwork, it suggests, not an implicit elevation of the material world to the status of spirit or “radiance” (as in some concepts of vitalism), but instead the rendering “near” or “familiar” (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 68, 69) of spirit. It is not that spirit is “just” matter—it is that matter is “just” spirit, i.e., that there is nothing more ordinary than spirit.

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We might suppose that, insofar as he advances a concept of the “ordinariness” of poetic vision, its temporally-bound, “everyday” character, Ammons reaches for something like a “commonness” of vision: that he makes use of the common (in the sense of the ordinary, the lowly, the everyday) as a way of engaging the held-in-common. In “Poetics”, from the mid-1960s, he writes that he is

not so much looking for the shape
as being available
to any shape that may be
 summoning itself
through me
from the self not mine but ours. (CP 199)

Yet, where Ammons is concerned, I would be inclined to resist positing too close a connection between these two senses of “the common”. Discussing a recent turn toward the everyday in studies of twentieth-century poetry, Rachel Malkin cautions against a hasty conflation of “ideas of the diurnal or everyday” and ideas of “the common, humble, or shared” (106). Of Wallace Stevens (whose poetry has featured centrally in such studies) she writes that “his ordinaries may not join up” (109). Stevens’s poetry may make use of a thematics of “the ordinary and the commonplace” (108), and may engage a notion of the “ordinary of language”—poetic language’s fittingness to the articulation of forms of value that answer to human desire (109; Malkin here echoes Altieri’s notion of Stevens’s “phenomenology of value”, mentioned in Part One). But this combination of features does not, in and of itself, point in any stable way toward the cultivation of community. “For Stevens”, Malkin argues, “there is no firm bridge between poetry and politics, and the attempt to build one runs a real risk of failure” (112). Instead, Stevens’s “commonness”, such as it is, must reside in a “trust that the subjective can be universal” (122)—a trust that is always unsecured or contingent (“unsponsored, free”, we might say [“Sunday Morning” 56]). In this respect Stevens anticipates Ammons, who as we have seen conceives of the relation between audience and public as a matter of “wide reaches / of water / with no islands” (Tape 204). Notably, in the work of both poets the sense of poetry as addressed to the creation and expression of moments of value is often expressed in the private terms of erotic love, as in Ammons’s reference to “the place I keep / the love of you in” (Tombstones 53; on love in Stevens see Malkin 113-14; 121-22).
I have treated Emerson and Thoreau as more forthright in their claims to public attention. Yet even here, we should note that Emerson’s concept of the “representative” relation between the poet and his or her commonwealth has the character of a potentiality or undertaking, rather than of an achieved end—is couched as a “promise”, as he says in “Uses of Great Men” (617). To this extent, he inaugurates what the Language poet Charles Bernstein finds to be itself a commonplace of American literature:

[T]he question for American poetry—and it has been a question for a long time—is what are the terms of the common? Emerson imagines an America that is in process, where the commonness is an aspiration, not something that is a given social fact. Langston Hughes says that we are a “people in transition.” The “point” is not to hurry through this going because we never arrive. Get used to it! (41, original emphasis).

“Terms” here carries the sense both of “conditions” and of “words”—perhaps, words as conditions. Thus in passages like the one from “The American Scholar” about the poet “embrace[ing] the common” we might detect a certain performative energy—a desire that a down-to-earth scholarly and poetic style might actively bring into being a new, democratic relation between the poet or scholar and the wider community. This is captured in Emerson’s movement from a descriptive grammar (“the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child … are the topics of the time”) into a declarative one: “I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low”.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that the value of pastoral to our reading of writers in this tradition lies precisely in the mode’s attunement to the ways in which literary pursuits of “the common” always have this character of promise or aspiration. I have argued that pastoral is best approached as a matter of authorial self-representation, and proposed as the signature manoeuvre of the mode its laying of the function of the shepherd (or mower, planter, worker…) over that of the poet—so that the poet becomes “common”, and therefore speaks to that which is held-in-common. Yet the relation is always dialectical—is one of difference as well as similarity. This is why Empson begins Some Versions of Pastoral by contrasting pastoral and proletarian literatures: for him, the latter doesn’t really exist as a stable category, because the artist is structurally, inevitably, in the moment of composition not a worker. Art relies on surpluses: it only happens when there is freedom from the need to secure one’s basic means. The beanfield episode in Walden may instantiate Thoreau’s understanding of his literary activity (that it is a matter of working over what has come before, that it involves the body as well as the mind), but, when it comes to his actual
routine, Thoreau is quite explicit—mornings for work, afternoons for more intellectual pursuits: “When they [i.e., his beans] were growing, I used to hoe from five o’clock in the morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other affairs” (108), in particular his writing and his reading of the classics. As Empson writes, “[t]o produce pure proletarian art the artist must be at one with the worker; this is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist is never at one with any public”; for him, this represents “a permanent truth about the aesthetic situation” (14). Pastoral is fully aware of this permanent truth—it is the foundation of its emphasis on leisure, all those images of shepherds like Virgil’s Tityrus “loll[ing] … / … beneath the spread of sheltering beech” (3). As Alpers writes,

conventions of pastoral that sometimes seem callow and in bad faith—the pretense that poor, humble, and deprived people are simply free to sing and woo—these fictions convey the sobering truth that literature can give us our sense of human worth only if we have the kind of space … represented by the pleasures of the locus amoenus. (What is Pastoral? 6)

Thus Empson’s biographer John Haffenden remarks that “the ultimate subtext” of Some Versions “is addressed to an allegorization of the artist’s terrible solitary vocation as the ‘detached intelligence’ [Empson 273]” (394)—what Ammons, in the interview quoted at the beginning of Part Two, calls his “loneliness” (Set in Motion 65).

It is within such a context that Empson places significant emphasis on pastoral as a type of aesthetic “machinery” or “trick of style” (23, 210)—an approach echoed in such later characterizations of pastoral as Lawrence Buell’s, that pastoral is a “species of cultural equipment” (32), and Seamus Heaney’s, that it is an “enabling resource” (180). Kenneth Burke (mentioned in Part One with reference to Ammons’s appropriation of the phrase “symbolic action”) was an astute reader of Empson, and observed of Some Versions that Empson is concerned with a kind of expression which, while thoroughly conscious of class differences, aims … at a stylistic transcending of conflict. We might say that he examines typical social-stylistic devices whereby spokesmen for different classes aim at an over-all dialectic designed to see beyond the limitations of status. (A Rhetoric of Motives 124)

Burke therefore understands Some Versions to be “concerned with the rhetoric of courtship between contrasted social classes” (123). Burke’s rendering of Empson’s argument might usefully be contrasted with that of Richard Poirier, who sees Empson as attending to a rhetorical process wherein “higher condescends to lower” (Poetry and Pragmatism 81).
Burke’s “courtship” seems to me more apt than Poirier’s “condescension”, for two reasons: first, it is attuned to the ecumenical note in Empson’s descriptions, his proposal that “the way this sense of isolation” of the artist from his or her public “has been avoided in the past is with the conventions of pastoral” (18). Second, it is addressed to the ways in which such ecumenical efforts exist always in the mode of approach, and (like other kinds of courtship) are defined by their own potentiality for frustration or failure. This is another reason why, in my pursuit of a modern “version of pastoral”, I have permitted a fusing of pastoral and georgic modes: the georgic emphasis on labour captures this idea that—as in Bernstein’s account of American poetry—the “social ideas” (Empson 22) of fellow-feeling that are central to pastoral are always to come, always deferred. The strength of Empson’s account is that he denaturalises literary devices without hollowing them out or depriving them of meaning—his attention is on the way in which they are actions or forms of work. To this extent, his reading of pastoral echoes Burke’s own treatment of literary works “as the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations” or as “equipment for living” (The Philosophy of Literary Form 1, 292).

This idea of a continuing “courtship” of the common, or a search for its “terms”, is central to the philosophy and criticism of Stanley Cavell. Cavell suggests that when, in the passage from “The American Scholar” quoted in Part Two, Emerson says, “I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low” (68-69), he means that the ordinary is his desired end as well as his scene of instruction: “By ‘sitting at the feet’ of the familiar and the low, this student of Eastern philosophy must mean that he takes the familiar and low as his study, as his guide, his guru: as much his point of arrival as of departure” (“An Emerson Mood” 147); thinking along Burke’s lines, we might additionally imagine Emerson’s stance as that of the suitor. Cavell’s is an understanding of Romantic aesthetics in which the common is not only the scene of transcendent discovery, but what is sought: to adapt the title of one of his books, it is a quest for the ordinary, not just a quest within it (In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism). Elsewhere, in a comment about modernist painting quoted by Malkin in her discussion of Stevens, Cavell writes:

These works exist as abstracts of intimacy—declaring our common capacity and need for presentness, for clear separateness and singleness and connection, for horizons and uprightness and frontedness, for the simultaneity of a world, for openness and resolution. They represent existence without assertion; authority without authorization; truth without claim, which you can walk in. (The World Viewed 118)
“I’ve given / you my / emptiness; it may / not be unlike / your emptiness” (Ammons, Tape 204). An abstract (such as the one that appeared at the beginning of the current document) is a sketch—which is to say that it is preparatory, or takes the form of a promise. It points ahead of itself, and intends to be something fuller in the future. “Abstract” is also intended here in the sense of “non-figurative” (the particular subject of the discussion is abstract expressionist painting), and, perhaps, of “vague”: Cavell’s own descent into baffling abstraction in his list of the kinds of common capacities and needs that modernist art works “declare”—“presentness”; “separateness” but also “connection”; “uprightness”; “openness”; “the simultaneity of a world”—suggests that the forms of “common life” that art reaches for are always, to a certain degree, abstracted from actual, material conditions. Such works’ claims to commonness are therefore unauthorised, in the sense that nothing grounds them—thus they involve a degree of risk. Empson suggests something similar when, in the context of his remarks about the “permanent truth” (5) of tragedy, he writes that the “strength” of any good artwork lies in its being “prepared to waste itself” (5).

Finally, such riskiness, or preparedness to go to waste, seems to me also to be important to Ammons. “If a poem is each time new”, he writes in “A Poem is a Walk”, “then it is necessarily an act of discovery, a chance taken, a chance that may lead to fulfillment or disaster. The poet exposes himself to the risk” (Set in Motion 17). In “Corsons Inlet” such “risk is full” (CP 149), and although the immediate context of the remark is Darwinian (“the demand is life, to keep life” [CP 149]), the language of fullness—in the poem and in the essay—returns us to the theme of fulfilment in time—and, specifically, to Ammons’s notion that such fulfilment is coincident, not with the “keeping” of things, but with their loss. If vision is in his poetry often associated with opacity, so is fulfilment associated with waste, or expenditure: thus the evocation, in “Easter Morning”, of “rondures the fullness / has come into and spent itself from” (Coast 20) and the motif of the wastebasket in The Ridge Farm—indeed, the general emphasis upon garbage—as well as the image of the poet having “had all the apples out of [his] / basket” (SV 11). When, in “The City Limits”, he refers to the radiance’s “storms of generosity”, the sense is of overabundance or superfluousness: each item in the poet’s catalogue (“snow or shale, squid or wolf”) is “accepted into as much light as it will take” (CP 320)—the implication being that there is more available than can be taken in or held. And again, because the poem seems invested in a concept of literal ocularity, the light that is not “taken” by phenomena is the light that is reflected—so that the
surfaces of things express both the temporal essence of those things, and their essential wastefulness:

the universe is itself
love’s memorial,
every cliff-face,
rocky loft having
spent
itself through love’s light,
here held
till love again burn it free:
ninety percent
of the universe is dead stars,
but look how the light still
plays flumes down
millennial ranges  

(Tombstones, SV 53)
Works Cited


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