

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

16



# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

**VOLUME 16**

*Margaret Haerens  
Christine Slovey*  
Editors

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# Poetry Criticism

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# Preface

## A Comprehensive Information Source on World Poetry

**P**oetry Criticism (*PC*) provides substantial critical excerpts and biographical information on poets throughout the world who are most frequently studied in high school and undergraduate college courses. Each *PC* entry is supplemented by biographical and bibliographical material to help guide the user to a fuller understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism Series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, examine a poet's most prominent themes, or lead a poetry discussion group.

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- **Introduction:** a biographical and critical essay introduces readers to the author and the critical discussions surrounding his or her work.
- **Author Portrait:** a photograph or illustration of the author is included when available. Most entries also feature illustrations of people and places pertinent to an author's career, as well as holographs of manuscript pages and dust jackets.
- **Principal Works:** the author's most important works are identified in a list ordered chronologically

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- **Criticism:** critical excerpts chronologically arranged in each author entry provide perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable a reader to ascertain without difficulty the works under discussion. For purposes of easy identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it originally appeared. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to enable smoother reading of the text.
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<sup>2</sup>Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Greenwood Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 410-14.

## **Comments Are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editors.



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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

<b>A. R. Ammons</b> 1926– .....	1
<b>Lord Byron</b> 1788–1824 .....	67
<b>Louise Glück</b> 1943– .....	122
<b>Jupiter Hammon</b> 1711(?)–1800(?) .....	175
<b>Robert Hass</b> 1941– .....	193
<b>Gyula Illyés</b> 1902–1983 .....	230
<b>Alphonse Lamartine</b> 1790–1869 .....	253
<b>Mina Loy</b> 1882–1966 .....	305
<b>Mary Wortley Montagu</b> 1689–1762 .....	336

# A. R. Ammons

## 1926–

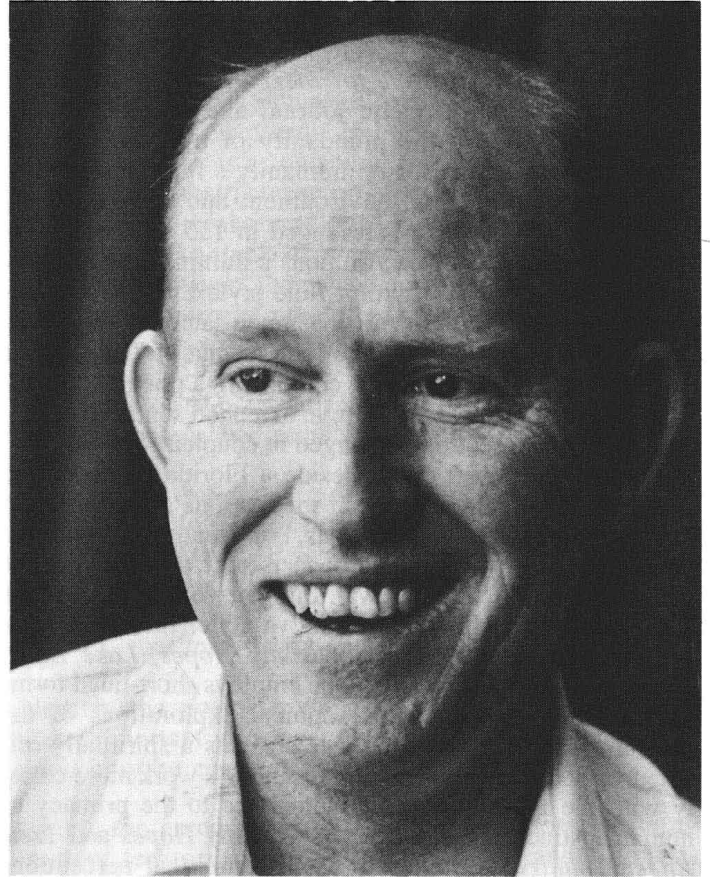
(Full name Archie Randolph Ammons) American poet.

### INTRODUCTION

A prolific writer, Ammons is widely considered among the most significant contemporary American poets. Sometimes referred to as an Emersonian Transcendentalist for his visionary view of the relationship between humankind and nature, Ammons is praised for his sensitive meditations on our capacity to comprehend the flux of the natural world. Furthermore, he frequently endows his verse with resonant images of detailed landscapes rendered in a conversational tone and flowing style similar to that of an interior monologue. Though features of traditional literary movements are evident in his work, Ammons's poetry is pervaded by a modern skepticism that stems from his refusal to attach universal significance to religious or artistic doctrines. Abstaining from offering any facile resolutions to the tensions in his verse, Ammons is concerned with broadening his readers' perceptions of their relationship to the world. Donald H. Reiman observed: "A. R. Ammons has engaged the fundamental metaphysical and psychological issues of twentieth-century man—concerns about the relationships of the individual with the Universe and with his own familial and social roots—and he has shown us a way to triumph without relying on dogmatism or on mere palliatives."

### Biographical Information

Born in the rural community of Whiteville, North Carolina, Ammons was raised on a farm, where his appreciation for nature was fostered. A good student, he graduated near the top of his class in elementary school and high school. Upon completing high school in 1943, Ammons worked in the shipyards in Wilmington, North Carolina, and in 1944 joined the Navy for two years of service. He began writing poetry while in the Navy and, after World War II, enrolled at Wake Forest College, North Carolina, receiving a bachelor of science degree in 1949. For one year he was the principal of an elementary school in Hatteras, North Carolina, then enrolled for a short while at the University of California, Berkeley. Ammons returned to the east coast, settling in south New Jersey, and there held several jobs, including that of a vice-president of a glass company. His poetry began to appear in magazines in 1953, and an inaugural collection, *Ommateum with Doxology*, was published in 1955. With the publication of a second volume, *Expressions of Sea Level*, nine years later, Ammons garnered widespread critical attention that established him as an important American poet. That same year, 1964, he began to teach in the English Department at Cornell Uni-



versity, Ithaca, New York, where he continues to work as a professor. Ammons has received many honors during his career, including the 1973 National Book Award for *Collected Poems: 1951-1971*, the 1982 National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Coast of Trees*, and the 1993 National Book Award for *Garbage*.

### Major Works

*Ommateum with Doxology*—the title refers to the compound eye of an insect—conveys a broad range of expression. In his attempt to present a multifaceted view of humanity's relationship with the universe, Ammons vacillates between a scientific and a transcendental perspective. In the collection *Expressions of Sea Level*, his conception of the interdependence between humanity and nature becomes more complex as he begins to focus on the educative and restorative aspects of the universe. Often using images of sea and wind to represent nature's perpetual motion, Ammons suggests that man is only partially cognizant of external forces. In "Unsaid," one of his most acclaimed pieces, Ammons acknowledges the limitations of human expression and apprehension as he asks

his readers, "Have you listened for the things I have left out?" In *Corson's Inlet* and *Northfield Poems* Ammons continues to examine the complex association between man and nature.

During the period in which he produced the above-mentioned collections of short lyric verse, Ammons also published two book-length poems, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*. Noted for its innovative structure, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* takes the form of a daily poetic journal and chronicles Ammons's thoughts on the mundanity of everyday life. In *Sphere* Ammons focuses on humanity's futile attempts to impose structure on the environment and to halt natural forces. While this work is arranged in 155 numbered sections of four tercets each, Ammons's minimal use of punctuation endows *Sphere* with a fluid style that conveys nature's inexorable motion. In the much later volume *Garbage*, Ammons returned to the long format of *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Sphere*, composing a poem that comprises what appears to be a single extended sentence, divided into eighteen sections, arranged in couplets. Starting with the image of a trash dump beside a Florida highway, the poem develops into a series of meditations about different kinds of waste, decay, and debris, but eventually makes the point that what we term garbage is part of the cycles of nature, evolution, and renewal. In other volumes, Ammons has tended toward a less discursive style. In such collections as *A Coast of Trees*, *Worldly Hopes*, *Lake Effect Country*, and *Sumerian Vistas*, he employs short-lined forms to create increasingly philosophical explorations of the natural world. *A Coast of Trees* presents a spiritually oriented view of nature and aligns Ammons's work more closely with the Romantics in its adherence to the primacy of human instinct and emotion. In *Worldly Hopes* and *Lake Effect Country*, Ammons fuses his empirical perceptions with hymn-like tributes to nature.

### Critical Reception

Commentators have been almost uniformly complimentary of Ammons's work. Most commend his ability to provoke thought about the complexity of human nature through reflection upon our attitudes toward and understanding of the environment. Because of his iconoclastic views and association of nature and humankind, Ammons is customarily acknowledged to be a literary descendent of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Clearly critics perceive Ammons's poetry to be distinctly American, and other comparisons find him frequently linked to Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Emily Dickinson. Though Ammons has received high praise for his Whitmanesque extended interior monologues, some reviewers object that his poems can be self-indulgent and wordy, problems exacerbated by the occasional impression of structural arbitrariness and by his preference for minimal punctuation. *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, for example, has been called gimmicky because it was composed on an adding machine tape, which artificially prescribed the shape of the poem. Nevertheless, Ammons's manipulation of language is also recognized as one of his strengths. Com-

mentators remark on the rhythm and phrasing of his poetry, finding them imitative of spoken language, and judge his vocabulary to be engaging and stimulating.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Poetry

*Ommateum with Doxology* 1955  
*Expressions of Sea Level* 1963  
*Corson's Inlet* 1965  
*Tape for the Turn of the Year* 1965  
*Northfield Poems* 1966  
*Selected Poems* 1968  
*Uplands* 1970  
*Briefings: Poems Small and Easy* 1971  
*Collected Poems, 1951-1971* 1972  
*Sphere: The Form of a Motion* 1974  
*Diversifications: Poems* 1975  
*For Doyle Fosso* 1977  
*Highgate Road* 1977  
*The Selected Poems: 1951-1977* 1977  
*The Snow Poems* 1977  
*Breaking Out* 1978  
*Six-Piece Suite* 1978  
*Selected Longer Poems* 1980  
*Changing Things* 1981  
*A Coast of Trees: Poems* 1981  
*Worldly Hopes* 1982  
*Lake Effect Country: Poems* 1983  
*Sumerian Vistas: Poems, 1987* 1987  
*The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons* 1990  
*Garbage* 1993  
*The North Carolina Poems* 1994  
*Fear* 1995  
*Brink Road* 1996

### Other Major Works

*Set in Motion: Essays and Interviews* 1996

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## CRITICISM

### Laurence Lieberman (essay date 1964-65)

SOURCE: "Poetry Chronicle: Last Poems, Fragments, and Wholes," in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Winter, 1964-65, pp. 537-43.

[Lieberman is an American poet and critic whose verse combines the particular and the visionary in its celebration of the physical world. The long, flowing lines and eloquent language of his poems set them apart from the works of his contemporaries. Unassigned Frequencies:

American Poetry in Review, 1964-1977 (1977) collects Lieberman's reviews of the works of many important contemporary poets. His most recent book, *Beyond the Muse of Memory: Essays on Contemporary American Poets*, continues his exploration of modern American poetry. In the following excerpt from a review of Ammons's *Expressions of Sea Level* and several books by other poets, Lieberman calls attention to the talent of Ammons and James Dickey in the long poem genre.]

James Dickey and A. R. Ammons are evolving a poetic line that works wonders in the extended lyric. In composing the longer poem, most poets rely on sectional subdivisions and distinct variations in form between sections to keep the poem from growing tedious. But in so doing they jeopardize the key advantage that Dickey and Ammons get from writing on a broad scale—the unbroken flow of language.

For Ammons, words on the page weave in and out like crosscurrents in a calm river:

... shapeless, undependable  
powerless in the actual  
which I rule, I  
  
will not  
make deposits in your bank account  
or free you from bosses  
    in little factories,  
will not spare you insult, will not  
protect you from  
men who  
    have never heard of modes, who  
do not respect me  
or your knowledge of me in you;  
    men I let win,  
their thin tight lips  
humiliating my worshippers:  
  
I betray  
him who gets me in his eyes . . .

There is a quality of hesitation and search in the variable movement of the line down the page. The center of gravity in the lines shifts from left to right to center. In most of Ammons's poems, a sort of variable but recognizable stanza pattern emerges from the movement. In others, there is a relatively unbroken thrust down the page, as in the passage quoted. . . .

Many a contemporary poet handles language like a mason laying a foundation for a house—the words are so many concrete blocks to be cemented into a wall. Dickey and Ammons treat language with special attention to tone, modulation, and breathing space; all are suavely managed. Particular words and phrases rarely call attention to themselves; they must swing with the abiding rhythm and movement. It is hard to conceive of this poetry being composed slowly, word by word. There is too much continuity and rhythmic sweep. . . .

Both Dickey and Ammons tend to write very long sweeping verse sentences that read quickly. There is more technical excitement for the reader of Ammons; I find myself moving down the page and weaving back and forth simultaneously, hunting the rhythmical center of each line. It's a poetry of crosscurrents, and a reader finds he is rowing *with* the current and *into* the current at once.

A quality that makes both of these poets better able to work on a larger scale than most of their contemporaries is the extraordinary power of mind they bring to bear on experience in their poems. In both, the depth and breadth of concentration is astonishing. Surprisingly, neither poet suffers from abstractness or obscurity, two hazards that poetry which thinks very hard is usually prone to. Their poetry seems to think its way *into* experience and things in life, not *around* them, and never loses a close touch with the contours of creature, landscape, and seascape:

... here on the  
bottom of an ocean of space  
we babble words recorded  
    in waves  
of sound that  
cannot fully disappear,  
    washing up  
like fossils on the shores of unknown worlds . . .

(from "Risks and Possibilities"—Ammons)

Ideas in the poems seem less important in themselves, more important as conveyors or conductors that lead the mind into the center of happening.

I think the extended lyric is one of the most fertile and inviting territories for the poet of today, and I hope we can look to Ammons and Dickey for more solid achievement in this genre. It will take some doing to offset the movement toward fragmentation of experience set in motion by the shorter lyrics of William Carlos Williams in the twenties, and to initiate a return to structures that are large enough to cope with our most important experiences.

### Jim Harrison (essay date 1966)

SOURCE: "Muse & Hearth," in *Poetry*, Vol. CVII, No. 4, January, 1966, pp. 330-31.

[An acclaimed American novelist, short story writer, and poet, Harrison is best known for his fiction but has published nine collections of verse. In the following review, he perceives some flaws in *Tape for the Turn of the Year* and *Corsons Inlet* but states: "In both books, I sense a poet on the eve of a breakthrough."]

A. R. Ammons' *Tape for the Turn of the Year* was composed on a roll of adding machine tape; it purports to be a long poem in the form of a journal covering some thirty-five days in the poet's life. There are a dozen or so things that make it fatally wrong as a long poem—the fact of its length alone was predicated by the size of the tape, its



form determined by the width of the tape and the number of days. The whole idea is more than a bit fey; we have weather descriptions, nature walks, all manner of cracker barrel phenomenology; the poet pumping out large unleavened portions of his brain, the day in shorthand, creaking dross, rather house-broken observations on poetics, jokes, much fallow ground that might better have been left that way. It is a disastrously ambitious piece of work; the marriage of the poem and journal a bad one.

Despite these crude reservations *Tape for the Turn of the Year* has much to recommend itself. There are many fine short lyrics hidden within it, sections of incredible fertility, the texture rich, the poet in completely new territory. I think it is the poem's total intemperance that saves it. Ammons is a poet with an essentially sweet consciousness at home with the quality of strangeness that makes him a very individual poet. Ammons does not limit himself to colonizing like so many of his gifted contemporaries; he explores. When he invokes the muse he does not do so fatuously; rather than the small household god or mistress of the academy that we are accustomed to, she takes the form of the "perpetual other woman" whom poets have served for centuries. It is a tribute to the poet that he sometimes makes her whine in the same sense that John Skelton did in his "*Merry Margaret*," makes her yield to him the volatile gift of the poem. Ammons writes, "the predator / husbands his prey". He might well take this as a cautionary note for himself, an admonition.

Much of *Corsons Inlet* is perhaps too typical of the better conservative poetry being written now; a poetry of things closely observed and gracefully described, of the imagination at reasonable harmony with itself. There's a great deal of unpretentious technical solidity and little of the diffuseness and ambling that marred *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. I think, though, that the more successful poems in the collection are the least orthodox. Of the seven exceptional poems in *Corsons Inlet* (I would draw attention to "*Moment*," "*Jungle Knot*," "*Dark Song*," "*Butterflyweed*," "*Two Hymns*," "*The Strait*," "*Libation*"), "*Jungle Knot*" and "*Two Hymns*" are truly fine. Our senses rupture, are enlivened, awed; there are no false notes. I quote part of the first of the "*Two Hymns*":

So when the year had come full round  
I rose  
and went out to the naked mountain  
to see  
the single peachflower on the sprout  
  
blooming through a side of ribs  
possibly a colt's  
and I endured each petal separately  
and moved in orisons with the sepals . . .

In both books I sense a poet on the eve of a breakthrough, a poet who has far from exhausted his equipment. I think A. R. Ammons' success—it could have very large dimensions—will depend on his ability to harbor, to cage his gift with greater cunning while still taking those steps in the dark that make his best work so radically original and fresh.

#### Ammons receives mention in a discussion of new poets:

One writer (Ammons) seems [in *Ommateum*] to speak to an audience so vaguely-defined that it may be no more substantial than the audience of "language itself." . . .

[Later, the critic continues]: There is one poet here, Ammons, whose imaginary audience, and whose tone-of-voice, remains elusive. If he is speaking to anyone, or anything, he seems, as I have suggested, to be holding converse with the language itself. The result is poetry that does not exactly seem to want to be listened to, not to say, "understood." Yet, oddly enough, the rhythms of these poems seem more individualized than that of the poems by the other writers here—and at least one of his poems is compelling. In this experimental piece, he has taken the treacherous model of Whitman's style—building loosely declamatory additive sentence variations around a single visual symbol—and hammered out a potent poem. The general effect is like hearing a symphony orchestra in its shell, playing a resonant work from a great distance.

With ropes of hemp  
I lashed my body to the great oak  
saying odes for the fiber of the oakbark  
and the oakwood saying supplications  
to the root mesh . . .

Reuel Denney, "Invitations to the Listener: Nine Young Poets and Their Audiences," in *Poetry*, October, 1956.

#### John Logan (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: "Interior and Exterior Worlds," in *The Nation*, New York, Vol. 204, No. 17, April 24, 1967, pp. 541-42.

[Logan is an American poet and critic whose verse is generally regarded as intense and personal as well as distinctly humanist in its central concern with humankind and its potential. He has served as the poetry editor of both the *Nation* and the *Critic* and is also the founder and coeditor of *Choice*, a magazine of poetry and graphics. In the following review of *Northfield Poems*, Logan comments on the relationship between the external world and the poet's internal life, as they are depicted in Ammons's early poetry. Logan concludes by declaring Ammons "a major talent."]

A. R. Ammons is one of the most prolific and, at the same time, most intelligent gifted poets of recent years. *Northfield Poems* is his third book to appear in two years—with *Corsons Inlet* and *Tape for the Turn of the Year*—and there were two others in the previous ten-year period; *Ommateum* (which was privately printed) and *Expressions of Sea Level*.

*Tape for the Turn of the Year*, perhaps the most interesting single volume, is a continuing poem, mainly unre-