

03
**ON SMALLER FORMS OF LIFE, LANDSCAPE AND
 THE SEASONS IN A. R. AMMONS'S POETRY**

*Dr. Salil Varma R., Associate Professor, Post Graduate Department of English,
 St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Calicut*

Abstract:

The paper attempts to analyze the presence of the animal world in AR Ammons' Collected Poems 1951-1971. Attention is given to explore the relation that Ammons' builds up between human beings and the world around and how this world is significantly determined by a vision that takes seriously the presence of the smaller forms of life. The world vision of Ammons is informed by the need to revise an anthropocentric definition of the world. Consequently, his poetry is noted for its rejection of a privileged view of human life. Collected Poems 1951-1971 with its focus on minute forms of life and its Thoreausque elements won for Ammons his first National Book Award for Poetry. With more two dozen volumes of poetry that spanned a writing career of nearly six decades Ammons celebrations of daily life brought him nearly all the important awards of the American literary scene including the Bollingen Prize, and National Book Critics Circle Award. Ammons's understanding of the forms of life other than the human and his descriptions of the same are firmly situated in landscapes subjected to the changes brought about by the weather and the seasons.

Keywords: *Animal world, Anthropocentric, Anthropomorphic, Post-Christian, Seasons, Weather.*

Archie Randolph Ammons grew up on a farm southwest of Whiteville, North Carolina, “full of grapes, peaches, pears, pecans, guinea fowl, peacocks, geese, and of course cattle and pigs” with no family around except for one quarter mile down the road” (Albright 47- 48) his early poetry bears sufficient impress of these images of animal life, a presence which persisted to the end of his writing. His poetry is characterised by a vision of existence where the relative insignificance of the animal world is questioned. He exhibits a growing awareness that is post-Christian in that he refuses to assign primary importance to man's endeavours and refuses to accept the intentions of the various projects undertaken by man. Man's egotistic stances are looked upon with suspicion in his poetry, and one of the early poems of Ammons to look into this aspect of existence is "I Broke a Sheaf of Light" where he builds up a number of domestic images. The poem with its images of the cows in pasture and the squealing pigs, and neighing that comes from the stables betrays some degree of self-centeredness with its repeated use of the first person singular pronoun but as his poetry matures, the subjective element comes to be more and more insignificant and the impression of a cool, naturalist mind recording as faithfully as possible the external world of life, becomes prominent in the later poems of *Collected Poems 1951-1971*.

“Some Months Ago” and “Doxology” continue with the preoccupation with the world of animals and the technique of placing them in a landscape bound by the weather and the seasons. Rain and mist mark this landscape where birds peck dew and the spider runs out of its tunnel. Doxology continues in the same vein when he writes of the rain in the morning and the robin pecking a lady bug in its beak. The early poems in *Collected Poems* show an anthropomorphic and anthropocentric imagination at work as in “I Went Out to the Sun” and “I came upon a plateau” with its images of sun and moon displaying human characteristics and the latter poem ends with an image of a snake in the landscape.

The peaks coughing bouldered

laughter shook to pieces
and the snake shed himself in ripples
across a lake of sand (CP, 32)

The receptive mind picks up the finer details of animal life and “Sumerian Vistas” is a case in point where he writes of the emotional impact that the world of animals creates:

on the southern salty
banks near the gulf the ducks
and flying vees of geese have
shunned me: the bouncing spider's net,
strung wet over narrows of reeds, has
broken terror dawn cold across my face:
rising . . . (CP, 32)

Ammons here speaks of the emotional impact that the world of animals has on him. As his poetry matures, the subjective response is replaced by the workings of a cool, naturalist mind recording as faithfully as possible the external world of life. Weather and seasons provide the frameworks for Ammons to view the world of animals, birds and insects. Return open with images of drought hit landscape with the vegetation wilting and poem moves on to record how the animal world responds to it.

dangling buzzards
drop to sleep
in ledge and
cactus shade to rock held
reservoirs of night (CP, 62)

Like life, death too, is part of the world of the world of animals that Ammons presents in his poetry and in “Hardweed Path Going” which begins with images of life in the form of Jo reet and the approaching winter moves to the experience of death of the animals in the closing lines of the poem, Ammons writes of Sparkle, the hog that will be killed the next day, and the experience is an integral part of weather and the seasons. He imagines Sparkle's carcass “hanging upside down / hardening through the mind and night of the first freeze” (CP, 68). For Ammons, the death of the domestic animals is a part of agrarian reality, and is linked to weather. In “Prodigal”, Ammons writes of a lonely figure in the landscape, a figure sensitive to the signs of animal life which sees “flotillas of wintering ducks weathering the night” (CP, 76). In these landscapes, where signs of human life are rare, Ammons allows signs of other forms of life to intensify the sense of loneliness. Josephine Miles's observes: “the peopled world or constructed world are not his chief substance”(23). This particular quality of his writing, Ammons himself traced to his life on the farm. Ammons told Nancy Koeber:

It was a time of tremendous economic and spiritual privation, even loneliness. But all this privation was compensated for by a sense of the eternal freshness of the land itself. So I substituted for normal human experience, which was unavailable to me much of the time, this sense of identity with the things around me. (12)

The things around him include the landscape in all its diverse forms and phases and include the teeming life in it. Concerns about the possibilities of identity appear making some poems abstract and cerebral but there is always a return to the concrete and the particular which is marked by the weather, seasons and forms of life other than the human as in “Risks and Possibilities” where life is observed in the context of weather:

Dry thunder in the locust weed!
 The supple willow -slip leafless in winter!
 The chill gibbers of the frog
 stilled in night snake's foraging thrust!

 repeating midnight these songs for these divisions.

(CP, 83 - 84)

The idea of a return to the present amidst intellectual discussions suggests a return to the concrete and the particular and clearly conveys Ammons's preferences and priorities though the preferences are not as obvious as in his later writings where the frequency of such returns is forcefully presented by him that the ideology behind such a technique is less veiled.

The human figure in the landscape is seen in the company of snakes, frogs and birds, and it is the naturalist that is projected in most of the poems. The personal mode is sparingly used and often a review of the landscape is undertaken without any display of emotion as in "I Came upon the Plateau". The eye is deeply absorbed in the landscape trying to recapture all the possible experiences and the details and the finer points never cease to fascinate the poet.

Initially the animal world is evoked for the purpose of creating a subject in ways that may be related and defined in terms of those aspects of nature and life at large. This is one way of approaching the subject as understood by Ammons, but his later poetry is, in a way, the poetry of non-subject, and the subject is less and less dependent on the impressions that the world of animals creates in him. He records the animal life around, with minimal interruptions of the influence that this world brings about in his mind.

Ammons's interest in the minute and the insignificant (as seen from an anthropocentric perspective) begins early in his writing and the world of the smaller forms of life is a powerful presence in his early poetry. He believes that process, as he sees it, is more available to human figures surrounded by these small insects, and he entertains this thought in "Requiem". Every attempt is made by Ammons to absorb these into his writing and the involvement that his poetry conveys and demands is very high in a poem like "Sumerian". The insect world is observed mainly as a search into the process of life as how it is reflected in spheres other than the one of human beings. This interest in the smaller forms of life Ammons traced to some incidents in his life in his conversation with Nancy Koeber where he spoke of the shift from North Carolina to Millville, which precluded the possibility of distance vision. Of this shift Ammons says: "After readjusting my vision to look for small things, I found [Millville] very beautiful indeed and became very much attached to the shore and land there." (12)

The insect world offers the context for another more serious purpose, that is, the articulation of the themes of interrelatedness and a consequent idea of the perspective as a vital factor in the understanding of all reality. The theme of interrelatedness in his early poetry does not present itself as a fantasy or as an abstraction. The interrelatedness is suggested but never elaborated to convey the impression of a poem of interrelatedness in action in the widest possible sense. The scope is only suggested, the possibilities are never fully or even partially realized, and the scope is hinted at in the most skeletal form and the animal world as a part of the environment, attracts and affects Ammons strongly in his later writing that it becomes an obsessive theme only towards the later poems of *Collected Poems*.

Ammons often stretches the theme of interrelatedness to the selection of imagery with the result that one species of life is seen in terms of another. Interchangeability and interdependence are the watchwords in his writing and often land is defined as an animal and vice versa, and this rapid switching creates a fluid concept of reality which undermines the traditional quality central to the older notions of reality. Both "Risks and Possibilities" and "Interval" are based on the belief of the interchangeability of images, an idea that Ammons derives from the notion of sameness that is possible and logically defensible at the level of perception. Mere observation of the phenomenon itself is sometimes the theme of the poems

of Ammons where the judgment is withheld, and a condition with almost no trace of the poet's judgment and subjective impressions exists, a technique, which in itself becomes an implicit judgment of the landscape.

The poet's response to this world is relevant in that there is development or change in the attitude of the poet. Ammons's early poetry is marked by a tendency to present the self as greatly troubled at the personal level by the world of the smaller life. A more sensitive self is the impression Ammons communicates in the early poems. He acknowledges its emotional value and it is rendered as a very powerful experience having some lasting and transformative qualities. Ammons's interest in the animal world is also partly due to the innumerable patterns of reality that an observation of the animal world offers. These patterns are often visual patterns of change that the landscape accommodates due to the flight of birds from trees, of rabbits on the grass, squirrels swinging from branch to branch and the flight of bees from flowers in bloom. Motion fascinates Ammons, motion as transience, motion as form, motion as the manifestation of time and he uses these images of birds and insects sometimes as a context to discuss the forms of reality as in "Epiphany" which begins with a very concrete image of a wasp striking the window pane like a rain drop and swiftly moves to questions about the consolations offered by a sensuous understanding of reality to conclude with thoughts of "hard realizations, opaque as death" (CP, 98). The poem is significant in the general pattern of Ammons's poetry since Ammons here sees the wasp as a drop of rain suggesting the association between the life of animals and natural phenomena.

Ammons's poetry records and exploits the dialectics of tension between experience and abstraction, between that which is immediately visible and the abstract thoughts which are more clinical and disinterested, and the bifocal vision that Ammons so often displays, extends to the attitude towards the experience of the animal world, comparable to the attitudes to weather that he entertains.

Poems on weather fall into two categories, poems where weather is a reality felt through the senses and poems where weather is a reality placed against the notions of reality. "Motion for Motion", a case in point, begins with an image of the water beetle in the sandy stony bottom of the stream. This interest in the small and insignificant is part of Ammons's willingness to entertain the small and even the microscopic, and from this simple seeing Ammons proceeds to a more complex seeing that is possible with a greater knowledge of the scientific reality of which he writes:

If I knew the diameters
of oval and beetle the
depth of the stream, several
indices of refraction
and so forth
I might say why
The shadow out sizes the
beetle. (CP, 127)

Ammons proceeds from this 'lecture' to look into the possibilities of the reality presented and he expresses his preference of experience over abstraction. A transient self-reflexive tone is heard when Ammons declares, "I admit to mystery / in the obvious" (CP, 128) which is abruptly cut off by a return to the concrete: "but a blurred mind over exposed: / caught the sudden gust of a cat bird, selfshot" (CP, 128). Once again a disruption of the description of the theoretical possibilities takes place, and return to the world of the particular is accomplished by Ammons who calls himself "a person who would run to the defence of the particular practically as fast as his legs could go" (Haythe 189)

Ammons's poetry conveys the impression of an eye rapidly moving, picking up an image, discussing a thought associated with it for a while and then moving on to the initial or related image approached at the level of the senses and of resuming the thought over it. The final return is to the concrete

experience of animal life around with oblique references to the world of the little living things and weather as in the concluding lines: and then there were two beetles, and later three at / once swimming in the sun . . . (CP, 128).

This prioritizing of the concrete experience is evidenced in "W C W", a poem dedicated to William Carlos Williams. The technique adopted by Ammons is very much similar to that of William Carlos Williams since the scope of the poem is consciously limited to the concrete sense of the landscape bound by elemental forces. Ammons sets the atmosphere of the poem in a "crosswind that hit him", a context in which he fixes the experience of the poem:

. . .till
 a woman came
 and turned
 her red dog loose
 to sniff
 (and piss
 on)
 the dead horse shoe
 crabs. (CP, 147)

The experience is firmly located in time and place and no attempt is to resort to intellectual discussions. A powerful sense of the place in Ammons's poetry is due to the presence of the continuities of the forms of life around which is "outward continuities" (Bloom 14). Eudora Welty's definition of place is significant to Ammons: "Place is where he has roots, place where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference, the point of view" (117). This place for Ammons is very much defined by the presence of animal life in it. What is focused is the experience as predominantly based on the senses resulting in a very concrete poetry in the manner of William Carlos Williams and the sense of the real, which runs through the poem, is partially the result of references to weather.

"Corsons Inlet", a major poem of the 1961-1965 period, repeats the technique of placing the concrete world outside with its images of birds against the abstract thoughts and it continues the tendency of placing the animal life in the landscape in a context of weather. Ammons describes the tree swallows preparing for flight from winter locating the poem's action in nature with a sense of the concrete and the particular and they function as a counter point to certain questions of reality that Ammons poses in the same poem:

The possibility of a rule as the sum of rulelessness:
 the "field" of action
 with moving in calculable center:
 in the smaller view, order tight with shape . . . (CP, 150)

Ammons's poetry treats the minute aspects of the larger landscape with great precision. Small incidents are treated with seriousness, and extended dialogues and descriptions are attempted by the poet, so that the subject under discussion becomes a huge world which definition cannot exhaust. The close observation that Ammons brings to bear upon even insignificant things creates the impression of a mind in search of changes, a mind constantly recording the events, all of which are relevant to the poet for the complex connotations of process that they carry. It is this close observation that Ammons brings to bear on the minute that the reader experiences in "Mark", a poem short enough to be reproduced in full where Ammons writes of a butterfly:

I hope I'm
 not right
 where the frost

strikes the butterfly:
in the back
between
the wings. (CP, 200)

What one encounters here is the pattern of approaching animal life around, in a context of weather, recording the changes in climate. Ammons's strong interest in weather defines the way the animal world is treated and the moments of observation are linked to weather and animal behaviour is a part of the process that he is trying to analyse, and weather is the lens that filters the experience of life around.

Ammons graphically presents the reality of the insect and weather and Paul Zweig is right when he sees in the poetry of Ammons "a flood of perceptions which is visionary not because of any metaphysics, but because of sheer clarity of the poet's ability to recreate what he sees." (610). This ability to recreate what he sees is largely accomplished by a strict adherence to the concrete which produces a poetry, in Eudora Welty's words, bound up with the "local, the 'real', the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience." (117)

Very rarely does Ammons write of animals in captivity. Most of the poems on animals centre on cats, dogs, bees, robins, crows, squirrels and "Rome Zoo" are an exception not in terms of technique, but in terms of theme. Ammons here writes of rhinoceroses and rabbits and he repeats the technique of placing them in a context of weather:

Subtract from that shower
each leaves take
and the oak's
shadow is bright dust. . . (CP, 222)

It is with this sense reality of weather that he looks at the animals in the zoo:

Rabbits with blue tipped ears
stick mist-weight
rain and, from high
tussling, yield
all the way to the ground:
the rhinoceros back darkens. (CP, 222)

Animal life everywhere, for Ammons, is inalienably fused with the influences of weather. For Ammons, the motions of the landscape are always motions influenced by weather, and the animal life trapped in it is no exception. The poet's interest in the small world of animals, as a possibility of realigning the larger world by attributing to the former, a definitive role in his vision of the world is central to his vision. Such changes in the perspective suggest a significant shift in the attitude of Ammons. From the anthropocentric view and the centrality of the ego which Ammons foregrounded in his early poetry he has matured to look at life from what Donald Reiman calls "the imagined vantage point of other creatures and processes of life" (24).

For Ammons, process cannot be separated from the weather; it is the most concrete manifestation of the process inducing a sharp sense of the particular. The animal world presented by Ammons is seen in the context of changing seasons and the energy of these poems is the energy of the animal world in a scene of rapid changes, and the attempt is to record how animals cope with the pressure of existence.

Ammons often incorporates animal world into his poems to convey the severity of weather. Severity of weather is often conveyed as a response of the animal life that Ammons sees around him as in "September Drift" where he directly plunges into the experience of weather which for him is a submission to the animal life around under the pressure of rapid changes of climate. The reality of the landscape is the reality of animal life in it, a thought stressed by Ammons:

Hardly any thing flies north these days

ajay occasionally makes the bleak
 decision: the robin, sitting on a high
 dead limb, looks melancholy with
 leisure... (CP, 262)

Ammons here falls into pathetic fallacy, one has to concede, but life in the landscape, life of the birds and other forms of life remain bound to weather. John Elder's observes "for Ammons world order is dynamic, with process rather than things providing primary reality" (196). Such an observation is largely conveyed by constant changes in the animal world caused by weather. The close observation is made possible in the context of weather and the sharpness of vision is not limited just to the animal life around but is extended to weather, which modifies and controls one's perception of the animal life in it.

The small and the insignificant figure in his poetry, and they come to be observed along with the changes that the seasons bring about on them and in "Spiel" Ammons writes:

... I try to think
 of what he eats
 so winter skinny, such a bugless
 winter... (CP, 270)

One finds here an interest in the insignificant and a concern for its well-being and one senses here the widening vision of Ammons which comes to accept the concerns of life other than that of human beings. Such a concern is a part of an ecological consciousness which Glen Love sees as having the capacity to challenge "the notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone" (205). Though not directly stated, Ammons here presents an image of man who is more sensitive to the issues of other forms of life and he satisfies one of the important qualities of ecological consciousness. Ammons poetry is fine evidence of what Robert Pack terms "a capacity for empathy towards nonhuman nature" (273). Later in the same poem Ammons constructs a landscape where weather is significant in a subtle way where the presence of the animal life is powerful: "the pheasant's tail, long / perfect for disappearance in / winter weeds, (CP, 271)

Not life alone, but death too, is part of the world of Ammons's poetry. The drama of death that he witnesses is firmly placed in an experience of weather. Death, too, is part of the process that rules the world of insects and small animals. This dependency on weather that characterizes animal life underlies "Lollapalooza 22 February" with its elaborate build-up of landscape in a particular weather before he introduces the theme of animal life in it. The poem is about the carcass of a pheasant that Ammons comes across when he removes the snow. The experience is also an experience of weather, a point that Ammons underscores when he writes:

ten weeks turning casually to water: the afternoon
 was lovely and constant (except, wing feathers in a
 ground melt, I shoved the mount aside to find, as if alive,
 a pheasant under snow)... (CP, 319-320)

And Ammons winds up the poem with a turn to a record of the changes in the landscape occasioned by weather:

... at dusk, a patch of white
 still centered on the roof, I went out to check
 and sure enough the motions had lessened: spicule icicles lengthened into a lessening
 overflow... (CP, 320)

The reader here witnesses what John Elder sees as a major characteristic of Ammons, "the fuller integration of the particular terrain with underlying processes of creation that also includes mankind." (197)

The theme of death continues in "Lonesome Valley" though without overt references to weather.

Ammons writes of the end of a bumblebee where the only solution, which he writes of, is far away. The solution is the solution of weather, which he makes obvious when he writes that “frost's the solution still / distant” (CP, 345). From this oblique reference to weather, from which the present can be surmised, Ammons turns to present the touching image - the image of the carcass of the bee in this 'reality' of weather:

... being dragged down by ants,
 the sucked dryness,
 the glassy wings perfectly remnant
 in their raggedness,
 the body shell shellacked and complete,
 the excessive hollowness and lightness. (CP, 346)

The dryness of the body, Ammons relates to the dryness of the landscape, which refers to the weather and the season. “Lonesome Valley” is the last poem in *Collected Poems* in which Ammons writes of animal life in a landscape defined by the weather and the seasons and the poem foreshadows Ammons's later poems on animal life in that life and death here, as in later poems, are so thoroughly fused with the cycles of the seasons. For Ammons, life and death in the world of animals are expressions and experiences mediated by the weather and the seasons.

Works Cited

1. Albright, Alex. “Ponds and Mudbanks and Ditchbanks, Brierberries, Things of that Kind: A Conversation with A.R. Ammons.” *North Carolina Literary Review* 1.1 (1992): 46-55.
2. Ammons, A.R. *Collected Poems 1951-1971*. Norton, 1992.
3. Bloom, Harold. Introduction. *A.R. Ammons*. Ed. and introd. Harold Bloom. Chelsea, 1986. 1-31.
4. Elder, John. *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and Vision of Nature*. Illinois UP, 1985.
5. Haythe, Cynthia. “An Interview with A.R. Ammons.” *Contemporary Literature* 21.2 (1980): 173-90.
6. Kober, Nancy. “Ammons: Poetry Is a Matter of Survival.” *Cornell Daily Sun* 27 Apr. 1973. 12-13.
7. Love, Glen A. “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism.” *Western American Literature* 25 (1990): 201-215.
8. Miles, Josephine. “Light, Wind, Motion.” *Diacritics* 3.4 (1973): 21-24.
9. Pack, Robert. “Taking Dominion over the Wilderness.” Afterword. *Poems for a Small Planet*. Ed. Robert Pack and Jay Parini. Middlebury College Press, 1993. 271-292.
10. Reiman, Donald. “A.R. Ammons: Ecological Naturalism and the Romantic Tradition.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 31.1 (1985): 22-54.
11. Schneider, Steven P. “From the Wind to the Earth: An Interview with A.R. Ammons.” *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A.R. Ammons's Long Poems*. Ed. and introd. Steven P. Schneider. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999. 325-49.
12. Welty, Eudora. *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. New York: Random, 1977.
13. Zweig, Paul. “The Raw and the Cooked.” *Partisan Review* 4 (1974): 604-612.