

Writing as Cultivation: Pastoral and the Local in A. R. Ammons

Xanthe Ashburner

What use is pastoral in contemporary criticism? In the lengthening perspective of our distance (cultural and temporal) from the classical worlds of Theocritus and Virgil, has pastoral become synonymous with nature writing, or any other writing that praises a life in the country over that lived in the city? Or does the term today suggest something else, something looser: pastoral not as a set of motifs and conventions, but as a particular way of thinking through or structuring human experience—a “take” on life, rather in the way that tragedy and comedy represent certain takes on life and on those factors deemed most important in it: love, death, our capacity for freedom, and so on. If the latter is true, then pastoral is much broader in scope than might once have been imagined; yet it is also perhaps finer, keener in its insights and offerings than its traditional trappings—shepherds, mournful love songs, idyllic landscapes—might suggest. The answer, of course, is that pastoral is whatever you make of it. If such a statement rings true of all literary genres, it seems particularly pertinent to this one. As this article will show, pastoral is a mode that has continually meditated on the question of what we, as human beings, “make of things”; how we negotiate the conditions of our finitude, certainly, but also the question of the importance to this process of that other form of making: *poesis*, poetry.

My intention in this article is to tease out a few of pastoral’s thematic threads as they appear in the work of one modern poet, A. R. Ammons.

The connection I want to draw is not, perhaps, the one that might be expected: 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 wish to suggest a direct and conscious engagement with the pastoral tradition on Ammons's part. The twentieth century has 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 number¹), 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). As Harold Bloom and others have insisted, Ammons's debts to literary history lie elsewhere, primarily with the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists,² whose own connection to the pastoral is handled rather differently in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*. 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 is counterpoint to Tityrus's easy repose, so the American idyll is always threatened by the advance of technological modernity, the machine in the garden.³

My pursuit of pastoral themes in Ammons's poetry is inspired by William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, to which I alluded in my opening remarks about pastoral as a certain way of configuring "feelings" (as Empson persistently, if a little vaguely, calls them) about "the conditions of life."⁴ Empson is less interested in the specific motifs of pastoral than in the structures and moods those motifs imply. I also draw insight from Paul Alpers, whose work in *What is Pastoral?* and elsewhere is greatly indebted to Empson. Again, this might seem an odd choice for an article on a poet of nature like Ammons: Empson is mostly associated with a social, if not straightforwardly political, understanding of pastoral as "implying a beautiful relation between rich and poor,"⁵ as against studies like Marx's that emphasize 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."⁶ One of the key insights offered by these critics is that pastoral is ultimately about the work artists do in the world, for themselves as much as 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, and indeed emerges from, literary engagements with the lowly or humble: the placing of poetic voice in the mouths of shepherds and other “simple people”⁷ serves to affirm the prospects of freedom and agency “within acknowledged, sometimes deeply felt, limitations.”⁸ It is the argument of this article that Ammons similarly makes use of an idea of writing as cultivation. Enfolding poetry in an idea of the “common,” in the dual sense of “humble” and “repeated,” he frames writing, and experience itself, as a continuous gathering and reworking of materials. What I intend is less a prescriptive account of the similarities between Ammons’s poetry and the model of pastoral developed by Empson and Alpers, than a drawing out of mutual themes, a sounding of echoes of feeling and gesture. If this seems a somewhat hazy or impressionistic approach to the topic of modern pastoral, I hope I am at least partially vindicated by the fact that this form of writing has always been about a certain haphazardness of representation. As Alpers notes, pastoral was from the outset “conceived as modern” in the Bloomian sense of “self-consciously belated.”⁹ Separated by a centuries-wide gulf from “the Hellenic epics and tragedies that were the measure of poetic achievement,” Theocritus and particularly Virgil took refuge in a deliberately diminished, as it were “simple,” style.¹⁰ The task of the critic of modern pastoral is not dissimilar to that of the ancients themselves: a sifting through of what remains, a coaxing of fragments into form such that we might—to adapt a line from Ammons’s “Easter Morning”—“get by on what is left.”¹¹ I begin by considering two commanding themes in Ammons’s poems: an emphasis on the local, and an idea of motion. I propose that one of the major questions he puts to poetry is that of how one best stands towards, or in relation to, the world. Pastoral too, reflects on this question, and in the second part of the paper I address Empson’s and Alpers’s ideas, and posit a pastoral relation between two of Ammons’s most famous poems, “Corsons Inlet” and “Salience.”

Evocations of the local

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.¹² 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 here. There is also very little nostalgia for the poet’s own past. After the early allegorical pieces collected in *Ommateum, with Doxology* (1955), 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 the town of Whiteville in the eastern part of the state, and all hands were expected to pitch in toward a light work that, apparently, never came:

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.¹³

As in many Ammons poems, rhythm suggests 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, evokes the poverty and tedium of 1930s rural life, its mealiness and early darkneses. Death is everywhere, as the poet recalls the setting free of a pet bird ("Better turn him loose / before the cold weather comes on"¹⁴) and, finally, as the season turns, the slaughter of a "favourite 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.¹⁵

It is a rehearsal of the theme of another early poem, "Mule Song," which remembers the fate of the family's mule, Silver:

old mule, no defense but a mule's against
disease, large-ribbed,
flat-toothed, sold to a stranger, shot by a
stranger's hand,
not my hand she nuzzled the seasoning-salt from.¹⁶

The idealisation of childhood or of the rural origins of one's culture features prominently in accounts of pastoral, but poems like these forbid the romanticising of the past.¹⁷ Writing out of a Romantic tradition that had often portrayed the countryside as a wellspring of spiritual authenticity,¹⁸ the Ammons of "Hardweed Path Going" and "Mule Song" tests the limits of poetic representation of rural life, forcing recognition of poverty, mortality, and hard work.

The later poetry moves away from tough 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 observation. Yet as "obstinate commemorations of reality" (the phrase is Helen Vendler's¹⁹), these early efforts inaugurate several of the attitudes and gestures that underpin the mature work: an adherence to the rhythms of everyday life, a sense of the speaker as deeply involved in his immediate environment, and above all an identification of the local with an idea of necessity. After serving in the Pacific during the Second World War, Ammons lived in New Jersey before relocating to Ithaca, New York, where he taught poetry at Cornell University from 1965 until his retirement in 1998 (he died in Ithaca in 2001). The poetry records this northward migration, and the gradual attuning of the poet's sensibilities to the specificities of his immediate environment: Jersey's coastal regions in poems like "Corsons Inlet" and "Salience"; 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 such as *The Snow Poems*, *The Ridge Farm* and *Garbage*. In the bulk of these works, the local figures in one way or another as necessity, the ground—as much literal as metaphorical—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 sort of mental escarpment that "beseeches" the mind, "roll[ing] my fixed ocean".²⁰

... I like the ridge: it was a line
in the minds of hundreds of generations

of cold Indians: and 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.²¹

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 macadam²²

Ammons more than once commented to the effect that "Whitman was a tremendous liberation for me,"²³ and several readers have traced his quotidian sensibility precisely to Whitman. Here, Whitman's more transcendental, Emersonian bent ("I celebrate myself, and sing myself ... I loafe and invite my soul") is made to answer to Ammons's old theme, mortality.²⁴ To lie, as both 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).²⁵

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 transcends all material things is precisely impermanence itself. Local nature is important to Ammons because it reveals to him the universality of entropy, or as he more frequently terms it, "motion." Death, physical decay and the passing of time are all varieties of motion, and no topic preoccupies him more insistently throughout his career. Motion is a radically destabilising force in the poetry, naming as it does the ultimate solubility of all physical things. I have implied that in his engagements with the local, Ammons privileges a poetry of the concrete over that of the abstract or visionary; yet entropy means that concretion is itself as much a "myth" as its alternatives.²⁶ In a universe in motion, materiality is simply the

momentary catching of infinitesimally tiny particles as they flow into and out of form. 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:²⁷

From the perspective of human time the ridge might be what the mind comes up against, enduring as it does beyond recorded history. Yet in the larger view, it too is unanchored, already passing away:

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 bubbles²⁸

If Ammons's main theme is motion, the task he puts to poetry is that of finding ways of orienting the self in face of instability. How does one stand towards, or in relation to, a world in motion, and how might poetry reflect this standing, or suggest new and better ways of standing? "Corsons Inlet," from the 1965 collection of the same name, may be approached as an extended meditation on this question. As much *ars poetica* as nature description, the poem has become Ammons's most anthologised, and readers of a variety of critical persuasions have argued for its centrality to the poet's project as a whole, its almost manifesto-like declaration of his themes and concerns.²⁹ In the context of my comments so far, we might begin by noting the poem's grounding in the specificities of a particular environment. It 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
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:³⁰

Roger Gilbert reports that Ammons originally called the poem “A Nature Walk”; the choice of “Corsons Inlet” instead “announces his fidelity to the particulars of his walk, his refusal to synthesise them into some larger conception that would replace or dissolve them.”³¹ The movement of wind in sand, “chang[ing] the dune’s shape that will not be the same shape / tomorrow,”³² is Ammons’s most sustained figure for motion. In earlier poems, it is associated with a dispersal of poetic voice (as in “So I Said I Am Ezra”) or a sublimation of the material self to pure “direction” (see “Guide”). Here it displays in macrocosm what is observable in microcosm, the ongoing shift and flow of things in nature. The speaker perceives orders or nodes of form—nature is “not chaos”³³—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:
 blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:
 snail shell:
 pulsations of order
 in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,
 broken down, transferred through membranes
 to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no
 lines or changeless shapes:³⁴

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 blocks, boxes, binds / of thought,” but rather to adapt to it, to embrace “the flowing bends and blends / of sight[.]”³⁵ 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[.]”³⁶ 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 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?³⁷

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

Poetic utterance itself is important here. In a brief but significant essay of 1968, Ammons affirmed a close connection between walking and poetry. Like the walk, the poem 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.”³⁸ Inherently antithetical to the boxes and binds of preconception, poetry is the “becoming / thought” that the walker at Corsons Inlet seeks. Because it is specific to its moment-to-moment realisation, 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 recognised and discovered” in the course of the writing.³⁹ It is therefore 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: is the sum of these events
 I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting
 beyond the account.⁴⁰

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. We find in "Corsons Inlet" the seeds of an idea of writing as a kind of cultivation; this is something I will explore further below. 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 its etymological sense of "earth writing." There are few full stops in Ammons; his career-long devotion to the comma, and particularly the colon, suggests an endless 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."⁴¹

All well and good. But the poem's cheerful embrace of motion is by no means straightforward. Gilbert finds "Corsons Inlet" somewhat 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."⁴² In rhetoric, if not in argument, the poem suggests that the mind seeks closure, steadiness, unity. For every gesture towards motion in Ammons there is an equal impulse towards stability, a desire to reach out to what remains fixed in the flow of time. Entropy is less a scientific or philosophical principle than a state of being, and as such it has profound human effects. Elsewhere in the poetry, this is something that troubles Ammons 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,"⁴³ and the fact that always returns to view is exactly that of death (recall the image of the squirrel with one eye pressed to the macadam). "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 acknowledgement—they will seem not

to understand for a minute.⁴⁴

Like most of Ammons's abiding topics, the "cold acknowledgement" of what motion snatches from us seems to go back to the childhood in 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.⁴⁵

What the wind carries away is not only our mortal lives but also the trace of our presence on the earth. Inscribed in the 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 it is 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. Yet the desire for steadfastness remains, and if the poems are footprints, they are also the structures that house those footprints and attempt to protect them. It is this identification of poetry with an idea of preservation that constitutes Ammons's connection to the pastoral mode.

Pastoral and the ethic of cultivation

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've discussed in relation to Ammons: death, loss and the passing of time. For Empson and Alpers, what pastoral is really about is the necessity of generating and maintaining forms of communion, communication, and "ethical stability in one's present world, rather than a yearning for one's past."⁴⁶ The pastoral vision is not one of material entropy, of the flow of energy into and out of form. Yet like Ammons in *Tombstones*, *The Ridge Farm* and "Corsons Inlet," 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 allows⁴⁷—but in the context of this article their thinking is sufficiently similar to warrant a combined treatment.

Empson's oft-quoted notion of "the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple" defines the pastoral as a mode 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.⁴⁸ In this regard, pastoral resembles the heroic and high tragic modes, in which some metaphysical or epistemological problem deemed universal to the "conditions of life" is routinely (or ritualistically) played out in the triumphs and afflictions of a single individual;⁴⁹ where pastoral differs is that it is the lowly person, the herdsman or shepherdess or bumpkin, rather than the warrior or king, whose situation in the world is deemed the appropriate site for the working through of these problems. Pastoral is in many respects the inversion of epic and tragedy; yet at the same time, Empson and Alpers emphasise 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."⁵⁰ Pastoral's engagement with what is humble or lowly reflects a perspective that human life is essentially limited in its capabilities. 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."⁵¹ Like tragedy, pastoral takes for granted that the desires we hold for life are inevitably in excess of

life's actual conditions—chiefly, its finitude. 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.”⁵²

Yet even in their humble circumstances, pastoral shepherds and shepherdesses possess powers of recuperation and steadfastness that constitute a serious challenge to the tragic perspective. Speaking from a position of loss and “distaste for the conditions of life,”⁵³ the pastoral ethic is enduringly one of cultivation and affirmation. Pastoral is 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”—meaning 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 texts 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.”⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ 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 emphasises the poem’s (perhaps surprising) grounding in the real world of human grief. Noting Milton’s “central purpose” of “finding the proper commemorative song for a human world,” he writes that the poem “gives assurance to ‘all that wander in the perilous flood,’” and thereby “sustains the human world, enabling it to continue both despite and in light of what it has lost.”⁵⁶

It is therefore not entirely fallacious 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 powerless 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 cultivating what abides and sustains. Literature itself is clearly at

issue here. The thematic centrality of song and the readiness to affirm the binding power of speech acts 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 critics have approached this structure of ideas is to say, as Empson does, that pastoral is characterised by a “clash between style and theme,”⁵⁷ such that the text derives much of its meaning, and all of its irony, from the disparity between the poet’s elegant locutions and the down-home rusticity of the shepherd. But the movement is one of unification as much as juxtaposition: conflating poet and shepherd, pastoral imagines the poet’s role as one of guidance, observance, 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 what kind of work artists do.” The model of *poesis* “we turn to here is ... that of the poet/artist as a person who shepherds forms of life.”⁵⁸ Thus Alpers remarks that “pastoral is a form that arose from and has continually meditated” the question of “literature and its claim on us.”⁵⁹

What is really celebrated in pastoral is the ability of language, and particularly of literature, to foster a feeling of stability and groundedness. The implication of this mode is that *any* poet, singing her song, may affirm the value of life. This is perhaps why the image of the human in nature features so prominently in pastoral. In their implied interactions with natural environments—their herding of sheep or goats or (as in Marvell’s poems) 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.

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 poems like “Corsons Inlet” might not be similarly motivated by what I have called an “ethic of cultivation.”⁶⁰ As noted above, nature in Ammons is by no means a preserve of bucolic simplicity. Yet gestures towards the simple frame many of the poems, in particular those that engage closely with immediate nature. I would like to widen Empson’s terms slightly here, and take pastoral simplicity to include not just social lowliness, but also ideas relating to the demotic, the ordinary and the everyday. The task of

Romanticism, particularly in America, has often been that of locating poetic vision in the mundane particulars of everyday experience, and in this respect Ammons is a true inheritor of his tradition. Appeals to the everyday are common in the poetry, as are attempts to cast writing itself as a fundamentally ordinary act. Like writers of traditional pastoral, he consciously inverts epic form. The long poem *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) 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.⁶¹

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
self-conscious POEM:
I've wanted to bend
more, burrowing
with flexible path
into the common life
& commonplace.⁶²

If we follow Empson and Alpers, we 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 simple or demotic, pastorals draw attention to what is held *in* common: human life as "inherently a matter of common plights and common pleasures" which are "shared and accepted."⁶³ Critics have begun to revise the old view of Ammons as an isolated individualist, pointing instead to the importance of social relations in the poetry,⁶⁴ and an idea of the common life as a shared life is certainly apparent in *Tape*. Nonetheless, the poems I've discussed above seem to me distant from the gentle pleasures of community imagined by Alpers; we cannot graft the pastoral structure these critics describe wholesale onto Ammons's poetry.

Yet when Ammons evokes the common, he does so in full awareness of its range of meanings, and unfolds those meanings in ways that suggest to me a version of pastoral. In declaring his preference for a poetry of "the common life / & commonplace," he not only announces his intention to

engage thematically with the demotic or quotidian, but also expresses an idea that writing itself ought to be approached as a diurnal or “common” activity, part of the fabric of everyday life rather than thrust into a position of privileged excess. 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 he left largely unrevised. But a sense of the “dailiness” of poetry is felt elsewhere too, and I think gestures towards an idea of writing as a kind of cultivation. 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, as it were, of one’s earthly “house.” What I am getting at here is an idea of the common as that which is ritualised, repeated. A feeling of ritual animates pastoral writing: Alpers’s comments on convention as simultaneously a set of motifs repeated across literary history, and a gathering of shepherds in the midst of sorrow, reveals the extent to which pastoral’s ecumenical effects are achieved through a living out of pre-existing forms. In Ammons, what are repeated are not the forms of others but the poet’s own procedures. Yet the effect seems similar: working and reworking his materials, tilling the soil of his mental and textual “geography” (“Corsons Inlet”), the poet attains a sort of steadiness in the midst of entropy.

The idea of poetry’s 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 likelihood that the event will be repeated is something that the speaker is keen to affirm at the end of the poem:

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.⁶⁵

We have seen this before: there is no total perspective, at least in the poet’s medium. But I would emphasise 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 Ammons’s use of the colon suggests a deferral of closure, 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 paper by proposing that the poetry stands as record of Ammons’s gradual attunement to the landscapes in which he dwelt during his lifetime. The suggestion of repetition in poems like this one, 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. Repeated, experience becomes fundamentally 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, of ritualised repetition that serves to affirm a sense of grounding.

Ammons made good on the promise of dailiness contained in “Corsons Inlet”: the very next day, he took another walk in the same location, and wrote another poem about it.⁶⁶ That poem is “Salience,” 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. The relation between the two poems is necessarily one of both familiarity and strangeness. The poet is retracing his steps (literally and poetically) but, this being Ammons, the wind has of course carried his footprints away; the mark in the sand that was the previous poem must be made anew. “Salience” has two sections, the first of which raises the theme of universal motion to a pitch unprecedented in “Corsons Inlet”:

wind alone as a variable,
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:⁶⁷

With renewed vigour, the speaker resumes his task of “bend[ing]” to the motion of the dunes. The “eddies of meaning”⁶⁸ that collected in the earlier poem are now outmoded, and the poet’s materials must, like the grains of sand, be rearranged, liberated “to new forms.” Yet 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[.]”⁶⁹ The second section 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 again today,
 saliences,
 congruent to memory,
 spread firmly across my sight.⁷⁰

There is a palpable sense of steadiness here, which the speaker appears to attribute to the intersection of memory and observation—the “congruency” 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), no doubt because that poem, too, took place with reference to previous experience. But here it exerts a much stronger force, I think because what is brought to bear on “Saliences” is not only the walk of the previous day, but also the writing 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,
 deep 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:⁷¹

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”) is a result of its “constancy,” its ability to “rouse an answering memory in the mind.”⁷² Yet although familiar, it also has the vivid appearance of something seen as if for the first time; its resonance, like that of the poem as a whole, arises from the layering of the new over the old, salience over memory.

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—that is, observance—of a particular locale provides a sense of steadfastness, a feeling that, despite the endless falling away of things in time, “continuities sinuously work.” The anxious rhetoric Gilbert found problematic in the earlier poem all but vanishes in the latter, creating the sense that the speaker is more comfortably “at home,” as it were, in his environment. At the end of the poem, Ammons even tries a perspective on the “overall,” something he has strenuously denied so far:

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 than sang, leaped, swirled,
yet keeps a round
 quiet turning,
beyond loss or gain,
beyond concern for the separate reach.⁷³

Previously the overall was “the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting / beyond the account”; now it is that which “reassures.” How has the transition been made? I would posit 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 true 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, or 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. When I spoke above of writing in its daily aspect as a kind of poetic keeping of one's earthly house, this is the sense that I had in mind. It 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 one's 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 juts 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.⁷⁴

Cecil Day Lewis's choice of "saved" in this translation is felicitous for my purposes: if nothing can be "kept" in poetry, so can nothing be "saved" there. Alpers emphasises that pastoral has always been cognisant of its own inadequacies. Its "claim to literary authority" lies precisely in its "self-aware modesty and sense of limitations."⁷⁵ For Ammons, the poet's task of measuring time and motion entails the recognition that the only place things of value—that is, ideas, beliefs, feelings—can be kept is in motion itself. I conclude by returning 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 it⁷⁶

Love is another name for the desire for steadfastness that is felt in Ammons's poetry, and that underpins pastoral representation: it is the impulse that makes one seek to safeguard the precious footprint in the

dust. But if pastoral seeks to preserve love in the songs of shepherds, it must necessarily fail at its task: *Tombstones* 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.⁷⁷ But one of those meanings, certainly, is that if love is another name for the yearning for steadfastness, so does nothingness name the principle of entropy that Ammons sees 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.

University of Queensland
xanthe.ashburner@uqconnect.edu.au

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Alpers, “Modern Eclogues,” *Triquarterly* 116 (2003): 20-47.
- ² Bloom’s 1971 essay “A. R. Ammons: ‘When You Consider the Radiance’” remains the most influential study of Ammons and his indebtedness to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. See Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 257-289.
- ³ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3-33.
- ⁴ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Directions, 1974), 114.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁶ Alpers, “Modern Eclogues,” 44.
- ⁷ Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 11.
- ⁸ Paul Alpers, “Empson on Pastoral,” *New Literary History* 10.1 (1978): 101-23. 102.
- ⁹ Alpers, “Modern Eclogues,” 20.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹¹ A. R. Ammons, *A Coast of Trees* (New York: Norton, 1981), 19. We might also note that the word “eclogue” itself is derived from the Latin word for “selection” or “gathering.”
- ¹² 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.” “Ammons: Pilgrim, Sage, Ordinary Man,” *Raritan* 21.3 (2002): 130-58. 152.

- ¹³ A. R. Ammons, *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (New York: Norton, 1972), 66.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ¹⁷ In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams sees “neo-pastoral” (that is, post-Classical and particularly post-sixteenth-century pastoral) in English writing as about nostalgia for a rural past, one that is always felt to have only just vanished. Pastoral is famously problematic for Williams because it effaces the real economic relations (chiefly, the labour) that underpin rural communities. See *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Empson notes with regret that modern pastoral “take[s] refuge in child cult” because changes in English society since the seventeenth century have steadily eroded the ecumenical power of art works (*Some Versions of Pastoral*, 12-13).
- ¹⁸ I am thinking here of the Wordsworth of poems like “The Solitary Reaper.”
- ¹⁹ Vendler, Helen. “A. R. Ammons: Dwelling in the Flow of Shapes,” in *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 310-342. 313.
- ²⁰ A. R. Ammons, *Sumerian Vistas* (New York: Norton, 1987), 26, 36, 10. The reference to the mind as an “ocean” recalls Marvell’s “The Garden”: “The mind, that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find...”
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²³ William Walsh, “An Interview,” in A. R. Ammons, *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, Dialogues* ed. Zofia Burr (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 57-71. 63.
- ²⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 2004), 63. This is not to suggest that Whitman’s poetry is unaware of mortality—plainly, this is not the case—but rather to make the point that Ammons is here targeting for critique a certain visionary aspect of his Romantic heritage.
- ²⁵ There is an echo here of 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 cimenter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career.” *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 93. The same note is sounded in the title of Ammons’s last long poem, *Glare* (1997).
- ²⁶ Steven P. Schneider, “From the Wind to the Earth: an Interview with A. R. Ammons,” in *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A. R. Ammons’ Longer Poems*, ed. Steven Schneider (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 325-49, 330. The full quotation runs: “concretion is a myth ... Look into any so-called ‘solid object’ and it breaks down into this, that and the other until finally there may be nothing going on there but motion or spirit or energy. There’s nothing there.”

²⁷ Ammons, *Sumerian Vistas*, 50-51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁹ Just what these themes and concerns actually are varies considerably from reader to reader. For Roger Gilbert, the poem dramatises the possible interactions between mind and nature, providing a view of "the way consciousness opens on to reality" (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 "Salience." Between them, the poems chart Ammons's "swerve away from Emerson" (277). For John Elder, the poem is a cornerstone of Ammons's "ecologically balanced art" (145). As such, we might attribute the poem's centrality not only to its open declaration of the poet's themes, but also to its ability to accommodate a variety of readings. See Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991); Bloom, "When You Consider the Radiance"; John Elder, *Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, 2nd ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

³⁰ Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 147-48.

³¹ Gilbert, *Walks in the World*, 212.

³² Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 149.

³³ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁸ A. R. Ammons, "A Poem is a Walk," in *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, Dialogues*, ed. Zofia Burr (Michigan: University of Michigan P, 1996), 12-20, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁰ Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 148.

⁴¹ A. R. Ammons, "Surfaces," in *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, Dialogues*, ed. Zofia Burr (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 21-22, 21.

⁴² Gilbert, *Walks in the World*, 216, 225.

⁴³ A. R. Ammons, *Bosh and Flapdoodle* (New York: Norton, 2005), 29.

⁴⁴ A. R. Ammons, *Garbage* (New York: Norton, 1993), 53.

⁴⁵ Walsh, "An Interview," 71.

⁴⁶ Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 37.

⁴⁷ Alpers thinks differently. He offers that Empson sees "life and literature ... in social and psychological terms. He has very little sympathy with religious or metaphysical views of the human condition" ("Empson on Pastoral," 119). To my mind, themes like death and freedom figure both too prominently, and too

abstractly, in *Some Versions of Pastoral* to rule out a metaphysical underpinning completely. I agree that the book is mostly social in emphasis. But one of Empson's underlying arguments, I think, is that the social and the metaphysical need not be mutually exclusive, that questions relating to being and the "human condition" are part of social life, not outside of it.

⁴⁸ Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 22, 29.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 50.

⁵² Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 114-15.

⁵³ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁴ Alpers, "Empson on Pastoral," 102.

⁵⁵ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 81; generally 79-93. For Alpers, the two meanings of "convention" are in the pastoral context one and the same: just as the song contest represented in the text brings together the community of shepherds, so does the use of the convention itself serve to link the individual author with other writers of pastoral across time—intertextuality as a binding force, not a cause for anxiety.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 100, 112; generally 93-112.

⁵⁷ Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 12.

⁵⁸ Susan Stewart and John Kinsella, "An Epistolary Pastoral / An Introduction," *Triquarterly* 116 (2003): 6-13. 7.

⁵⁹ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, xi.

⁶⁰ My use of this phrase is inspired by Robert Harrison's book *Gardens*. Although Harrison does not mention pastoral, his idea of the human condition as one of "cultivation" or "care" echoes, I think, the ideas I've drawn from Empson and Alpers. He uses the phrase "ethic of cultivation" in reference to Epicurus (82), and notes more generally that "it is *because* we are thrown into history that we must cultivate our garden" (x). See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Susan Stewart also uses the term "cultivation," this time in reference to pastoral, in her "Introduction," with John Kinsella, to the *Triquarterly* issue cited above (6).

⁶¹ A. R. Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (New York: Norton, 1965), 9.

⁶² Ibid., 144.

⁶³ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 93.

⁶⁴ In an article on *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974), 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 recent writing on Ammons has addressed the importance of "heart" as well as "head" in the poetry. See Susannah L. Hollister, "The Planet on the

Screen: Scales of Belonging in A. R. Ammons's *Sphere*," *Contemporary Literature* 50.4 (2009): 662-694; and Roger Gilbert, "Archie's Heart," in *Considering the Radiance: Essays on the Poetry of A. R. Ammons*, ed. David Burak and Roger Gilbert (New York: Norton, 2005), 186-212.

⁶⁵ Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 151.

⁶⁶ In reading "Corsons Inlet" and "Salience" together, I am greatly indebted to Gilbert's work in *Walks of the World*, which first alerted me to the connection between the two poems. Bloom, too, reads the poems alongside one another, but he is less concerned with their circumstances of composition.

⁶⁷ Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 153.

⁶⁸ "Corsons Inlet", *Ibid.*, 148.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 153-54.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷² Gilbert, *Walks in the World*, 231.

⁷³ Ammons, *Collected Poems*, 155.

⁷⁴ Virgil, Eclogue 9, lines 2, 7-13, in *The Eclogues and the Georgics*, trans. C. Day Lewis. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁷⁵ Alpers, "Modern Eclogues," 20.

⁷⁶ Ammons, *Sumerian Vistas*, 53.

⁷⁷ Robert Harrison's article "Tombstones" is especially useful in this regard. Among other things, Harrison interprets the "nothing" in the poem as the absence that "the sign by its very nature traces." See Robert P. Harrison, "Tombstones," in *Complexities of Motion: New Essays on A. R. Ammons' Longer Poems*, ed. Steven Schneider (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 167-80.