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IN THE CONTEXT of American literature, the presentiment of the writer-as-critic or the critic-as-writer is likely to be inherently a more available one than in other literatures. This is due in no small part to the fact that American literature, as Kenneth Dauber pointed out several years ago, “is a literature whose primary concern has always been its own nature,” and whose object, even in the classic period of American letters, “[is] its own process,” the “act of writing” in other words, “into which all forms of the written are returned” (53, 62). American literature, therefore, will repeatedly sensitize us to a historical moment in the writing of its poetry in which the traditional “apology” conventionally located *outside* the artifact—one thinks, for instance, of the classic statements of poets such as Sidney, Shelley, and Wilde—will be gathered up *inside* the American poem, allowing the text itself to become its own medium of authorization and legitimation. From the auto-affectation of “Song of Myself,” through to “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” the romance in American poetry for self-reflexivity is given without apology—at least, without any kind of formal apology. Writing continually turning back upon itself in such a manner thus elides any clear separation between introspection and retrospection in the poet’s art. “The Philosophy of Composition” then, as “Composition as Explanation” now, both seem somewhat beside the point when it is actually the practice that constitutes the theory (and the theory constituting the practice) that forms the basis of America’s longstanding romance with text. In this regard, Gerald Graff has therefore been quite correct to

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surmise that “It has taken little time for earlier theories of Americanness of American literature to be written in the deconstructionist register . . . [since] Americanness lay not in the romance of the symbol or the frontier but in reflexive awareness of the problematic of writing itself, which is to say, in the romance of self-deconstruction and of heterogeneity” (“American Criticism” 113). In keeping with “the ‘secret’ autobiographical agenda of [American] writing” (Renza 82), A. R. Ammons thus contends that a poem, once it is thoroughly known, “contains / its [own] motion,” and that this *modus operandi* can be reproduced completely whole to the mind—“all its shapeliness intact”—as the mind travels in and around it.¹ He says this in a longer poem called, characteristically, “Essay on Poetics,” the significance of whose title I must return to later.² Using this poem primarily, I would here like to explore Ammons’ own re-versal of the classic defense in the self-reflexive scene of modern American poetry, and specifically, to investigate further both the possible and what I consider to be the *impossible* wager his textuality dares to encumber in so dividing, on both theoretical and/or practical levels, the discourse against itself.

The self-defensiveness of American letters as a whole, in view both of the absence of a historically stabilizing tradition within and the presence of a politically intimidating authority without, is by now a commonplace among the master-narratives attending to the sanctioning of American literature’s own Declaration of Independence (for example, Weisbuch, Fredman). In the literature’s repudiation of *arché* and deregulation of *telos*, one becomes rather easily persuaded to the view that writing is grounded in no metaphysical principle outside writing itself, indeed, that “we descend into the void that the loss of metaphysical grounds for words has opened up” (Dauber 65). At an early point in his “Essay on Poetics,” this appears to be a view to which Ammons is somewhat partial, a view of writing he labels “enterprise”:

enterprise is our American motif, riding horseback
 between
 the obscure beginning and the unformulated conclusion,
 thinking
 grace that show of riding, the expertise, performance,
 the intricacy
 of dealing: to be about something . . .

enterprise then's the American salience, rainbow arch
colossus: but the aristoi are beauty, wealth, birth,
genius &
virtue who should be governors: enterprise somewhat,
though
not necessarily, inconsistent with those, we lack
governors: ("Essay on Poetics" 35)

With the disavowal of beginnings and endings, the emphasis of these lines lands firmly on the movement of the writing itself: riding, thinking, dealing, etc. Moreover, this is a movement that, on the most basic level of the text, converges into that "main confluence" of what Ammons calls his "one:many" mechanism, and as an earnest of self-reflexion, demonstrates what "all this essay is *about*" ("Essay" 34, emphasis added). And just as many lines turn back on one movement and many motions turn back on or are *contained* by one mechanism—"whatever turns turns — in [on?] itself" ("Essay" 35)—so, on another level, many poems turn back onto one grand poem. In the punning "lyric in[-]formation" that begins the essay, therefore, the curvature of each turns back on the curvature of all:

. . . everything beefing up
and verging out

for that point in the periphery where
salience bends into curve
and all saliences bend to the same angle of

curve and curve becomes curve, one curve, the whole
curve:
that is information actual
at every point

but taking on itself at every point
the emanation of curvature, of meaning, all
the way into the high
recognition of wholeness, that synthesis,
feeling, aroused, controlled, and released: ("Essay" 30)

If the "high / recognition of wholeness" in this passage clinches a gradually accretive and autotelic structuralism that we tend to associate with

High Modernism, it's surely no accident. For in such a structure, where all objects turn back upon and in a sense re-present their subjects, we are given a system of signification which, in Mark Taylor's words, "perfectly mirrors the structure of the modern subject that begins with Descartes and comes to completion in Hegel's speculative or specular System" (213). Ending the recognition of wholeness in the above passage by remarking upon "that synthesis" as it does ("Essay" 30), Ammons' modernist narrative here merely serves to underscore how both "sign and subject are thoroughly reflexive," and so resemble the self-coinciding artefact that produces nothing other than itself" (Taylor 213).³ "I've often said," Ammons states in another place, "that a poem in becoming generates the laws of its / own becoming" ("Essay" 50). With this assertion, we finally begin to see how the aesthetic trajectory of the American poem is made even more intensely to coincide with the historical and political trajectory that I alluded to previously in remarking upon a certain self-defensiveness in American poetry with respect to the whole notion of authority—a defensiveness that can appear iconoclastic equally from a Puritan as from a Modern (or Postmodern) point of view. For in generating the laws of its own becoming, Ammons' discourse generates for itself as well an image of self-referentiality "without practical rhyme or reason . . . [and] is at once eloquent testimony to the obscure origins and enigmatic nature of value in a society which would seem everywhere to deny it, and an alternative to this sorry condition" (Eagleton 65). In the sheer pointlessness of its "enterprise," then, Ammons can joke that his American text "must be ever in search of the rapier that / holds the world on guard!" ("Essay" 33). In the same gesture, however, it's impossible for Ammons to escape sounding somewhat reactionary, if not paranoid—"schizophrenic," as Deleuze and Guattari would perhaps say, and as my title in part suggests. For, as Deleuze and Guattari ask, "Isn't the destiny of American literature that of crossing limits and frontiers, causing deterritorialized flows of desire to circulate, but also always making these flows transport fascisizing, moralizing, Puritan, and familialist territorialities?" (*Anti-Oedipus* 277–78; see also *Thousand Plateaus* 18–19).

If whatever circulates, turns in (or on) itself in American poetry's most self-reflective moments, Ammons' poetics would argue that there ought really to be "no reason for confusion: that is / what this [essay] is

about," after all ("Essay" 34). Yet a discourse layering practice over theory and theory over practice in precisely the etymological sense suggested by the word *con-fusion* is, in fact, the very thing this essay is about, and this "thing" perhaps cannot slip by without the need for some further questioning. Confusion, then, like the very self-reflexivity it betokens, is simple and impossibly difficult, by turns: "simple by grandeur, impossible by what all must answer there" ("Essay" 34–35). And so we are given a quite intractable sense in which Ammons, somewhat more hesitantly now, admits his text may be far more profoundly divided against itself than we might at first have thought. For what the text at the level of a high recognition of wholeness finds impossible to answer there is *how* all that simplicity and all that grandeur of curvature comes into being in the first place. Wholly outside the plane of cognitive wholeness and synthesis, therefore, lies Ammons' quite different conception of reality. This is a reality that we're likely to find unbelievable (to recur to the poem's opening once again), "because it permits / another wholeness, / another lyric, the same in structure, / in mechanism of existence, but bearing a *different weight*" ("Essay" 30, emphasis added). What could this reality be?

For one thing, it appears to mark a level of discourse entirely resistant to any kind of unitive synthesis, the kind that eventuates, for example, when language is made to take hold of reality in an empirical, objective, or eidetic sense, as a parley to reflexive order.⁴ Reality "captured" in such a restrictively correspondent sense is entirely analogous to the eductions of "arborescent" discourse described by Deleuze and Guattari, a hierarchical system of communication whose "corresponding models" (the imprint, engram, tracing, photograph, etc.) "still cling to the oldest modes of thought in that they grant all power to a memory or central organ." By contrast, as "an acentered nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton" (the fascicle, map, *intermezxo*, etc.), "rhizomatic" discourse seeks to establish an *experimental* contact "with the real" (*Thousand Plateaus* 16, 21, 12). Rather than an invocation of language, then, Reality, in this quite improvisational mode of discourse, is more like its provocation, and in Ammons' text, seems somewhat akin to Nietzsche's Chaos, Heidegger's Being, or Althusser's History—a radical multiplicity or Otherness that (simply) cannot be rationalized:

. . . all I mean to suggest is that the reality under
 words (and images) is too multiple for rational assess-
 ment and
 that language moves by sailing over: the
 other way definition has is to accept the multiplicity
 of synthesis: of course, synthesis is at work in cer-
 tain levels of
 analysis, but I mean by synthesis the primary intent:
 look
 at it this way: I am experiencing at the moment
 several
 clusters of entanglement: (“Essay” 36)

In an even more revealing passage, we find the former rapier-like wit of the well-wrought poem’s conception in the image of unenlightened “blades of reason” sinking and melting through the quite *other* motion of “reality’s cold murky waters” (“Essay” 32). Here, the verbal symbol operating on behalf of reason tries to control reality’s “level of abstraction” by suppressing it, imagining that a symbolical salience of meaning—a “sheet of ice” in Ammons’ very telling image (“Essay” 32)—can perhaps be the last (and lasting) word on the matter. In thus heightening language “by dismissing reality” in this way, the symbol only serves to violate reality, reducing it to what Ammons calls an “artificial clarity” (“Essay” 36). The point is made even more emphatically in Ammons’ “Hibernaculum”:

. . . the poet, baited by illusion, figures
 that massive tangling will give locus to core-tangles
 and core-tangles to *the* core-tangle that will
 fix reality in staid complication, at that central
 core’s center the primordial egg of truth: ah, what an
 illusion . . .⁵

The fact of the matter, however, is that reality cannot be fixed, a point which Wallace Stevens only came to discover quite late in his own Modernist project (*Necessary Angel* 35, 34; see my *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief*, esp. ch. 2). In more rigorously postmodern terms,

Deleuze and Guattari view reality's construction through metaphor—the radical of all symbolization—as equally problematic: "There is no 'like' here. . . . The plane of consistency is the abolition of all metaphor; all that consists is Real . . . veritable black holes, actual organites, authentic sign sequences. It's just that they have been uprooted from their strata, destratified, decoded, deterritorialized, and that is what makes their proximity and interpenetration in the plane of consistency possible" (*Thousand Plateaus* 69). Consequently, though language may be formed and sustained by reality, the symbol can only operate at an "impositional remove" ("Essay" 32) from reality—a "nothing," as Ammons goes on to expand the notion in "Hibernaculum," "an infinitesimal dot of void at the center of / the primordial egg" just described (89), a veritable black hole if you like. Like Paul de Man on the subject of "The Task of the Translator," then, Ammons fully owns up here to "the inadequacy of any symbol in relation to what it means" (98). Paul de Man, of course, arrives at this conclusion after working many years on the symbol in the context of Romanticism. Using the word "image" rather than "symbol" (or "metaphor"), Rodolphe Gasché makes a similar point in this context, but he also hooks it up with the conventional reflexivity of language developed previously: "if [a word like 'hymen'] re-marks its textuality, it is not because it would be a totalizing emblem which, like the romantic image, would assume the eschatological function of subduing a text to having its meaning in reflecting itself" (167). Once below this textual repression, however, it is precisely Ammons' point that "the symbol carries exactly the syrup of many distillations"—"hard endurance," it is true, but also "soft inquiry and turning" ("Essay" 43).

The other thing about Reality that intensifies the division of Ammons' text at a deeper—perhaps more distilled—level than transparent self-coincidence is a certain opacity which the text sets up to frustrate every avenue to univocal meaning or singular truth. This is particularly evident when the "Essay on Poetics" endeavors "to turn the essential image of a tree into the truest / rational wordage," "tree" into its etymology, in ME. *treue* and AS. *trewe* and G. *treu*, hoping at some point to end with Truth, and at last, "'conformity / with the facts'" ("Essay" 35). But like the highly perspectival character of Nietzsche's Fact or the inexhaustible nature of Heidegger's Thing, Ammons' Tree proves to be equally multiple and incorrigibly dense. Constantly influenced and influencing, it hardens and enters the ground at some "fairly reliable

point” that does promise a degree of “general unalterability,” but only to veer off at some other point, in “an outward, expanding / reticulation / too much to deal precisely with” (“Essay” 37–38). The point of rupture here that makes all the difference, in Deleuze and Guattari’s surprisingly similar terms, between a tree in its reductively transcendent or “arborescent” aspect, and its productively immanent or “rhizomatic” aspect is, in the more historically resonant terms alluded to earlier, a point of demarcation that separates American literature from all others:

. . . [America] is not immune from domination by trees or the search for roots. This is evident [] in the literature, in the quest for a national identity and even for a European ancestry or genealogy (Kerouac going off in search of his ancestors). Nevertheless, everything important that has happened or is happening takes the route of the American rhizome: the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with an outside. American books are different from European books, even when the American sets off in pursuit of trees. The conception of the book is different. *Leaves of Grass* . . . there is the rhizomatic West, with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is a whole American “map” in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes. (18, 19)

What complicates this whole matter of mapping, of course, is language itself, and according to Ammons, its withholding of any “core center of the planet” from which to gauge the tree’s true material being.⁶ And even if such a core could be settled upon, it would very soon betray the kind of “slow—perhaps universal—slosh” that before long gives every fixed point and every core position over to an entirely new set of references (“Essay” 38). This is rather like the hapless position of Borges’ “Funes, the Memorius,” in his confrontation with every last detail of a similar tree, and a thousand others besides (114–15). But if Funes is unaware that to think—to abstract and generalize—is to forget a difference, at least *that* lesson has not been lost on the writer of the present essay, whose own “wide application of averaging” seems the only way round a “massive pile-up of information” otherwise “recalcitrant to higher assimilations” (“Essay” 42–43). I don’t think Ammons means to imply here that the opacity of experience that greets us on

this second level of his text necessarily strengthens and thereby privileges all that we secure for ourselves in the way of unity and wholeness found on the first. If the poem is making sense at all, there is a certain application of averaging operative at *both* levels. But what I do think we sense when the essay becomes more deeply divided on this second level is how it is enabled more completely to account for itself when the discourse seeks to become open to that which is other than itself. "Read a few lines along the periphery of any of the truly / great," Ammons instructs us, "and the knowledge delineates an open shore," and the experience of a "landless, orientationless" beyond. But to obtain experience in such a prospect—reductions, identities, suasions—is perhaps to know it for the first time in all of its "difficult absoluteness" ("Essay" 44). "Philosophy," it has been said, "has its reasons for wanting to know beyond, across, and between what it itself is and what it is not . . . for being itself as well as being *other* than what it is" (Silverman 31). Yet can anything *less* be said about a literary text that problematizes its own identity to an equal degree?

From all of this, I think it might now be possible for us to see that the point in the self-reflexive scene of American poetry at which the same is divided against (or by) its other, that one is divided by many, and identity by difference is precisely the point at which Modernism gives place to Postmodernism, the point, that is to say, at which writing exceeds the symmetrical bifurcation between theory and practice and discovers in theory itself—Against Theory, if you will—a genuine source for its own production and power. In saying this, I entirely concur with Gerald Graff's recent suggestion that theory "is what is generated when some aspect of literature"—its conditions of production, in this case—"ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way" (*Professing* 252). In this way, the concern for the "poetics" of a text will yield a "description of the way in which a work means" that a concern for "hermeneutics" or the meaning itself of a work never can (de Man 88). In electing, therefore, to title his own work, "Essay in Poetics," Ammons in the same way aims to foreground the productive syntactics of textuality rather than a reductive semantics—the how rather than the what—underscoring, in an important place near the end of the poem, that he is "more certain that [he is] about than what [he is] about" ("Essay" 51–52).⁷ As with the co-dependent relation between Modernism and Postmodernism, of course,

neither syntax nor meaning is completely separable from the other, the very “meaning-producing function” of all discourse residing in “the fundamental oneness of language” (de Man 39). And it is this oneness, too, which is fundamental to Ammons’ own “one:many” mechanism, no longer a shorthand for pluralism in the restricted and equilibrated economy of reflexion. “Bearing a different weight” now, to repeat the earlier citation, this one:many mechanism becomes something very much akin to “the primordial structure of repetition” (Derrida, *Speech* 57) in the more general economy of his text, manifest both from within *and* from the outside:

that is, a different, perhaps contradicting,
bit-nature and assimilation:

wholeness then is a condition of existence,
a one:many mechanism, internally irrelevant to scope,
but from the outside circumscribed into scope: (“Essay” 31)⁸

As a gloss on the one:many mechanism here, particularly in relation to “the outside” in the final line, it may be instructive to recall the discursive “war machine’s relation to an outside” in Deleuze and Guattari once again, a relation which is “not another ‘model’” by which to represent or reproduce or replicate the world. As in the case with reality previously, “we think that one cannot write sufficiently in the name of an outside [for] the outside has no image, no signification, no subjectivity . . . with which to assemble in heterogeneity” (*Thousand Plateaus* 24, 23, 24). In terms of this formulation for Ammons’ one:many machine, then, we’re now invited to view “the high levels of oneness” as relays of force, “examples of integration” that set limits against which a text’s “energy flows with maximum / effect and economy,” generating “numerous subordinations and divisions of diversity” for itself (“Essay” 49). The control of the flow and organization of the energy is signal here; Ammons says he cannot stress that enough. “If I am to celebrate multiplicity / unity, and such,” he declares, “I’ll be obliged to free myself by accepting certain limitations . . . [for] it seems to me / a possibility of unceasing magnitude that [only] these structures / permit these eventualities” (“Essay” 38, 33). Seen from the other side, as in “Extremes and Moderations,” limitation forms an extreme the “strictures and disciplines of which prevent loose-flowing phantasmagoria,” and when broadly and

densely exploited, empowers "the outbreak of dialectical alternatives" (64, 56). Derrida stresses the same point, time after time, in his own work:

The adventurous excess of a writing that is no longer directed by any knowledge does not abandon itself to improvisation. The accident or throw of dice that "opens" such a text does not contradict the rigorous necessity of its formal assemblage. The game here is the unity of chance and rule, of the program and its leftovers or extras. (*Dissemination* 54)

The "unity of chance and rule" states precisely the "oneness" that divides both Ammons and his text, and indeed Postmodernism more generally, against themselves, for it is "out / of that bind"—perhaps we should say, double-bind—as he says, "I proceed a little way into similarity and / withdraw a bit into differentiae" ("Essay" 36). "In short," Deleuze and Guattari affirm, "there is no deterritorialization of the flows of schizophrenic desire that is not accompanied by global or local reterritorializations, reterritorializations that always reconstitute shores of representation" (*Anti-Oedipus* 316; see also 366–67). Hence, in Ammons, "one recognizes an ocean even from a dune" ("Essay" 44). But Ammons' one:many mechanism can take off in the completely opposite direction, and through the deterritorialization of the previous "shores of representation," discover a repetitive means—"say ocean over / and over"—by which, in a passage already cited, to "delineate[] an open shore" ("Essay" 44).

The most surprising thing about Ammons' essay, the thing that perhaps puts it most beside itself, comes with the revelation that, by the end, its theory really cannot be saying anything radically mind-altering or subversively earth-shattering at all. Those who detect in certain lines of Ammons' thought as I have outlined them yet another weary diatribe in the deconstructive mode, rife, once again, for institutional appropriation—or "routinization" (Graff 241) or "domestication" (Gödzich 39) or "neutralization" (Carroll 124)—at least have one thing right. There can be no mistaking the very conservative direction from which Ammons' theory comes. His is not a brief against lyricism or confessionalism or formalism or traditionalism or anything else. A delimitation of the self-reflexive gestures in American poetry is not an attack on those limits, but if anything, an *intensification* of them. To decipher,

we proceed by way of the cipher, and to deconstruct, we honor not the destructiveness of human endeavor, but rather its opposite. "I am not so much / arguing with the organic school," he tells us at the conclusion, "as shifting true organismus from / the already organized to the bleak periphery of possibility" ("Essay" 51). Along that "periphery of integrations"—the integration of chance and rule, again—there may be what he describes as "an exposure / to demons, thralls, witcheries, [a] maelstrom black / of possibility . . . an area transcendental only by its bottomless entropy" ("Essay" 51). But that is a blackness, a bottomlessness, a bleakness seen only from "that point in the periphery where / salience bends [back] into curve" once again, the curve of sameness from which we began. It rings a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around all those who will not know, nor indeed would ever care to know, the possibility of something other. Yet what if what happens at the periphery presents us with the possibility of adding to our store of knowledge rather than merely recycling or recircling what we may already possess? In other words, "you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities." But then, picking up on the gesture of intensification just noted, "you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located *outside* the limits and in other directions" (*Thousand Plateaus* 11; see also 22, 23). As Ammons envisions the process, the curvature of sameness suddenly begins to take on the appearance of an effect constituted from a point at the furthest remove from sameness, that is to say, from a point of unlikeness or difference as *the* centrifugally fecundating category. And the burgeoning "strings of nucleations" engendered from this newly focused sense of otherness that eventually opens us up to greater knowledge and to greater insight—do these new lines of flight not please us so much more than merely "representative details" only because, at that same point on the periphery, but from where, this time, "the mind is brought to silence, the / non-verbal, and the still" from an *other* or *out-side*—do these nucleations of mind not please us more because for the first time we are actually able "to see how [the mind's] motion goes" ("Essay" 46, 45)?

. . . split its green periphery and divide: John's
old tractor on the lawn only shows its steering wheel:
the

snowplow's been by and blocked the driveway: it's
December 26:
yesterday was Christmas: I got a pair of water-resistant gloves
with a removable woolen lining: I got Phyllis three charms for
the bracelet I bought her in Rome: John got a snowsled,
a beautiful
wooden train set, Lincoln logs, toggles, and several things
operated by non-included batteries: this morning he has
no fever: ("Essay" 45)

In the "irreducible errancy of [the] parapraxis" here, in Mark Taylor's phrase (224)—which can risk moving beyond the periphery only by moving through it—we approach generative and accumulative reaches of the expanding mind so insubstantial and inscrutable, so filled with the pure heat of "potentiality" and "undisclosed possibility," that we're given to stand in terror and amazement ("Essay" 47). And undoubtedly it's at that moment that we fall back into our more established and secure patterns of disciplinary discourse, rather pendentically attempting to talk a poem down through a study of its sources, its history, its influences, and other less "peripheral," though perhaps more widely footnoted and more amply rewarded ways.

This is not to imply, in a final word, that a Postmodern poetics of the "bleak periphery" is to be located at a diametrical remove from the study of history and culture and society, as some are likely to charge. If in bearing down on the force of articulation, "procedure's the only procedure," as we are given in conclusion to "Hibernaculum" (104), then one wants to have at one's disposal as many procedures as one can in order to circumscribe its motion and contextualize its operation, a kind of "pragmatology," as Derrida would say, that would aim to take the whole sociohistorical situation of the marking (and re-marking) into account ("My Chances" 27).⁹ This also means, of course, that the "poetics" of force is not restricted merely to literary discourse, although to many, that would seem a fairly likely place within which to begin charting its motions. Once underway, however, the opportunities for expand-

ing and exceeding the periphery, like the expanding energies of discursive expression itself, seem boundless:

. . . I am seeking the
 mechanisms physical, physiological, epistemological,
 electrical
 chemical, esthetic, social, religious by which many,
 kept
 discrete as many, expresses itself into the
 manageable rafters of salience, lofts to comprehension,
 breaks
 out in hard, highly informed suasions, the “gathering
 in the sky” so to speak (“Essay” 34)

Once Ammons’ poetics takes this final turn against its own containment within a purely Modernist literary self-reflexion, the only absolute limit it dares impose upon itself is “patience”: the patience to understand how oneness cannot be useful “when easily derived,” and to understand how manyness cannot be truthful when “thinly selective” (“Essay” 50). Hence, Ammons’ well-known ending to “Corsons Inlet”:

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.

(*Selected Poems* 46)

If Ammons’ bleak poetics risks leaving us with a theory of American literature that can’t add up to some kind of high (re)cognition anymore, the ultimate reflection of some kind of metaphysical Being or Presence, perhaps it’s because, like Nietzsche’s well-known Becoming

that can only be explained without recourse to final intentions, Ammons finds so much more to interest him at every moment ("Hibernaculum" 104). That is to say, his is a model of textuality "that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting up again" simply because it is in the very character of American literature to "do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings . . . [in] a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away . . . and picks up speed in the middle" (*Thousand Plateaus* 20, 25). The image of the periphery, in sum, seems an appropriate one with which to foreground this sense of a poetics processually "in the middle," that is to say, perpetually machining its way as a movement *in-between*. As readers and writers of contemporary American discourse, in a final citation from the *Anti-Oedipus*, "We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date. . . . We believe only in totalities that are *peripheral*. And if we discover such a totality alongside various separate parts, it is a whole *of* these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity *of* all these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately" (42, initial emphasis added). "Scope eludes my grasp," as Ammons has stated: "tomorrow a new walk is a new walk." And if *that* means nothing—"the greatest hazard of all is alien water," we learn in a final anecdote from "Essay on Poetics"—it could very well be that to risk meaning nothing, at last, is to begin to play (Derrida, *Positions* 14). When one gets lost for fun, as Ammons' "Essay" wryly claims, "there's no chance of getting lost" (34).

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NOTES

1. Renza concludes his essay with a superb description of the discursive self-reflexivity in the work of Poe that seems to permeate the canon of American letters more generally: "Poe's 'body' of works, continually purloined by French criticism, was in fact produced in such a way *as to return* to its original American ideological setting—if only to haunt it and engender readings possessing the uncanny effect of a *séance*" (85, emphasis added).

2. *Selected Longer Poems* 45.

3. Compare Adorno: ". . . as modern philosophy since Kant has noted time and time again . . . The reflection, which in philosophical terminology goes by the

name of *intentio obliqua*, is then a re-relation of that ambiguous concept of the object to a no less ambiguous concept of the subject. The second reflection reflects the first, more closely determining those vague subject and object concepts for their content's sake" ("Subject and Object" 498).

4. Compare V. L. Parrington's allegedly uncritical conception (according to Lionel Trilling) of reality in *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30), as "always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant" (cited in Graff, *Professing* 216).

5. *Selected Longer Poems* 89.

6. The non-coincidence between Reality and Truth marked by language, it should be stressed, is not to deny any belief at all in the external world signified by Ammons' tree. "There is not so much 'a loss of belief in a significant external reality,'" as Linda Hutcheon very perceptively observes, "as there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality, and therefore to represent it in language" (68). Thus, as Hayden White remarks: "reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience" ("Value of Narrativity" 20).

7. "It is cognition viewed in a different light," as Terry Eagleton observes, ". . . so that in this little crisis or revelatory breakdown of our cognitive routines, not *what* we know but *that* we know becomes the deepest, most delightful mystery." And at the heart of this mystery is to be found the modalities of production, once again—"Power," in a word, "a kind of riddle, of which the aesthetic, with its impossible lawless lawfulness," as we shall see momentarily, "is an apt sign" (*Ideology* 66, 56).

8. The passage has a striking resemblance to the "powerful writing operation" described by Derrida in his *Positions* as "the movement by means of which [content] exceeds its meaning, permits itself to be turned away from, to return to, and to repeat itself *outside* its self-identity" (78, emphasis added). For a likeness to Ammons' one:many mechanism, see also Derrida's "machine defined in its pure functioning, and not in its final utility, its meaning, its return, its work" (*Margins* 107).

9. Compare "a pragmatics composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensities" in Deleuze and Guattari (*Thousand Plateaus* 15; also 22, 25, 43, 82, 85, 94, et passim).

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