

## Laughing into the *Glare*

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### Abstract:

A. R. Ammons' *Glare* culminates a 40-year poetic career. *Glare* discusses all Ammons' familiar thematic concerns: spirit and matter, time and being, order and disorder. It reveals his debt and allegiance to American Romanticism, especially Emerson, his recognition of his position in the American poetic tradition, and his encyclopedia range of interests. *Glare* meditates on death, on humanly constructed orders, on our scientific understanding of life, on the disorder that is everywhere, and that we seek to understand, however temporarily. Finally, *Glare* celebrates life, recognizing that our stories and narratives are a way to project meaningful being, though they are mostly false or distorted versions of whatever exists. This slim triumph over disorder and death, however brief, provides us with perspective and a wistful guffaw.

**Keywords:** A. R. Ammons, Contemporary American Poetry, American Romantic poetry, science and literature, the American long poem.

*Glare* (1997) is A. R. Ammons' last volume of poetry before his death in 2001. For forty years, Ammons had been one of America's most distinguished poets, winning numerous prizes and distinctions, among them two National Book Awards, a Bollingen Award, and a MacArthur Fellowship. *Glare* is a book-length poem, written on an adding machine strip, like two earlier book-length poems, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1965) and *Garbage* (1993), the latter a National Book Award winner. *Glare* contains 117 sections or poems, divided into two parts, "Strip" (65 sections) and "Scat Scan" (52 sections).

A meditation on death, which contains forays into an encyclopedic range of topics and issues, *Glare* continues Ammons' insistence on the flow of matter and spirit, on a material monism, reversing the familiar religious dichotomy, so that: "the spirit dies, but the body / lives

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forever” (7). The poet asks us how to account for “litter, litter is without centrality . . . the central // image of this poem is that it has no / mound gathering stuff up but strews // itself across a random plain randomly” (54). The poem wrestles with randomness and disorder, of which death is one manifestation, as an ordered system called life changes to some other material structure. By doing so, *Glare* mirrors the uncertainty of life and the disarray of what passes through the mind. The mind is presented as a wandering process, a motion in search of form: “motion, going from here to there, / describes a swerve or arc or salience // and that is form” (51). Material objects have, at the atomic level, endurance beyond the particular form of the moment: form as cat, rat, elephant or fern. The “big” themes, and the “postmodern” ones, are all present in *Glare*: order and chaos, language and its vagaries, constructions and misconstructions of meanings, uncertainties of self, ontological inquiry, epistemological ambiguity, identity as process and flow. But the poet reverses common emphases and routine privileges, as his material monism suggests. By strewing itself “across a plain randomly,” *Glare* interrogates notions of order, while insisting that our “cookie-cutter” orders are too narrow. Ammons’ material monism means that, whatever the new configuration of matter, it is part of some one, some whole, some monad, some unity, often unclear to human observers.

This disposition places Ammons’ orientation in the center of the American poetic tradition. A number of critics have noted the influences of Emerson and Whitman on Ammons (see, for example, Harold Bloom and John Ashbery in *Considering the Radiance*). Roger Gilbert remarks that Ammons was “haunted by this passage” from Emerson’s *Nature*:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. (Gilbert 187)

But where Gilbert stops his citation, Emerson continues: “I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm>).

This Emerson passage articulates a desire for union with beauty, but, for Ammons and other writers we may not know immediately what beauty is. Gertrude Stein's famous analysis of what makes a classic identifies the problem of recognizing and locating beauty:

There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. . . . The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition. (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/238702>)

Can something “without centrality” strewn “across a random plain randomly” provide aesthetic beauty? The universe is without a center, and matter is strewn about. Because we look with scientific eyes at the world, because science is the dominant intellectual paradigm for understanding our daily lives and our cosmic context, we are looking at the world differently from those who have preceded us. What we see is different – how can we make a composition of garbage, and then progress to litter? Why are they not beautiful and worthy, or, why is their ugliness not aesthetic?

Additionally, Emerson's intimation of immortality turns out for Ammons to be material rather than spiritual. The literal, chemical, material union with all other objects in the universe means that “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through” us. “The City Limits” may be as clear a statement of Ammons' assertion of the beauty of being as any in his canon:

When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold  
itself but pours its abundance without selection into every  
nook and cranny not overhung or hidden; when you consider

that birds' bones make no awful noise against the light but

lie low in the light as in a high testimony; when you consider  
the radiance, that it will look into the guiltiest

swervings of the weaving heart and bear itself upon them,  
not flinching into disguise or darkening; when you consider  
the abundance of such resource as illuminates the glow-blue

bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped  
guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit and in no  
way winces from its storms of generosity; when you consider

that air or vacuum, snow or shale, squid or wolf, rose or lichen,  
each is accepted into as much light as it will take, then  
the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks about, the

leaf does not increase itself above the grass, and the dark  
work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May bushes  
and fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to praise.

(<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15225>)

Echoes of Whitman's monism and all-embracing style provide Ammons with a model for that connection with all being he feels to be material rather than traditionally spiritual. So while very much in the American romantic tradition – *Glare* cites Whitman and Stevens – Ammons' version owes more to chemistry and advances in science than to the romanticism of "spilt religion," as T. E. Hulme phrased it. As a nature poet, with a kind of Wordsworthian solitary voice questioning the universe, Ammons' poetry is philosophical, religious in a non-sectarian way, scientific, ontological, eschatological. Roald Hoffman, in an essay insightfully titled "The Natural Philosopher Returns, Singing," comments on Ammons' poetic: "His search, gentle yet insistent, is for a philosophy of nature – a metaphysics always, an epistemology of openness to the connectedness of things and ideas, its inherent logic, an aesthetics rooted in the wonder of

it all, and reinforced by the purposive harmony of his poems, an ethics, even an eschatology of the very real world" (174).

This constant search marks both the pilgrim's journey coupled to the ever-changing flow of being into new forms, new apprehensions, new motions, with certainty sliding away, fixity a hollow goal, assurance a vacant lot. The famous ending of "Corsons Inlet" articulates a position that remains constant throughout Ammons' career:

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.

<http://boppin.com/poets/ammons.htm>

Without "Scope," we can only live in every new moment, which has a shape and a motion. We construct form and create artifice. We manufacture shape and motion, but "forms are like foam cast up onto // floats of pause" (*Glare* 110). In this context, being does not have a motive other than to continue to be, in the present, in the now, in the unfolding of form and possibility. So in "Poetics" the speaker says:

I look for the forms  
things want to come as  
  
from what black wells of possibility,  
how a thing will  
unfold:

not the shape on paper -- though  
 that, too -- but the  
 uninterfering means on paper:

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

(<http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/A/AmmonsAR/Poetics.htm>)

So just as with the reversal of Ammons' monism from spirit to matter, so it follows that Ammons reverses eschatological goals: the goal of being is to be, for the moment and in the moment, but in that self that is "ours." Being is a temporary system destined to dissolve and disappear, whose ultimate goal is to keep on being. Death comes, the system breaks up, and becomes some other order, some other form, some other motion. Yet being thrives in its activities: "I write to write: it's / not that I think that's the way to // write: It's that this way of writing / occupies me: it's a way of existing" (*Glare* 78-9).

The self is a system won away, temporarily, from entropy, with its matter destined to continue in some other form, its spirit dissolved, yet present. The flux between material and immaterial provides Ammons a trope for the state of the universe. This image is presented memorably in *Garbage*, "which is about the pre-socratic idea of the / dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind // to stone . . . this is a scientific poem / asserting that nature models values" (20). In *Garbage*, Ammons makes a major aesthetic statement, central to his vision, and central to our times, to "the thing seen" in our times. *Garbage* is

just a poem with a job to do: and that  
 is to declare, however roundabout, sideways,  
 or meanderingly (or in those ways) the perfect

scientific and material notion of the  
spindle of energy: when energy is gross,

rocklike, it resembles the gross, and when  
fine it mists away into mystical refinements (24)

there is a . . .  
riddling reality where real hands grasp each  
other in the muff but toward either extremes the  
reality wears out, wears thin, becomes a reality

“realityless”: this is satisfactory, providing  
permanent movement and staying, providing the

stratum essential with an essential air, the  
poles thick and thin, the middles, at interchange . . . (30).

things are awash in

ideality: ideal meaninglessness, ideal absurdity,  
ideal ideals: we want to know the reality of

these perfectly, ideally, as themselves . . .” (89).

Nature indeed models values, and therein lays a clear statement of a romantic orientation. But in our age, nature and values must be restated depending on how we perceive our universe through the penetrating instruments of science and scientific reasoning. If the modern poem, in Stevens’ words, “has to be living, to learn the speech of the place” that speech is now scientific, that lens through which we apprehend our coordinates for existence is predominantly scientific (<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/of-modern-poetry.html>). “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” finds science as the discourse of “scope,” and science,

always advancing, always changing our perspective of nature – even indeed what we are all looking at – assures us that “Scope” eludes our grasp. And if nature models values, what does litter model? No use saying it does not exist or is not everywhere or we should ignore it. What values are we to learn from litter? How to see the radiance of litter?

What kinds of things pass through the mind? All sorts of things: related and unrelated, connected and random, ordered and muddled, petty and noble, and a multitude of other descriptors. So the poet has the task of recording these ordered and random strewings. The method resembles stream of consciousness, recording what passes in the mind, validating it, accepting it, allowing it, in all its pain, confusion, pettiness, self assertion, and self-doubt. Memory, of course, flows centrally through this stream, and carries with it glory, success, joy, generosity, bawdiness, scatology, jealousies, failures, and the overwhelming recognition of one’s own death. *Glare* is unremittingly self-conscious, interrogating the litter in the mind and the litter of the mind, unrelentingly glaring at the human muddle. Consciousness, however, is not a neutral or even reliable narrator:

consciousness is a kind of planet, inscribed  
on the outside with whatever’s seen or done,

trekked or swum, climbed or scrambled down,  
while inside the molten moves (drives, slow

shifts) redispose how the surface lies: we’re  
wardens, gardeners, waterworkers of the self

keeping the circulations clear and the light  
bright; except, of course, we clog everything

up and dumb everything down dim

(225)



Internal drives, unconscious motives, unknown motions clutter our understanding, clog our path, diminish our perceptions. This position resembles some arguments in contemporary neuropsychology. With this kind of contention, Ammons echoes Michael Gazzaniga's assertions about the left brain as interpreter. Working with split-brain patients, Gazzaniga argues that the left brain creates a narrative out of the various disconnected pieces of information coming into consciousness. But these narratives are almost always wrong (see, for example, Gazzaniga Cooney and Gazzaniga, Roser and Gazzaniga). Ammons identifies both the motions of the un- or subconscious brain, and the falsity of the narrative projected by a consciousness that relies on memory: "sometimes I did what // I say I did – if memory serves, / memory filtered through by invention // and displacement" (149). Memory and consciousness are both notoriously unreliable, "filtered through by invention and displacement," with a resulting self-doubt, confusion, even despondency: "existence // itself seems like a wayward temporizing, / an illusion nonexistence sometimes stumbles into" (121).

The wrong narrative, the wrong explanation, the wrong ameliorative provides the title of the poem. Ammons narrates his memory of the scene of his sick brother being passed through a split tree in the folk medicine of his North Carolina childhood:

I see the eye-level silver shine of  
the axe blade the neighbor carried

at our house at dawn, and I see the  
child carried off in arms to the woods,

see the sapling split and the child  
passed through and the tree bound

back: as the tree knits, the young  
rupture heals

His brother was not saved by this ritual, and we cannot be saved by this or any ritual. Rituals and memories are forms that motion flows into temporarily – they offer scope, but not Scope. Nevertheless these rituals and memories form some basis of being, a bedrock of being. The passage continues:

let // me who knows so little know less:

alas, though: feeling that is so

fleeting is carved in stone across

the gut: I can't float or heave it

out: it has become a foundation:

whatever is now passes like early

snow on a warm boulder: but the

boulder over and over is revealed,

its grainy size and weight a glare (94-5)

So there is feeling, which somehow centers us, even as we do not know what it is, cannot rely on the narratives our consciousness and memory construct from it, cannot be saved by our own artifices. Feeling glares at us from some foundation taken into our core: “glare” in all its various meanings of a harsh bright light, an angry aggressive stare, a showy appearance. Seen cosmically, death destroys all knowledge, ritual never saves us, artifice, posture, gesture, position, all result in death. Life is arbitrary, coincidental, conditional on forces well outside our control, impossible to order through memory or consciousness: litter.

But while life may be absurd and we may be silly, we still have these connections to the universe and to each other: “in extremis, // is love the main thing and the memory / of some other person diamonds / rubies, sapphires, and emeralds” (9-10). In this oscillation between a scientific knowledge projecting our insignificance, with our material return to chemical elements, and our concerns for our health, our well-being, our loves, our memories,

our pettinesses and generousities, we get a motion and form called life, destined to end. And since opposites are closely connected, binary logic relying on pairs, the pain of death is also the humor of life. Assertions, axioms, verdicts, and generalizations are all momentary and temporary: “verdicts are fences in fields where // lava flows” (82). These necessary connections between opposites result in a corresponding comic vision, a joy, perhaps unintended, a celebration of the irrepressible radiance of being:

but then what a nice note  
that is, life a big guffaw

possibly, even, a celebrant guffaw,  
possibly a word to us all: I hadn't

meant to get off onto a happy  
note, but life is just irrepressible

even in death: it all comes up  
again and starts over (125)

Because of its multiple voices, varied, encyclopedic subject matter, abrupt shifts, stream of consciousness, diversions and meanderings, *Glare*, like *litter* and *life*, does not admit “verdicts.” While enormously varied in tone, style, allusion, reference, wordplay, and content, *Glare* presents wry moments of humor, sometimes gallows humor, directed at the absurdity of living and the certainty of dying. As such it becomes a “celebrant guffaw,” an affirmation of being and living.

By doing so, *Glare* posits a most fragile, tentative, slim assertion of triumph over our fears of death. This triumph cannot hold, cannot face down its own internal contradictions, cannot withstand the poem's refusal to accept verdicts, the narrator's distrust of humanly constructed narrative, the mind's own fickleness, and the boggling variety and immensity of *litter*. While “Scope” is impossible, today's walk may lead to a “celebrant guffaw.”

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