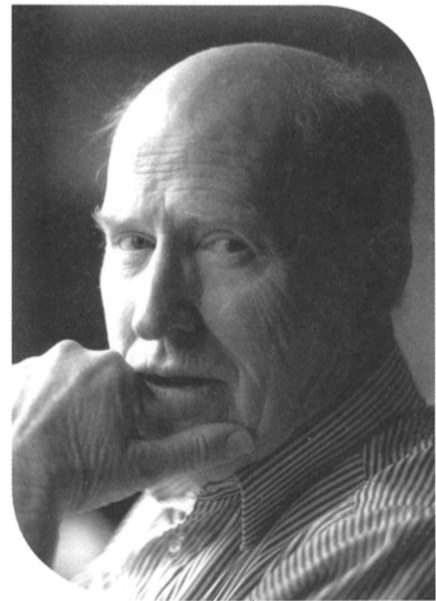


Reconciliation and Return: A.R. Ammons's Poetry as Autobiography

by Ted Olson

The recipient of more official recognition than virtually any other American poet during the final decades of the twentieth century, A.R. Ammons (1926-2001) received, among other accolades, the National Book Award for Poetry (twice), the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry, a Lannan Foundation Award, and a MacArthur Fellowship (popularly known as the "Genius Grant"). Ammons garnered laudatory critical response from leading literary scholars, including Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler.

Vendler appraises Ammons as having "an extremely attractive mind – full of sights, science, quirks, questions, and a million words – [which] appears to unroll itself to us as one would unroll an endless scroll" (Vendler 369). This quotation encapsulates the most characteristic attributes of Ammons's poetry: vision, scientific inquiry, quirkiness, philosophical speculation, and verbosity (one might encounter in Ammons's poetry virtually any word in the English language, formal or vernacular). Vendler, however, does not identify the principal factor underlying Ammons's eclecticism – that his poetry reads like an "endless scroll" in large part because it is strongly autobiographical, reflecting the considerable influence of the poet's unique formative experience. Indeed, scholars have tended to overlook the fact that, in essence, Ammons, like Whitman before him, composed one lifelong autobiographical poem, an extended "song of [him]self," comprised of many poems with separate identities that nonetheless contribute to the larger autobiographical intention of his *oeuvre*. To date, few scholars have recognized the fact that the poet's work grew out of his predicament of being caught between the South and the North – between two historically incongruent and often antagonistic cultures. In a poem composed in the late 1950s, entitled "Unsaid," Ammons himself once admonished those who overlooked such facts: "Have you listened for the things I have left out? / I am nowhere near the end yet and already / hear / the hum of omissions" (*Collected Poems* 90).



Photograph by David Heath Photography. Courtesy of Phyllis Ammons

Poetry by A.R. Ammons appears in the 1992, 1994, 1995, and 1996 issues of *NCLR*.

By the very nature of poetry it is impossible for anyone to be at the same time a sublime poet and a sublime metaphysician, for metaphysics abstracts the mind from the senses, and poetic faculty must submerge the whole mind in the senses; metaphysics soars up to universals, and the poetic faculty must plunge deep into particulars.

Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (Aphorism #821)