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The Discussion of Language and Poetry in A.R. Ammons's *Garbage*

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Abstract

A.R. Ammons's *Garbage* is a unique poem in all measures, starting from the title to the subject matter of the poem. Though it discusses the ecological repercussion of waste management, the long poem is written to shed light on the correlation between language\poetry and garbage. The paper argues that in his examination of language\poetry and garbage as both reflectors of human life and experience, Ammons claims that redemption is possible through both language and garbage by scrutinizing human experience whether low or high, mundane or sacred. This paper tries to examine Ammons's efforts to use the farfetched metaphor of garbage to discuss language and poetry-writing.

Keywords: Ammons, *Garbage*, language, poetry, metaphor.

Introduction

Published in the year 1994, *Garbage* can be said to represent Archie Randolph Ammons's (1926-2001) later life poetic achievement. The main source of inspiration for writing the poem was a scene of a mound of trash towering over a landfill situated close to Interstate 95 in south Florida which Ammons has seen. Buell states that "... the Florida landfill stands for what has been done everywhere to nature; no places apart, like beach or gorge, are left. Just the reverse; garbage spreads out literally and metaphorically across the entire landscape." (Buell, 2003, p. 270).

Garbage consists of eighteen sections and is arranged in couplets. The style in which the poem was written is improvisational and experimental with the long sentence text is prevalent and having the colon to function as a pause. The poem discusses Ammons's concern about the environment and the global crises. He condemns strongly the process of garbage burning and objects the resulting "toxic waste, poison air, beach goo". The meditative and philosophical touch is still seen in the poem, however. Themes in *Garbage* include science, old age, transcendence and human existence at large. John Holmes calls *Garbage* a "monologue on the nature of existence..." (Holmes, 2012, p. 61)

As for its metaphor and imagery, the poem tries to make a sort of analogy between the profane and the sacred going through wide spectra of themes. As the title might suggest, the poem is not solely an environmental poem that tackles the ever-growing problems of waste management (though the idea of dealing with waste is echoed in the poem). However, the focus instead is on garbage as a metaphor of other larger things. Garbage becomes a vehicle to describe something else, and in this poem Ammons studies the implications which trash embed.

Ammons uses the trope of garbage so as to express the intertwined relationship between humans and the world. The poem's central image is that of the garbage as one of the wonders of world similar to a ziggurat or a pyramid. Ammons describes a mock-ritual in which:

*the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance
as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls
and garbage keep alive, offerings to the gods
of garbage, of retribution, of realistic
expectation, the deities of unpleasant necessities*

(*Garbage*, 1994, p. 18)¹.

The truck driver drives up to the peak like a priest. Hence Ammons treats the garbage dump as something sacred and spiritual; a place where daily human items are discarded for decay, but also as an entrance to the divine presence. This sense of the spirituality of the garbage is the clearest all through the poem. Ammons writes,

*garbage has to be the poem of our time because
garbage is spiritual, believable enough
to get our attention, getting in the way, piling
up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and
creamy white: what else deflects us from the
errors of our illusionary ways, not a temptation
to trashlessness, that is too far off, and,
anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic .* (*Garbage*, 1994, p. 18)

Voros maintains that "if garbage means the possibility of transformation, then untransformed garbage betokens grave spiritual malady..." (Voro, 2000, p.163). The dialectic of the material and the spiritual is the central theme of the poem. This trend to find spirituality even in the lowest of things seen in *Garbage* makes the poem Whitmanesque. In addition to the celebration of the low and the basest of the material, the poet provides a Whitmanesque catalog of the useless or discarded objects of consumer culture (worn-out baby strollers, lemon crates, spoilt ground beef, and partially eaten hot dogs, broken lawn

¹ All reference to the poem is taken from this source: Ammons, A.R. *Garbage: A Poem*. New York: Norton, 1994.

chairs... etc.). The poem is a testament of the comingling of culture and nature. She believes that the poet is actually creating a setting suitable for the consummation of the relation (Phillips, 2003, p. 244).

Ammons's concern is that the poet's linguistic outcome, meant to reflect and manage the natural\cultural issue, only adds to the mound of garbage. Thus, he states this is

*... a poem about garbage garbage
or will this abstract, hollow junk seem beautiful
and necessary as just another offering to the
high assimilations: (that means up on top where
the smoke is; the incinerations of sin,
corruption, misconstruction pass through the
purification of flame
(Garbage, 1994, p. 30).*

The garbage spreader pauses in his work and has a sudden revelation: "*the garbage spreader gets off his bulldozer and / approaches the fire: he stares into it as into / eternity, the burning edge of beginning and / ending ...*" (Garbage, 1994, p. 28). The idea of transformation and regeneration is central in these lines. The poem envisages the garbage spreader in the role of magician who possesses transformative powers which are made doubly explicit by looking at the association with fire. Ammons hold to the scientifically-sound Emersonian notion that nature regenerates itself and that nothing is actually lost but only transformed. Likewise, Ammons insists that every piece of trash can be transformed into another form of objects or energy.

The poem is concerned with the poet's attempt to add sacredness to otherwise very mundane piles of trash. The mundaneness of the poem starts, actually, at the dedication page in which he dedicates the poem "to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, wordsmiths—the transfigures, restorers." Continually, two things are indicated in the poem: poetry/language and garbage – and the dedication for the poem-book starts the tone for the relationship between the two (or the three). It is not

possible to hear “Bacteria, tumblebugs,” and “scavengers” without associating them with garbage. They exist within a garbage mound since they love garbage and are allured to it. However, when the “wordsmiths” which are linked to language, are mentioned the poem's central theme shifts from being simply about the discussion of garbage into the study of language in relation to garbage. “Bacteria, tumblebugs,” and “scavengers” are makers, creating something from garbage, while “wordsmiths” are creators who make meaning out of language.

1- Language in *Garbage*

Undoubtedly, language is the most complex human behavior as it is, unlike the animal communicative signs, intended to provide a complicated expression of ideas. El-Samir and Ali argue that “[i]n addition to its basic communicative function, language can be used to imply information that is not actually stated, [its] addressers do not always state exactly (or directly) what they mean”(El-Samir & Ali, 2015, p. 145).

The bizarre analogy of language in general and the poetic language in particular with garbage is rationalized by regarding them as both the products of human activity. Garbage is the product of human consumption of products (food and otherwise) whereas the language is the byproduct of human thinking. Ammons reveals two of the most significant products of human existence by comparing the heap of language and the heap of garbage. As an extension to this farfetched metaphor, language is the byproduct of ourselves and can be attached to us as long as we live; it is the upshot of our mental life. The garbage we produce, on the other hand, is also the outcome of our material life. So we cannot simply detach ourselves from our garbage than we can from the words that we utter.

The two albeit being similar from the poet's perspective the words garbage and language here are incompatible or equivalent but very closely related. For Ammons both language and garbage are essential, spiritual and foundational:

a waste of words, a flattened-down, smoothed-over mesa of Styrofoam verbiage; since words were introduced here things have gone poorly for the planet: it's been between words and rivers, surface-mining words and hilltops, cuneiform records in priestly piles; between clay tablets and irrigated fields: papyrus in sheets; vellum in Alexandria; hundreds of temples to type and, now, networks of words intricate as the realities they represent.

(Garbage, 1994, p. 70)

As suggested by Ammons, his reference to the existence of "networks of words" indicates that the poet believes that a large number of problems in our environments are originated from human attempts to mirror the world in language. Words and garbage are very closely related; words are excessive like waste, and there is a kind of waste of words. To mention the similarities both of them are catastrophic when not managed properly and both are essential for human existence. Ammons in *Garbage* studies verbiage on as an excess of akin to the waste produce. Nature's wastefulness is obvious everywhere:

what are we to think of the waste, though: the sugarmaple seeds on the blacktop are so dense, the seedheads crushed by tires, the wings stuck wet, they hold the rains, so there's no walkway dry: so many seeds, and not one will make a tree, excuse the expression: what of so much possibility, all impossibility. . . .

(Garbage, 1994, p. 90)

This is not to say that Ammons is degrading the value of words or language. On the contrary he is stressing the importance of language as a powerful tool that transforms that world of physical objects into a spiritual realm and the other way around. Actually, Ammons believes that words

are the function of our exceptional brain that have allowed humans to dominate nature (something he laments greatly in *Garbage*).

The point is studied in more depth in section 12 of the poem when Ammons sheds light on the fact that humans have reached the position of the center of the universe thanks to the words they utter and record. Words have driven the fast expansion of human civilization, as shown by the media on which humans have recorded their words (cuneiform, clay tablets, papyrus scrolls, vellum, typescript).

For Ammons, the task to build the world that is shown in language also mirrors the modern longing "*to kick the l out of the world and cuddle / up with the avenues and byways of the word*" (*Garbage*, 1994, p.77). Daniel Tobin maintains that "...such an expanded notion of language as an integral aspect of the motions of reality and not merely a province of human creation at once chastens the presumption of those who would, in Ammons's words, make it 'fashionable to mean nothing'(Tobin, 2001, p.153).

Unmistakably, Ammons believes that whereas language has gotten more sophisticated, it still maintains its status as a means of communication. Yet in many instances it works as a divider rather than bringing humans nearer with their environments. He incites us to "*drop all this crap about words,*" so as to be able to take language back in general to something like "their proper place in the pecking order of behaviors, human and animal" (Phillips, 2003, p.247). Moreover, Ammons foresees that dwelling in this imaginary world of words will set humans on course for a future where "*words have / driven the sludge in billows higher than our / heads*" and speculates that people of the world may be obliged to leave the planet (*Garbage*, 1994, pp. 75-76).

Certainly, human beings are the only creatures who use words and utter meaningful words, but we are by no means the only ones who speak and communicate. Still this attitude by Ammons is mentioned to make a kind of equilibrium between humans and non-humans. Ammons writes that:

*our cousins the birds talk in the morning: I
can tell the weather by their voices before
I open my eyes: I know some of their "words"
because I know, share with them, their states
of being and feeling: my cousins the
robins tug worms up from the lawn and eat them
and that gives me a piece of conflictual reality
until I savor the hog in my bacon, admire the
thighbone in my chicken* (Garbage, 1994, p.47)

He 'shares' with the birds their feelings as their fellow habitant of Planet Earth. Actually even mentioned his eating the bacon and the chicken indicates his acceptance of the order of being.

Garbage introduces a peculiar trope of language; this one focuses on animals not on garbage:

*I know the entire language of chickens,
from rooster crows to biddy cheeps: it is a
language sufficient to the forms of procedures
nature assigns to chicken-birds but a language,
as competition goes, not sufficient to protect
them from us....* (Garbage, 1994, pp. 51-52).

Accordingly, instead of being a unifying factor between ourselves and animals, language here becomes a divider as it is being used nowadays to invade the lives of animals: "*our systems now \ change their genes, their forms and procedures, \house them up in all-life houses, trick their egg laying with artificial days and nights*" (Garbage, 1994, p.52). Like anything else humans have been using, language as a means of intervention that alters the very existence of animals make them serve our ends. Ammons notes that while "*our language is something to write home about, it isn't the world: grooming does for / baboons most of what words do for us*" (Garbage, 1994, p. 52). Our sophisticated language is not very different from the simple utterances of animals as communicative faculties

and Ammons indicates here that this double-edge sword is actually being used by humans to destroy the ecological order.

Undeniably, the poem investigates the points of similarity between human and other species' communicative talents. We tend to underestimate animal communicative faculties and overestimate our own language. Significantly, Ammons emphasizes in the examples below the way the sort languages animal use are set to their practical purposes. Ammons irritably invites us to "*have some respect for other speakers of being and / for god's sake drop all this crap about words, / singularity, and dominion*" (Garbage, 1994, p. 50).

Ammons strengthens this point about the use of language successfully as determined by its capability to produce some sort of reaction in other creatures when he writes that "*the words do for us what other / languages do for others -- they warn, inform, / reassure, compare, present: we may be alone in / words but we are not singular in language*" (Garbage, 1994,p.50). Morrison states that "[t]he process of revision is likened to garbage that needs to be composted" (Morrison, 2015, p. 197).

Ammons enthusiastically discloses the point the so-called common language does not exist. However, he suggests that the harmony of language, of verbal and non-verbal means for "alerting to dangers" and keeping "intimate transactions fluid," means that "we are not alone in language," although "we may be alone in words". The whales also "can turn to tongue, crotch, boob, navel" and "consider the perfumeries of slick exchange" in a manner relevant to their huge size.

Upon the above idea, Ammons puts it that "*words are a way of fending in the world*", the purpose of language is not essentially to reflect the world, but rather to help us find a productive relationship with our world and the other beings which populate it. Ammons is making a remarkable argument here about the purpose of human language, just like the communicative faculties of other animals, is to assist us explore the human experience in the existence. Poetry can facilitate to humans the

achievement of a better connection with the environment and its components.

Just the like the way garbage can be recycled and turned into more useful stuff, words could also go through the process of recycling. Voro argues that the poem "evinces faith in the possibilities of language to transfigure cultural junk and effect renewal" (Voros, 2000, p. 174)

2- Poetry in *Garbage*

Closely associated with words, poetry has also been compared with garbage and it turns out they have a great deal in common. Words and poetry are similar to waste but in another occasion poetry is definitely unlike garbage.

The poem begins with summoning the Muse as the tradition of the classical poet, but the Muse here is devoid of any divine nature: "*Creepy little creepers...curling up my spine*" (*Garbage*, 1994, p. 13). The Muse is an outsider that comes not from outside but from inside the poet, not as the source of inspiration for writing poetry but an uncomfortable feeling at the poet's heart.

Like the 'mound of trash' mentioned earlier, Ammons asserts that "*there is a mound/ too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled /off to and burned down on*" (*Garbage*, 1994, p.20). Material things are not damaged or formed, only transformed, and so energy is "*held / and shaped into new turns and clusters*" (*Garbage*, 1994, p. 20).

For him poetry is:

*like an installation at a Marine
Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit
and cool oil of stale recognition and words and
brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays
with light and strings with shiny syllables and
gets the mind back into vital relationship with*

*communication channels: but, of course, there
is some untransformed material, namely the poem
itself; the minute its transmutations ends, it
becomes a relic sometimes only generations or
sets of countrywide generations can degrade*

(Garbage, 1994, p.108-9)

Here, while portraying poetry as exhibiting the same properties and capacities as accumulated garbage, which Ammons considers a singularly exemplary model of the world's capability to continually preserve and regenerate itself, he also reiterates the description earlier likening poems to the markings of the wind. In either case, the poem itself must be viewed as evidence of motion, markings accumulated during prolonged activity, accurately depicting the progress.

In *Garbage's* world of cycles and recycling, this transformative mechanism stays unchanged itself for a short while. With the advance of time, predominantly in the later poems, Ammons gets strongly conscious of the ways in which the new contains the old and is created from it. His interest in the temporality generates his interest in recycling. Thus, he says in an interview: "The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again" (Ammons, 2006, p. 102).

Ammons's metaphor quickly obliterate the division between the material and imaginative; the very poem installation which physically salvages marine waste concurrently brings it back with language in the way which poems about garbage allege to do so that to have an effect over the mind.

Like poetry, garbage is unrelenting, provocative, and stubborn, like the "clear-through plastic lid" which, not like other "leavings" or "scraps" or "breadcrumbs" does not decay. From an ecological viewpoint, the plastic cover poses a problem which is not the subject of this discussion, its being disruptive, long-lasting as well as calling attention to itself is

something very similar to poetry. The analogy becomes complete when we know that the poet celebrates garbage as a lasting thing that can be reincarnated into many forms.

The treatment of garbage as something hard to manage is not the only unusual thing that one can notice. Garbage is compared to poetry in terms of holiness and spirituality in addition to mundaneness. The sanctity added to garbage is actually derived from that taken from poetry. They both enter into a process of recycling and poetry is likened to two various sorts of machinery.

Ammons uses the scientific parlance to describe the importance of poetry for the revitalization of language. The poet bases his argument on Emerson's idea that the poet enlivens the language. The poet like 'installation of Marine Shale' extracts 'words' from a cool oil of stale recognition' and revitalizes them. By doing so, Ammons suggests that poetry is able to involve language in such a manner like when the incinerator catalyze the conveyance of energy by burning the waste products. Massi notes that "the transfiguration of energy and Ammons's celebration of the dump is, symbolically, an Emersonian celebration of the current of energy running throughout the universe"(Massi, 2018, p.146).

Poetry-making is the same as orgasm during which is subjected to some sort of pressure to produce poems. The poet who keeps his stamina is compensated with a "trace of feeling" that circulates just like the energy free flowing current. Ammons recognizes this as flowing through the universe, that 'burns' like the waste objects smoldering on the garbage dump, and consequently has a generative outcome on the poet who "dreams of imminent shapes". Thus, Ammons suggests that on writing a poem "*you keep your mind / open and on the move and eventually there is a / trace of feeling*"(Garbage, 1994, p.42) .

The poetic process that Ammons is outlining should be free of 'conflict', 'density', 'brutality', and 'energy.' The process of poetry-making necessitates from the writer to clear their mind of distraction so as to concentrate on the moment, and be attentive to the details. The poet's

description of 'hackers' poets (whose poetry include that is *not* advisable in a poem) suggests that a more conventional writer might suggest that a poet should find a more motivated alternative of describing the impulse to write than this. Also Ammons's description of "little creepers" as creepy and an "unaccomplished mission" as unaccomplished can be read as lazy or uncreative from this standpoint. They also can be viewed as the instant product of a poetic mind, i.e. the poet's poetic procedure attempts to express an instantaneous reflection of the mind's functions and, in the case of "creepy little creepers", Ammons is not only "building steam in the poem but also foregrounding his commitment to the spontaneous" (Massi, 2018, p.126).

However, Ammons's values are unlike that of the conventional poet his portrayals are efforts to "provide a more honest reflection of how the mind actually works" (Massi, 2018, p.126). Ammons consciously utilizes a poetic process which restricts the opportunities to amend his work and helps him preserve an incessant streaming flow.

By contrast, the poetic writing Ammons recommends in *Garbage* derives its meanings from the writing process, as is evinced by the following lines:

*on writing a poem — you sit vacant and
relaxed (if possible), your mind wandering*

*freely, unengaged and in search of focus: you
may sit this way for several minutes till the*

*void unsettles you a bit and you become impatient
with the intrusion of an awareness of yourself
sitting with a touch of unwelcome exasperation
over a great blank...*

(*Garbage*, 1994, p.27)

In the lines above, Ammons details how poetry-writing start with an uncomfortable mind-clearing to accomplish some kind of "focus". The

poet, however, who perseveres in this meditative attention to the moment is rewarded at the end.

Conclusion

In A.R. Ammons's poem he answers a question about the dichotomy of garbage and poetry by saying: "*The garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again*". *Garbage* is a poem about garbage and about the significance of vindicating and redefining it, and seeing waste on the same level that we see language itself as the most valued achievement of human civilization.

Language, then, is the ideal vehicle for poetry to take humans up to the heights and down to the low. Ammons's understanding of the mundane physical and the sublime spiritual is that both co-occur and co-exist. Therefore, poetry and garbage possess this ability to make the readers experience being taken to the redemptive ground. Hence, they cause humans to be altered into a more sublime being the way religion makes them do. Poetry is the child of language and imagination. Like garbage, words, are human products, not to be wasted. In *Garbage* Ammons questions the nature and purpose of poetry in a universe of flux, on a planet in danger of being overwhelmed by human waste.

Given Ammons's point in which he embeds that the purpose of language is to help animals "[fend] in the world", in addition to his disappointment with the modern uses of language which is both complicated and environmentally lacking concentration, one suppose that Ammons argues that poetry can restore the "vital relationship with / communication channels".

The uniqueness of the poems starts from its very title and dedication as well as its experimental style. The poet's dedication of the poem to "wordsmiths' links it to the theme of words as human waste-like byproducts.

Ammons's equation of the human language and animal utterances and simple communicative gestures adds a transcendental touch to the poem and expands on the theme of waste spirituality.

The process of regeneration is central to the poem as both waste and language can be recycled to produce functional things. Poetry resembles garbage in many aspects: for in addition to its having the ability to be regenerated poetry also can defy change and maintain its existence for a long time. The poem's detailing of what is good poetry makes the readers believe falsely that it is a didactic, *Ars Poetica* poem but the truth is that Ammons is only trying to meditate on the source of poetry he recommends.

Ammons's *Garbage* takes as its theme the same opportunity for sanctifying garbage as the needed preface to regeneration and rebirth.

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مناقشة اللغة والشعر في قصيدة أ.ر. امنز (النفاية)

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المستخلص

مما لا شك فيه ان قصيدة (النفاية) للشاعر ا.ر. امنز هي قصيدة فريدة بدأ من عنوانها مروراً بموضوعها نفسه. على الرغم من ان القصيدة تناقش التبعات البيئية لعملية ادارة البيئة بيد ان هذه القصيدة ركزت ايضا على الترابط بين اللغة والشعر والنفاية. يجادل البحث بان أمنز وفي

معرض دراسته للغة والشعر من ناحية والنفاية من ناحية اخرى وَجَدَ ان كلاهما يعكس التجربة البشرية وانه بالامكان الوصول الى المخرج الى الخلاص عبر اللغة او النفاية عبر تحري التجربة البشرية سواء أكانت متكونة مما هو مقدس ام وضع. كما وتحاول هذه الورقة تحري جهود الشاعر امنز لاستعمال صورة مجازية ليست بالشائعة للتقريب بين اللغة والشعر والنفاية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أمنز، اللغة، الشعر، المجاز، قصيدة (نفاية)