

## UNITY AND PARADOX IN A. R. AMMONS'S TAOIST VISION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reflect about Ammons's biocentric and deeply human view of nature. It analyzes his ecological concern which is the supremacy of nature's way, that is, the Taoist way. Nature provides the locus of norms hence Ammons makes nature his text and calls man to consider in its cycles. Man cannot dominate nature's process. His exploitation of nature resulted in environmental degradation. Man depends on nature for survival. Therefore, he has to live in harmony with it and evaluate it. He seems to maintain the naturalness of Taoism which involves freeing oneself from selfishness. For all he means to do is to overturn the western mind. You do not need a political movement, you need something more radical, he believes.

Attention is especially given to "A unity beyond multiplicity" This is seen in "Ballad" which illustrates his passion for unity as an experience, a communication between man and nature. Nature sees man as a pure form of evil and death. Obviously, unity is a mere concept nature cannot experience. The other crucial point is Ammons concern with human nature. His worldview is antithetical in the sense that he balances and accepts basic opposites as life and death, ignorance and knowledge. In "Easter Morning" the theme of change is an interesting aspect. The change he is seeking will not be accomplished unless man nourishes internal spiritual peace and seeks deeply the powerful concept that all things are in all which Lao's Taoist philosophy calls for. Man has to realize, as the poet does, that earth is the only planet to live on and protect. The unity of the paradoxes of the high and the low, the spiritual and the worldly. The notion of going forward is essential with his heart man can see the essential since the essential is invisible to the eye.

**Key Words:** Taoism, Nature, Multiplicity, Paradoxes, Lao

## INTRODUCTION

Archie Randolph Ammons (1926-2001) was born in North Carolina where he grew upon a tobacco farm. During world War 11 he joined the US Navy forces as a Veteran. Both his life and his long night watch at sea as a navy strengthened his connection to nature and motivated him to write his poems. (Goodwin 180).

In an interview in 1978 Ammons offered an initial clue to his world as he picked 17th century America to be the appropriate time to live in. He states "I think of America when it was rural...the village community without cars or that kind of transportation ... with horses and streams and sky.it must have been very beautiful. Spiritually...would like to live in a pagan...society. "(Haythe 184- 185).

Ammons was seen as a successor to the American Transcendentalists, or as Harold Bloom named him "a descendent of the American romantic tradition of Emerson and Whitman". (Bloom 45). Consequently Ammons discussed bloom's viewpoint of "anxiety of influence" with regard to Emerson in a 1973 diacritics interview:

About the "the anxiety of influence"...I have experienced very little anxiety of that kind that I could identify- a need to come, and a fear of coming , to terms with a literary father. It is impossible for me to identify closely with Emerson because he comes from Concord, and I from a rural and defeated South... It is impossible for me to imagine myself belonging to any culture because of that rural South, which in growing up, I tended to discredit religiously and intellectually. ((Bloom 45-46).

In another interview with Cynthia Haythe in 1978 Ammons defends Emerson as" a better thinker" and "a better writer" I really didn't read Emerson that much or that well before Harold Bloom started speaking of him. ... I went back myself to try to confirm or renounce this..., and I found, a man speaking my central concerns more beautifully than I could say...i...can...see a better thinker and a better writer saying my material for me. (Haythe 181).

In addition, the oriental tradition, Ammons asserts was the principal source he shared with Whitman and Emerson. In an interview with Grossvogal held in 1973 he claimed that he read a good deal of Indian and Chinese philosophy,

Finally coming to Lao Tso...that's my philosophical source in its most complete version. So that, when I look back at Emerson, Emerson looks derivative to me of...those oriental traditions in the same way as I

am derivative of them. In an immediate sense my forbears are Whitman and Emerson, but in a larger sense my source is the same as theirs. (Grossvogel 52) .

Ammons respects Eastern philosophy, and in particular Lao Tso's *Tao Te Ching* in which Tso says:

The great Tao everywhere  
Both to the left and to the right.

It fulfils its purpose silently  
And makes no claim.

.....

It does not show greatness  
And is therefore truly great (Tsu chapter 34?)

Philosophically, Tao at first meant "road" or path. For Confucians it is the right conduct emphasizes Wu Wei (effortless action) or naturalness, simplicity (Pu), spontaneity and the Treasures: compassion, wisdom, harmony, deep tranquility, Paradoxical qualities and humility.(Bloch 4-8)

There is a group of Taoists named Literati Taoists who adopt the ideas of ancient thinkers to create meanings in the world and contribute universal harmony, known as the state of peace. They also hope to exert influence on social and political situation of their time. (Taoism 2) Besides, Taoism sees the universe as a constant cyclic process of renewal with paradoxical extremes of yin and yang which are complementary to each other. (Bloch 7) Thus the Tao is the "mother of all things" and "a unity beyond multiplicity. (Haythe 181)" This is exactly what motivated Ammons to adopt Taoism in his verse. For all he means to do, says Ammons, " is overturn the western mind. For that you don't need a political moment: you need something more radical." (Haythe 181).

### **Interdependency of all organisms within an ecosystem**

We are

Not half-in and  
Half-out of the universe but unmendable integral: when we  
Move, something yields to us and accepts our steps.

(Ammons 97)

Ammons's conscious sensitivity to ecological thinking reveals his abiding interest in life. Unity and wholeness which stem from the core of man's being are the forefront of Ammons's mind.

In "Ballad", a poem in *Diversifications* Ammons illustrates his passion for unity as an experience. He says: "I want to know the unity in all things and the difference / between one thing and another". (Ammons 40) The conversation between the poet and a willow tree signifies a unity, a communication between man and nature. However, the willow complains about the water oak's attempt to block it from sunlight, as a result

I said to the willow

And asked what it wanted to know: the willow said it  
wanted to know how to get rid of the water oak  
That was thrown it into shade every afternoon at 4 o'clock

In a reasonable manner Ammons suggests to approach the water oak with the powerful concept of unity of all things. If it could see it "deeply" it would be cooperative. But immediately and assuredly comes the willow's answer that the water oak is unlikely to be friendly because it is "afraid" of the willow's mastery,

Well, I said, but does he know about the unity in  
All things, does he understand that all things have a  
Common source and end: if he could be made  
To see that rather deeply, don't you think he might  
Give you a little way:  
No said the willow he'd be afraid I would take all

Ammons endeavor to be "afraid" with both "willowness" and "wateroakness" is confronted with "a deep grief" on willow's side. The willow harbors resentment for the wateroak. It describes the wateroak as "a pure form of evil and death. "Obviously unity seems a mere concept the wateroak cannot experience.

The willow went right on saying:

I can't take you for a friend because while you must  
Be interested in willowness, which you could find nowhere  
Better than right here  
I'll bet you're just as interested in wateroakness  
Which you could find in a pure form right over there  
A pure form of evil and death to me:  
Willow slaughtered into a deep grief

Metaphorically the wateroak represents man himself who sees nature unaffected by his deeds and the willow's complaint is an evidence of the ramifications of human viewpoints. This is one of the points raised by Ammons about the significance of unity. Man's aggressiveness extends to nature as if he is in competition with it. It mirrors his erroneous actions through the ages that indicates a discord in modern man's consciousness.

Hence, Ammons calls for "commonness" and "unity" of life is nothing but a voice in the willowness. Ultimately, the change he is seeking will not be accomplished unless man nourish internal spiritual peace and seeks deeply the powerful concept that all things are in all which La Tso's Taoist philosophy calls for.

### Quest for change

Ammons ecological concern is evidently the supremacy of Nature's Way, that is the Taoist Way of Lao Tzu. In "Easter Morning", a poem in *A Coast of Trees* Ammons's vision is Taoist paradoxical belief of life and death, man and nature, appearance and reality, and composition and decomposition.

The theme of change is an interesting aspect of the poem. It is presented from a child's view who cannot grow. A world without change is a paradox of the law of nature. On his return to his hometown the emotions of the speaker (Ammons himself) are heavily strained with the memories of his dead brother, Elbert and the barrenness of his family which adds solemnity to the poem .He starts with a startling declaration: "I have a life that did not become/That turned a side and stopped, astonished."

The present for him is a dead life, socially and psychologically. It is a silent and empty incompleteness

We all buy the bitter  
Incompleteness, pick up the knots of  
Horror, silently raving, and go on  
Crashing into empty ends ,not  
Completions...(Ammons 19)

Memories of childhood are lost as he grew up to conform to the ideals of elders. He feels he cannot live without such memories. They are like "a pregnancy" or a child on his lap. They do not grow up. They are dead as a "grave "provide no healing. Add to this, his return to his home country will also not heal. It is in

the grave as well. He says,

I hold it in me like a pregnancy or  
 As on my lap a child  
 Not to grow old but dwell on  
 It is to his grave I most  
 Frequently return and return  
 To ask what is wrong, what was  
 Wrong, to see it all by  
 The light of a different necessity  
 But the grave will not heal  
 And the child,  
 Stirring, must share my grave  
 With me, an old man having  
 Gotten by on what was left.

The barrenness Ammons lives in changes as he turns his attention from memories to the present,

I must stand and fail,  
 Calling attention with tears  
 To the branches not lofting  
 Boughs into space, to the barren  
 Air that holds the world that was my world  
 Through the incompletions  
 (and completions) burn out  
 Standing in the flash high-burn  
 Momentary structure of ash

The speaker's mood changes with Easter morning. It nourishes him with a sense of seasonal and spiritual renewal which assists in changing his perspective. He finds that "it is a picture-book/letter perfect/Easter morning." In addition to the "ash" image which indicates that the crumbling of his life is turned into ashes. The image refers to his moving to a new birth and a new way of seeing life. He is as phoenix that rises from nothing, emptiness to fullness and newness.

The transition from a state of separation to a state of realization is markedly illustrated as he moves his eyes to nature. Tranquility of earth is confirmed by image of the eagles. Ammons presents a fulfilling

image of the eagles to reflect the working of nature. One of the eagles rejoins the one it has abandoned it,

I saw something I had  
 Never seen before: The great birds,  
 May be eagles, black winged,

.....

The one behind, veered a little to the  
 Left and the other bird kept on seeming  
 Not to notice for a minute: the first  
 Began to circle as if looking for  
 Something, coasting, resting its wings

.....

The other bird came back and they both  
 Circled, looking perhaps for a draft;  
 They turned a few more times, possibly  
 Rising-at least-clearing resting-

.....

They broke across the local bush and  
 Trees: it was a sight of bountiful  
 Majesty and integrity

Two important biological facts are associated with the eagle. Firstly, its sharp eyesight provides a wide view. Secondly, the eagle is able to fly higher than any bird which makes it the master of all birds; it also enables it to be close to the divine and thus to convey a spiritual message. Observing these diverse dimensions linked with the image of the eagle Ammons, the poet, is granted courage and freedom to expand the perspective of his thinking to look forward to explore new realities and grow as he embarks on a challenging endeavor to change life view illustrating a rebirth of the spirit.

He is the eagle man who is aware that the quest for truthful principles requires stamina to endure difficulties. Especially that not all people can understand his view, as not all birds can fly as high as the eagle. He needs to be patient and lay a solid foundation for himself and others. As the eagle flies down to join the other eagle on earth, the poet needs to be with people on earth as the only planet to live on and protect. This encompasses the essence of the Taoist Way. The unity of the paradoxes of the high and the

low, the spiritual and the worldly. The image of the eagles signifies the unity in nature which leads to the renewal. Man needs to learn this from nature though he can stand in the opposite side of nature in different matters. His past is not to be united with the present, but the notion of going forward is essential. With his heart can man see the essential as the fox said in Antoine de Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince* "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." (Saint Exupery 87)

## CONCLUSION

Ammons's voice is distinctive as he sees nature with openness and optimism. As a poet of man and nature his view of nature is deeply human and biocentric. It is an equal other that is able to correct man's willfulness. Man cannot dominate nature's process. His exploitation of nature resulted in environmental degradation, chemical pollution of water, soil, and air, deforestation, diversity and ozone depletion.

Man has to realize that he depends on nature for survival and he is a subset of the whole ecological system. Therefore, he has to live in harmony with nature and appreciate its beauty as he immerses himself in its flow. Thus Ammons calls for a transformation in viewing the referential world of nature. His quest for a unity between man and nature comes from an inner consciousness not a mere external orientation. That is, unity is an experience and not a concept.

Basically his spiritual vision incorporates harmony with the ancient Taoist Way. He seems to maintain "a course o of action which involves no action" (Dhanavel 68) It is the naturalness of Taoism which involves freeing oneself from selfishness. He aims at a social change through a wakening us to our true natures without taking stands.

In addition, nature does some ethical work; it provides the locus of norms Ammons makes nature his text and calls man to consider his trust in its cycles and rhythms. Hence, his call to follow nature's renewal which involves change and accepts its variety and paradoxes. Without spiritual change life is a dead one. He is concerned with nature, including human nature his worldview is antithetical in the sense that he balances and accepts basic opposites as life and death, ignorance and knowledge child and adult which constitute the variety man has to accept in life and nature.



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