Notes on A.R. Ammons, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The Material of Writing Before Materiality Theory

Materiality, material culture, object-oriented ontology, thing studies, actor-network theory -- these are all kinds of theories that pay attention to the thingness of the thing: the physical book, the paper, pages, weight, and texture. My own project, Writing with Images, impinges on these topics whenever I find myself studying texts where the book itself is part of the work's expressive purpose. Anne Carson's "Nox" is an example. (I've written on that at some length in [writingwithimages.com](http:).)

Books like these are increasingly common, but they have earlier precedents. An interesting one is A.R. Ammons's "Tape for the Turn of the Year," which was typed on a single roll of adding-machine tape. As far as I can discover (I haven't called Cornell, which has the original reel), there is no scan of the tape, and no facsimile edition. The book transcribes the tape, so we don't see the original monospace typewriter font, and we can only imagine the edges of the reel on both sides of the irregularly formatted text. A typical passage:

1:26 pm:

I feel a little shivery:
the cold's making--
forgive me--headway:
but I just had a baked ham sandwich, glass of milk &
coffee,
that to be
transformed into
whatever ammunition
it can:

after this,
this long poem, I hope I
can do short rich hard
lyrics: lines
that can incubate
slowly
then fall into
symmetrical tangles:
lines that can be
gone over (and over)
till they sing with
pre-established rightness:
The wide margins conjure the invisible constraints Ammons gave himself, and he also writes intermittently about the roll itself, which is slowly unfurling, and how he re-rolls in an ashtray. Ammons may have known about Kerouac's "On the Road" scroll, done in the 1950s, and it is barely possible he knew about some of the early Fluxus experiments -- but my guess is he didn't know either. He was part-time at Cornell University at the time, and his points of reference are writers such as William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, and Robert Penn Warren.

All that is by way of explaining why it may never have occurred to Ammons to print a facsimile in monospace font with the tape made explicitly visible. He did have an interest in painting, and exhibited several times, but as I imagine it he wouldn't have thought that an image of the typewriter's embossed imprint, or even the red margins signalling the end of the tape is approaching (which he mentions several times; the red margins would have been visible at the center of the coiled tape roll as he worked) would have served any purpose except distracting readers from his voice. On the other hand, as the reader is reminded on every page, the project has a certain duration, requires specific arrangements (he unspools the tape at one point in order to take it with him on a trip out of town), and constrains every thought between its invisible margins. It is therefore a different kind of materiality, one that represents the physical stuff in words rather than images. It's an interesting kind of awareness of the material, unlike the literalism of today's theories, and immune from the preciousness that comes along with high-resolution color scans (as in Carson's book). When he asks himself

why do I need to throw
this structure
against the flow
which I cannot stop?
is there something
unyielding in me that
can't accept
the passing away of days [p. 87]

he doesn't mean the "structure" of the tape, its spools, his typewriter. He means the structure formed by their constraints, as they are represented in the book. That is a crucial, and I think moderate, ambitious, and sensible, alternative to today's insistence on the stuff itself, its mass, its weight, its look.

(As a poem, "Tape for the Turn of the Year" feels as though it is in the first wave of postmodernism. It is almost unedited; it contains all sorts of unpolished thoughts, including elephant jokes (haven't heard those since I was a child) and space- or time-filling observations, which he excuses by invoking the absence of the Muse. It also has flight of invention, and a wonderful, in the end entirely winning, mode of address to the reader ("reader, we've been thru / a lot together ; / who are you?" p. 200). It's as memorable a high-wire act now as it was when I first read it, when Ammons was younger than I am now.)