

Steven P. Schneider: On "Corsons Inlet"

Ammons, like Emerson, resists the city because the city diminishes vision. Sherman Paul, in his book on Emerson, *Emerson's Angle of Vision*, notes that for Emerson "the city was shortsighted business." Emerson closely identified the near-pointed tasks of city work with the Understanding. He writes in his journal that:

the City delights the Understanding. It is made up of finites; short, sharp, mathematical lines, all calculable. It is full of varieties, of successions, of contrivances. The Country, on the contrary, offers an unbroken horizon, the monotony of an endless road, or vast uniform plains ... the eye is invited ever to the horizon and the clouds. It is the school of Reason.

Ammons, over a century later, echoes Emerson when he states in an interview shortly after the publication of the *Collected Poems 1951-1971*: "I identify civilization (the City) with definition. . . . That's why I'm not in the city; that's why I am not an urban person. The city represents to me the artificial, the limited, the defined, the stalled." He too links the nearsighted vision of city life with constrictive modes of thought and diminished intuition.

Ammons's attempt to move beyond the "mathematical lines" of urban life is best evidenced in his poem "Corsons Inlet." Ammons is above all a peripatetic poet, and he begins "Corsons Inlet" by walking away from the city.

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning to the sea,

then turned right along

the surf

rounded a naked headland

and returned

along the inlet shore:

Both the direction of the walk and the form of its record defy "straightness." The varying lengths of the lines jut and curve down the page, evoking both the movement of the poet's walk along the inlet's shore and the uneven margins of the inlet itself. In reading them, the eyes must oscillate, swinging back and forth. In addition to engaging the reader in a beneficial visual exercise, the content of the poem points out toward nature, out toward the very flux of creation that Ammons believes must be experienced, to avoid the contemporary myopia epidemic.

The activity of walking in "Corsons Inlet" is an exercise in eye-body coordination; the eye traces the events in nature as the body balances itself on the winding path. Ammons finds this walk "liberating":

I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
of sight:

The poet has moved beyond the defined, described here in terms of the geometry of straight lines, into the "flowing bends and blends of sight." He evokes the difference between "hard eyes" and "soft eyes." Those who see with "hard eyes" tend to look for the hard edges of things. They tend to see people and objects as separate and not necessarily related. They constantly analyze and dissect experience by their way of seeing. Ammons, by contrast, is encouraging a "softer" approach, allowing one to see relationships, "blends of sight," flows of experience. Both the eyes and the mind are now free to open up to the flow of "events" the poet celebrates in the rest of the poem.

The word "lines" is repeated as many as ten different times in the poem, and one learns that Ammons prefers the "curvy" to the "straight," the spontaneous to the rigid, when describing both the visual geometry of nature's lines and his own processes of thought. Ultimately he seeks to resist definitions, boundaries of thought, any kind of reductive philosophy. He keeps his attention on the flux in nature, which functions as the model of openness he hopes to experience and sustain.

"Corsons Inlet," like so much of Ammons's work, presents a record of the poet's vision, but Ammons is particularly resistant to summarize the significance of the many natural events recorded, for to do so would be to construct a box of thought against which the flow of the poem argues. He writes:

I allow myself eddies of meaning:

yield to a direction of significance

running

like a stream through the geography of my work:

you can find

in my sayings

swerves of action

like the inlet's cutting edge:

there are dunes of motion,

organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance

in the overall wandering of mirroring mind:

but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events

I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting

beyond the account:

The "eddies of meaning" Ammons allows himself are found in the myriad "events" of this and his other poems. Unlike Emerson, Ammons does not feel compelled to make these events fit into a paradigm. His use of "Overall" echoes Emerson's "Oversoul," but Ammons distances himself here from his major influence by refusing to engage in the kind of speculation that takes him beyond the physical world of sight.

Harold Bloom, in his article on Ammons and the Romantic Sublime, cites "Corsons Inlet" as a pivotal poem in Ammons's development, a moment when the poet resists his own intense desire for Transcendence. Bloom writes, "Ammons was losing his battle against himself until he wrote his most famous poem, 'Corsons Inlet.'" Ammons opts for the vision of nature because he finds "direct sight" more liberating than the contemplation of the Sublime. In Ammons's universe, the apperception of physical, manifest phenomena and processes yields pleasure and sometimes pain. Despite the lure of the Transcendent, he resists it. Ammons associates the "Overall" with closure, whereas freedom depends upon process and visible change.

Much of this long lyric poem alternates between descriptions of what Ammons sees on his walk and his reminding himself not to draw conclusions from what he sees. There are no sharp lines in nature; there should be no sharp lines of thought to hem in consciousness. He employs words like "so" and "as" to make grammatically parallel the proper relation between thought and nature. Thus we read:

as

manifold events of sand

change the dune's shape that will not be the same shape

tomorrow,

so I am willing to go along, to accept

the becoming

thought to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish

no walls:

To "accept / the becoming thought" is to be open to process, and the continuously transforming sand dunes inspire him. The shifting dunes are just one of the many manifold "events" in the poem that have the capacity both to criticize restrictive mental forms and to simultaneously function as examples of "becoming," encouraging a more "easy-going, tolerant mental scope."

The poet's walk leads to the discovery of fresh visual patterns ("every walk is unreproducible"), liberating him from stale boundaries of thought and perception. For Ammons, the walk is "the externalization of an interior seeking." The many turns he takes along the inlet's shore reflect his internal quest for freedom and possibility.

While in the first half of "Corsons Inlet" Ammons argues persuasively against the "tyranny of straight lines," in the second half he is careful to avoid endorsing chaos or anarchy. And although the inexactness of the waterline captures his attention and is mirrored in the inexactness of the lines he uses to structure his poem, Ammons is careful not to endorse total randomness. Instead, he eventually uncovers in his walk the paradox of nature's mechanisms, which incorporate both order and randomness. The flock of tree swallows he sees in the distance is such a system.

the news to my left and over the dunes and

reeds and bayberry clumps was

fall: thousands of tree swallows

gathering for flight:

an order held

in constant change: a congregation
rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable
as one event,
not chaos: preparations for
flight from winter,
cheet, cheet, cheet, cheet, wings rifling the green clumps,
beaks
at the bayberries
a perception full of wind, flight, curve,
sound:
the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness:
the "field" of action
with moving, incalculable center:

The words used to describe this flock of swallows coexist as opposites: "constant" and "change," "order" and "entropy," "rule" and "rulelessness." Individual swallows can shift direction with the wind, swoop down for food or rest, and circle in seemingly aimless patterns. Ammons finds such diversity "rich." Yet he knows that this collection of swallows--this "congregation"--presents a unity to the mind that is "separable, noticeable / as one event, / not chaos." These swallows partake of the same flux that Ammons finds in the sand dunes and in the other natural events within the poem. Most of all they present him with the kind of perception that is anything but constricting: "full of wind, flight, curve, / sound." Yet for all the movement the swallows suggest, they also present "the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness." As a group they form a coherent wholeness.

As the poem moves toward its conclusion, Ammons has learned to accommodate his vision, shifting it from far to near. The reader follows him in these shifts and is encouraged to accommodate vision without straining or blurring. Contemplating the marine life in the inlet, the poet observes that inside the bellies of minnows must be "pulsations of order." But the minnows in turn are swallowed up by larger fish, the smaller order "feeding" the larger, illustrating the constant metamorphosis in nature.

In the final stanzas of the poem, Ammons resists trying to make too much sense out of all he has seen; to do so would be to create an unnecessary stop to processes that resist closure. Most of all Ammons does not want to diminish the reality of nature's events by imposing upon them a particular philosophical framework?"no humbling of reality to precept." Given "Corsons Inlet's" repeated emphasis on flux and curvature, it is not surprising for the poem to end with the poet's celebrating the fact that no perception is final. His credo is to resist at all costs a final "Credo," and in this sense the message of "Corsons Inlet" echoes what Ammons has

said in the Foreword to Ommateum: that "forms of thought, like physical forms ... are susceptible to change," and when one resists change the results are "costly and violent." In the final stanza of the poem he reiterates his preference for "the looser, wider forces" of nature in contrast to "limited tightness."

In employing the words "see," "vision," and "scope" in the final lines of the poem, Ammons leaves the reader with a final reminder about perception, the vehicle through which the provisional nature of reality is experienced.

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.

Ammons enjoys the freedom of not having to reduce his perceptions to a single, unifying philosophical abstraction ("Scope eludes my grasp"). Instead he celebrates that "there is no finality of vision." And, in attempting to widen scope, he will move beyond the range of the natural eye to look through the telescope and microscope.

"Corsons Inlet" offers a corrective to a shortsighted age. Ammons makes a major statement about the nature of reality, thought, and perception, suggesting that we avoid perceptual and psychological rigidity in exchange for a broader, more open, more tolerant way of being in the world.

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