

Roger Gilbert: On "Corsons Inlet"

The walk functions as more than metaphor in many of Ammons's poems, most notably his two masterpieces "Corsons Inlet" and "Salience." Both these poems present themselves as meditations unfolding in the course of actual walk; and both seek to integrate the phenomenal data of the walk with its accompanying stream of thought. They use the walk to lend a formal unity to the formless flux of consciousness, to stake out beginning and ending points, and to establish a spatial ground for the poem's temporal wanderings. The physical walk thus plays an indispensable role in firming up and shaping the analogical, discursive "walking" that the poem enacts, enabling the poet to coordinate his inner processes with the real time of experience, and so to be simultaneously faithful to the limitations of particular circumstance and to the expansive possibilities of pure thought.

"Corsons Inlet" is a volatile balancing of these two conditions, alternating between tight contractions to perceived particulars and broadly general assertions. Ammons originally titled the poem "A Nature Walk" but while this certainly lays greater emphasis on the formal coincidence of poem and walk it also tips the balance too far in the direction of a universal "Nature," and away from the restrictions of the local. In naming the poem after the place in which it is set, Ammons implicitly announces his fidelity to the particulars of his walk, his refusal to synthesize them into some larger conception that would replace or dissolve them. Indeed this refusal constitutes the central discursive gesture of the poem, a fact that accounts for a peculiar discordance between its style and theme. Over and over Ammons tells us that he has "reached no conclusions," committed no "humbling of reality to precept," "perceived nothing completely"; yet he does so in a tone of calm authority and certitude that seems radically at odds with his meaning. One might say that the grammar of statement in the poem clashes with the more fluid kind of syntax associated with the walk itself, so that we are being given both a representation of consciousness in flux and a series of firm claims retrospectively imposed on that flux. The poem's strength lies in its ability to balance this didactic mode of assertion and evocations of a more genuinely open consciousness caught up in the becoming of experience.

The poem opens with a straightforward narration of the walk in its purely external aspect:

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:

it was muggy sunny, the wind from the sea steady and high
crisp in the running sand,
some breakthroughs of sun
but after a bit

continuous overcast:

Ammons's language here is at its most mimetic, reminiscent of Williams and Snyder in its alignment of topography and typography. The shape and rhythm of the poem both work to capture the experiential contours of the walk; as David Lehman writes: "Such poems as the frequently anthologized 'Corsons Inlet' feature a more rambling gait, uneven lines with jagged edges that suggest a grammar of space; the poet constantly shifts his margins in an effort to set up antiphonal patterns apposite for 'a walk over the dunes' beside 'the inlet's cutting edge.'" Ammons makes subtle use of spacing here and throughout the poem to convey not only spatial forms, like that of the headland, but also temporal rhythms, as in the contrast between "some breakthroughs of sun," slightly indented to suggest its intermittent character, and "continuous overcast," which is set off on the page in a way that seems to mime the condition of linear stasis it describes. This kind of mimesis, however, is somewhat foreign to Ammons, who does not share Snyder's willingness to let his experience embody its own meaning. These opening lines must therefore be seen as a deliberately restrained prologue, in which the merely physical aspect of the walk is laid out so as to establish the ground of the poem's discursive utterances. It is essential to the poem's procedure that it begin with the physical experience, since this provides the necessary frame for its assertions, locating them temporally and spatially and so reminding us of their provisional, circumstantial character.

Unlike O'Hara, Ammons sets his walk in the past tense, thus acknowledging the inevitable gap that intervenes between occasion and composition. This gap becomes palpable in the course of the poem, since its discursive assertions are all cast in the present tense, and so are sharply differentiated from its mimesis of the walk as an event in the past. This grammatical difference creates a problem for the reader, however; are we to interpret the poem's thought-content as taking shape after the walk, during the act of composition? Or does the poem's thought unfold in the course of the walk itself? At first Ammons maintains the temporal separation between walk and thought, as if meditating on an experience that had already taken place; but as the poem continues this division is slowly blurred, until walk and reflection become virtually indistinguishable.

The structure of the poem as a whole may thus be described as a gradual convergence of seeing and thinking, perception and reflection, two modes of consciousness that are at first kept rigorously distinct.

the 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

Here Ammons insists that his walk is not contaminated by the rigid forms of thought, but is given over entirely to the subtle continuities of perception. A firm opposition is thus established between thought, with its sharp, angular schemata (imitated in the very sound of the words "blocks, boxes"), and sight, with its "flowing bends and blends," its apprehension of curve and gradation. Yet while Ammons is clearly valorizing the flowing contours of perception, his compartmentalizing of thought and sight in fact exemplifies the "blocks and boxes" of thought, a contradiction that the poem must wrestle to overcome.

While persuasive at first, the opposition between thought and sight turns out to be dangerously constricting as the poem proceeds, since it presents as mutually exclusive aspects of experience that the poet ultimately hopes to unite. While the passage ends with a colon, suggesting that it will be followed by some illustration of the "flowing bends and

blends of sight," it in fact gives way to a more blatant instance of "thought," that is, abstract statement, though now framed in terms taken directly from the landscape of the walk:

 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:

This conversion of the landscape into a metaphor for the poem represents an overly facile solution to the problem of mediating between sense experience and thought; the notion of "mirroring mind," which recurs throughout Ammons's work (see his poem "Reflective") is here given too literal a realization. Note especially the use of the allegorical "of" construction ("white sandy paths of remembrance"), which has the effect of denying the empirical reality of its first term. This allegorizing of the landscape is, I think, an inevitable outcome of Ammons's overly rigid distinction between perception and thought at the outset of the poem. Like Stevens in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Ammons begins with a static polarity that forces him to commit crude reductions in his effort to bridge the poles. This passage is thus the equivalent of canto II of "An Ordinary Evening," in which Stevens internalizes New Haven too fully, rendering it "an unpalpable town." Like Stevens, Ammons must blur his initial polarity if he is to arrive at a subtle and nuanced account of experience. Accordingly, as the poem proceeds, a more fluid relationship between the literal details of the landscape and the poet's meditation on his own consciousness begins to emerge, in which the landscape does not act as a mere emblem of mind, but rather provides the means by which mind measures its own uncertainties and fluctuations.

The poem's central assertion, as I have said, is its denial of totalization, of the possibility of achieving an "Overall" understanding. All that the poet can do is to enumerate or record, one by one, the separate "events" of both mind and nature as they occur, without seeking to amass them into a larger configuration. Yet the very denial of such a synthesis itself constitutes an act of synthetic thought, an attempt to generalize at the most all-encompassing level. Throughout his work Ammons weds this insatiable penchant for generality with a nominalist distrust of all general concepts; as a result his poetry must keep in constant motion, oscillating between provisional efforts to theorize about the cosmos and adamant returns to the hard data of experience.

Such a return to the immediate circumstances of the walk takes place in the next lines:

in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of
primrose

more or less dispersed;
disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows
of dunes,
irregular swamps of reeds,
though not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all ...
predominantly reeds:

The passage begins with another general assertion, but thereafter shifts to an account of particulars--somewhat disorientingly, since we are abruptly brought from the level of "nature" as a whole to the localized landscape of the poem without any evident transition. In cataloging the different forms of vegetation he sees, Ammons now adopts in his own language the kind of self-modifying looseness that he didactically invokes in the discursive portions of the poem. At first calling attention to the "irregular swamps of reeds," he at once feels compelled to point out that these contain "not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all. . ." He trails off because he knows he can never adequately account for the multifarious particulars of the scene, that he will always be guilty of some degree of oversimplification. The "all" thus stands as a gesture toward the many organisms he has had to omit from his catalog; and it is followed by a new formulation that returns to his initial reduction, but this time acknowledges its inadequacy: "predominantly reeds" (*italics mine*). The three lines nicely illustrate the essential trajectory of Ammons's thought, as he moves from a too singular account of the world ("reeds") to a futile effort to represent its full complexity and multiplicity ("though not reeds alone"), finally coming back to his first account with a new awareness of its partial nature ("predominantly reeds"). They thus begin to offer an antidote to the stark mind/world dualism that led Ammons to allegorize the landscape in the previous passage. Now the poet is able to represent mind and world simultaneously, not by subordinating one as vehicle to the other as tenor, but by depicting mind in the process of grasping world in all its complexity. Seeing and thinking have begun to coalesce.

In the next lines Ammons returns to the assertive mode that runs throughout the poem, alternating with more tentative, exploratory passages:

[. . .]

Ammons's claim that he has not separated "inside / from outside" stands in direct contradiction to the various dualisms we have already observed in the poem. Yet if Ammons's poem never quite behaves the way he keeps insisting it does, it nonetheless manifests a genuine tendency toward "the becoming / thought," in its less assertive passages at least. The ever-shifting shapes of dunes are his central emblem of mind in motion, an image that will be stunningly developed in "Saliences." A more relevant image of mental process for our purposes comes in his claim to be "willing to go along," in which the literal and analogical dimensions of the walk merge, as they have been implicitly merging throughout the poem. In Ammons's own words (from "A Poem is a Walk"), the walk is "an externalization of an interior seeking," representing with physical immediacy the restless wanderings of a mind that is rarely content to stand still. The problem with the poem up to this point is that Ammons has spent too much time striking a pose, and not enough time "going along," an imbalance that he

will shortly begin to remedy.

The notion of transition as "soft," impossible to fix at a given place or moment, is elaborated in another descriptive passage:

by transitions the land falls from grassy dunes to creek

to undercreek: but there are no lines, though

change in that transition is clear

as any sharpness: but "sharpness" spread out,

allowed to occur over a wider range

than mental lines can keep:

This again conveys the poet's vision of change as minutely incremental, too gradual to be assimilated to "mental lines." The landscape is no longer merely a metaphor for the poet's consciousness; although this image of natural transition clearly has relevance to what Ammons calls "the becoming thought," it also retains its integrity as a view of the landscape. Indeed this passage itself serves as a transition to the poem's central exploration of the place and its inhabitants, as Ammons leaves behind his posturing and gives us an extended representation of mind caught up in the becoming of world:

the moon was full last night: today, low tide was low:

black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk

of air

and, earlier, of sun,

waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact,

caught always in the event of change:

a young mottled gull stood free on the shoals

and ate

to vomiting: another gull, squawking possession, cracked a crab,

picked out the entrails, swallowed the soft-shelled legs, a ruddy

turnstone running in to snatch leftover bits:

risk is full: every living thing in
siege: the demand is life, to keep life: the small
white blacklegged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks and spears
the shallows, darts to shore
to stab ? what? I couldn't
see against the black mudflats? a frightened
fiddler crab?

In this brilliant passage, sight and thought are at last fully united. We are no longer conscious of any gap between the experience of the walk and the meditation that it prompts; the verb tenses waver between past ("a young mottled gull stood free") and present (white blacklegged egret ... quietly stalks"), suggesting that Ammons is no longer intent on separating occasion and composition. Most importantly, the poem is no longer alternating, as in its opening passages, between two extremes of discourse, one a detached, flat reportage of external phenomena, the other a rather strident assertion of the poet's own nominalism. Now exactly rendered perceptions are blended with a flexible meditation that always maintains contact with the world through which the poet walks. As in the central sections of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," where Stevens carefully measures the mutual impingements of mind and reality, Ammons here succeeds in representing the fluid interminglings of thought and perception, now seen as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive. Like Stevens, then, Ammons moves toward the notion of "a visibility of thought," a state in which seeing and thinking can no longer be differentiated, as they had been in the poem's opening lines.

Much of the power of this passage lies in its adoption of what Linda Orr calls "an imitative language," one that stands in sharp contrast to the language of assertion that has previously dominated the poem. As Orr points out, "Sentences in poems-of-process must be doubling back all the time, qualifying and contradicting. . . . The poet must be alert to any tendencies for rest and sweep the words up again." In this respect the language of this passage most resembles that of Bishop's "The End of March," with its incessant qualifications and questionings of its own perceptions. But Ammons is more intent on interpreting what he sees than Bishop; hence he is constantly broadening out from particular phenomena to larger ideas of order. Unlike its earlier assertions of a general stance, however, the poem's conceptual language now remains firmly tied to the minute particulars of the walk, representing the poet's moment-to-moment effort at making sense of the landscape before him.

The most prominent feature of this landscape is expressed by the recurrent term "risk," which evokes both the terror and the exhilaration of natural freedom. Throughout the passage Ammons expresses a simultaneous awareness of the aesthetic dimension of the scene and the savage struggle for life that underlies it. This doubleness is epitomized in the first line: "the moon was full last night: today, low tide was low." Full moon and low tide can both be seen as aesthetic phenomena, each permitting a human spectator to see more than is normally visible. But in the next line this aesthetic bonus is revealed as a terrible danger to the

creatures who inhabit the shore: "black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk / of air / and, earlier, of sun." Suddenly we are made aware of the helplessness of creatures for whom air and sun are not pleasures but threats.

Yet having acknowledged this darker aspect of the scene, Ammons cannot help continuing to dwell on its beauty, as in the lovely line "waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact," which seems to embody, in its undulating rhythm and evocative use of repetition, the motions it describes, like the line in which Bishop describes the wet string rising and falling in the water. But the next line again underscores the predicament of the mussels, while translating it into an existential condition: "caught always in the event of change." Change itself is the source of both beauty and terror here, combining freedom and risk in one violent spectacle. The brilliant description of the feeding birds does not seek to pass judgment on the predators, but sees their activity as deeply natural, if also deeply frightening. Responding to the sight, the poet again takes refuge in generalization: "risk is full: every living thing in / siege: the demand is life, to keep life." The key word here is "full," which takes us back to the full moon, and implies that what seems destructive is in fact a form of plenitude, the fullness of life desperately holding on to itself, even if it be at the expense of other life.

The next lines offer a particularly fine rendering of the concurrent beauty and savagery of nature. Ammons has to interrupt his description of the "small white blacklegged egret" to exclaim "how beautiful," then goes on to tell of how it "quietly stalks and spears / the shallows." What follows is a striking instance of the way Ammons cues the poem's syntax to the phenomenological time of the walk: the egret "darts to shore / to stab--what? I couldn't / see against the black mudflats--a frightened / fiddler crab?" The torsions of the sentence create the effect that it is unfolding simultaneously with the perceptions it describes, a device we have seen in Williams, Bishop, and Snyder as well. This temporalizing of syntax is an important element in Ammons's style, since it permits him to give a verbal form not only to the flux of phenomena but to "the becoming thought." Just as important here is the poet's acknowledgment of his own limited perspective; he does not have a godlike vantage on the scene--"Overall is beyond me"--but can only see according to his position at any given moment. He is willing to speculate about what he cannot see, however, and his surmise is in no way less harsh than the realities he has witnessed: he is careful to specify that his hypothetical fiddler crab is "frightened."

From the terror of "every living thing in siege," the poet has but to turn his head to observe a different spectacle, one with less baleful implications:

the news to my left 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

Here again perception modulates into thought all but imperceptibly, in part with the aid of Ammons's beloved colon, which helps to enforce the sense of continual forward motion that all his poems try to embody. Now rather than the vision of nature as an ongoing struggle for life in which every creature must work for itself, he beholds a more delicately balanced picture of "order held / in constant change." For all its multiplicity, the gathering of swallows coheres into a single phenomenon, "a congregation / rich with entropy." That last phrase resembles the earlier "risk is full" in its insistence on the plenitude made possible by change and disorder. The syntax of this passage consists not of a shifting hypotaxis imitating the temporality of particular events, as in the previous passage, but of a looser paratactic sequence of clauses held together only by colons. It thus approximates the state of order in multiplicity embodied by the swallows, in which individual entities form a larger whole not by virtue of any specific transactions among them, like the predatorial transactions of egret and fiddler crab, but simply through their contiguity, their copresence in a shared space.

Still describing the swallows, Ammons gives us a vivid series of close-ups that emphasize the restlessness of this pseudo-organism: "wings rifling the green clumps, / beaks / at the bayberries." The word "full" returns once more in the phrase "a perception full of wind, flight, curve, / sound," evoking a condition of maximal activity, in which too many things are occurring at once to be perceived completely. Clearly this condition is an exhilarating one for Ammons, suggesting "the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness: / the 'field' of action / with moving, incalculable center." It could be said that the poem's own "moving, incalculable center" lies somewhere between these two alternative visions of natural process and change, the predatorial, Darwinian vision of "every living thing in siege" and the more harmonious "congregation / rich with entropy" of the swallows. That moving center is in fact simply the poet's own body, as his use of the coordinate "to my left" suggests. Rather than locating the phenomena he describes in objective spatial terms, he acknowledges the central place of the body and the perceiving self in balancing different aspects of the environment . His walk thus

becomes a vehicle for achieving a kind of equilibrium between the news to the right and "the news to [the] left," the harsh and the harmonious possibilities of life. Ultimately Ammons's Thoreauvian temperament inclines him to see order rather than struggle as the dominant principle in nature; thus it may be significant that he turns from the predators to the swallows. Spatially the two are symmetrically balanced, but temporally the second replaces the first, allowing the poet to move toward a final affirmative vision of an order that ends individual struggle.

From the swallows, with their evocation of a "soft" order, shapeless but unified, the poet's gaze narrows to discrete objects with definite forms:

[. . .]

Ammons here acknowledges that nature offers countless instances of hard-edged form--flowers, shells, organisms--but insists that phenomenologically these represent details in a larger picture that contains no "lines or changeless shapes." The very act of turning his gaze to small, formally perfect items may relieve the poet of the burden of comprehending the "millions of events" constantly working together; but that relief can only be momentary, since his primary commitment remains with "the large view," the difficult vision of process and multiplicity microcosmically represented by the swallows.

Reflecting further on the large view, Ammons now chooses to characterize it with a rather surprising word, "serenity":

orders as summaries, as outcomes of actions override

or in some way result, not predictably (seeing me gain

the top of a dune,

the swallows

could take flight--some other fields of bayberry

could enter fall

berryless) and there is serenity:

no arranged terror: no forcing of image, plan,

or thought

no propaganda, no humbling of reality to precept

terror pervades but is not arranged, all possibilities

of escape open: no route shut, except in
the sudden loss of all routes.

The very absence of a controlling will, the poet argues, creates a sense of peace, despite the ongoing struggle he had earlier depicted. Terror is a pervasive force here, he concedes, but it "is not arranged," and hence not evil. He takes comfort in the knowledge that "all possibilities / of escape [are] open" (what possibilities of escape for the hapless mussels, we might ask), that "no route [is] shut, except / in the sudden loss of all routes." The last phrase, evidently a reference to death, seems a fairly drastic qualification of the sense of freedom and serenity being evoked here; yet after all it is a mark of Ammons's willingness to "accept the becoming thought," even if it leads him back to the darker vision of "every living thing in siege" that he has been working to overturn.

The poem's closing lines shift back into the rhetoric of assertion that had been abandoned in the middle section:

[. . .]

Once again the poet gives us a statement of policy, though now oriented toward the future rather than the past, and so less self-congratulatory in tone. Ammons's use of capitalization to distinguish between vision in process (scope) and a totalizing perspective ("Scope") is perhaps overly subtle, but the contrast is clear nonetheless. If the preceding lines are a little too comfortably abstract, however, the final line beautifully returns us to the poem's generative occasion, and gives us a formulation at once concise and concrete: "tomorrow a new walk is a new walk." This is I think deeply satisfying both in its air of cadential firmness and in its implicit denial of closure. For once the poem's paradoxical conjunction of authority and provisionality does not seem contradictory, perhaps because the line refers beyond itself to experience. In reminding us that the poem's meditation has been framed by a particular walk, Ammons locates its categorical claims in time and space, and so softens their authority. These are my thoughts today, he tells us; tomorrow I will change my mind. We should recall at this point that the poem's first line announced, "I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning" (*italics mine*), implying that this walk is already one of a potentially open-ended series, and should not be taken as in any way definitive or unique. Ammons does not claim that this particular walk, like Frost's walk in "The Wood-Pile," for example, deserves to be singled out from the poet's experience because it has yielded a special insight; tomorrow's walk will be equally valuable in the thoughts that it occasions.

Taken by itself, this closing line may seem a striking but ultimately empty declaration, paying lip service to a principle it cannot truly observe. After all, "Corsons Inlet" is a poem fully conscious of its centrality to the poet's oeuvre; it is not by accident that it has become the most anthologized of Ammons's poems, for its rhetoric aims at the very "finality of vision" whose possibility it denies. Remarkably enough, however, Ammons chose to take his last line literally: the next day he went for another walk, and wrote another poem about it. He thus confronted, more squarely and explicitly than any other poet I have so far discussed, a problem central to the mode of representation that the walk poem exemplifies, the problem of repetition. If "tomorrow a new walk is a new walk," that is, if all experience is equally valuable, equally fresh, can one simply go on writing poem after poem based on walk after walk? Surely at a certain point sameness will overcome newness, and monotony will set in. We have seen

how Frank O'Hara wrestled with this danger, ultimately destroying the very grounds on which his walk poems are based out of a restless urge to move on. But Ammons is not as restlessly innovative as O'Hara, although in a subtle way he may be the more daring of the two. For he takes up the challenge of repetition with unprecedented directness, writing a second poem the day after his great manifesto was composed, and taking as his occasion another walk in precisely the same setting.

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