

A. R. Ammons, "Corson's Inlet"

I left Washington at the end of 2012. Bernie had just been re-elected, the end of year-long lame-duck session was over, a new Senate was about to be sworn in. I had originally come to Washington for a year, maybe two, and ended up staying six years. I had started out doing legislative work on education and serving as a senior advisor to the new senator. For the past four years, I had been his Chief of Staff. Washington may be the center of a lot of political action, but it is a demanding place to work. I was tired and in need of a change.

I took some time off, tried my hand at detective fiction, and then returned to teaching. For six years, a part of my consciousness had longed to be back in the classroom, back grappling with poems. Now, after the long break from academe, I found the grappling as invigorating as ever, maybe even more so. The classroom was another matter. Perhaps I had changed; certainly, students had. Teaching successfully was more of a challenge than I expected.

So it was quite a few months before I sent out another poem. This time, it was a long poem, the longest I had sent. "Corson's Inlet" is one of my very favorite poems.

It addresses one of the central issues of the twentieth century, the loss of certainty. Yet it is not a poem of despair. Quite the contrary. But it does pick up on a theme that has marked physics ever since Werner Heisenberg postulated his famous uncertainty principle. Heisenberg, one of the inventors of quantum mechanics, demonstrated in 1927 that on a fundamental level, we could never be certain about 'objective' reality. In layman's language, every attempt to measure the position of a basic particle of matter would change its momentum, and every attempt to measure momentum would change the particle's position. There was a limit, Heisenberg claimed, to what could be known. The universe was, at its most basic level, unknowable.

Leap decades forward into astrophysics, and the discovery of black holes and dark matter made similar claims about the larger universe. Whether writ small or large, 'reality' was unknowable. Similar forays in philosophy, into what became known as post-structuralism, made similar claims. Either the arbitrary intrusions of language (deconstruction) or the shaping force of history (post-Marxism) or the assumption of observers (feminism) meant that we could not know, with certainty, any human 'meaning.'

In my view, this all had its root in a philosophical move made many centuries before. In 1637 Rene Descartes postulated that mind and body are different from one another. There was no primary unity, other than God. For Descartes, there was the world of objects which we experience through sensation, and there was the world of mind which is unrelated to that world of objects. (Contemporary neuroscience tries to erase that distinction.) Once the world was split apart, it could never quite be harmonized again.

This may be a little much for an introduction, so let's leave it behind. The purpose of bringing up Heisenberg and Descartes (and by implication Derrida) was to indicate the stakes that face us as we read Ammons' poem. He takes on the unknowable and how much of it can be known, and in what way.

Ammons does all this in the most unremarkable way. He goes for a walk and writes about what he sees and also about what he thinks about what he sees. That's it. This poem is the record of an ordinary walk along the seashore. He looks at clouds, at the ocean, at sea grass, at birds, and as he sees these things his mind is at work making sense – or being unable to make sense – of what appears before his eyes.

If we needed proof that a poet does not have to voyage to strange lands, or live in a garret ingesting mind-altering substances, or be caught up in a 'vision,' this poem provides that proof. It is the record of a walk along the shore. It is also a validation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's great claim that we can see the universal in the things that are right in front of us. We have encountered this realization in our discussion of an earlier poem, also one of looking at the seashore, Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper," in which the poet, like the bird in the poem, sees the world as William Blake counseled, in a grain of sand.

A large number of great poems are occasioned by walks. I think with particular love of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," William Carlos Williams' "The Desert Music," and W. H. Auden's "As I Walked Out One Evening."

Of all the walks ever taken by poets, perhaps the most astonishing was one taken by Rainer Maria Rilke. (It was a very, very different walk than Ammons's, and the walk itself – unlike Ammons's – did not figure in his poem). Rilke faced a writer's block, which would once again descend like a steel curtain after the frenzy of creativity occasioned by the walk I am about to describe.

Unhappy in Paris, Rilke had gone to live in a castle on the northern Adriatic owned by his friend Princess Marie Thurn und Taxis¹. One blustery day he walked along the cliffs beyond the castle while a strong wind was blowing over the Adriatic. Rilke was trying to figure out how to answer a 'business' letter. Suddenly a line accosted him: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the dominions of angels?" Not the kind of line that would ever occur to me, since angels, well, they don't figure in my consciousness. But Rilke, lonely, feeling thwarted and powerless, feeling like his life despite his successes in writing was a vast nothing, heard that line as an accusation from the universe.

He returned to his bedroom, wrote out the business letter, and began with that as his first line to write what we know of as the Duino Elegies², one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century.

¹ I love Rilke, but I always have to acknowledge to myself that Rilke was one of the greatest mooches in the history of literature. He lived, time and again, in splendid residences owned by the wealthy women who befriended and supported him. Poetry has strange wellsprings.

² A later letter will examine Rilke's "Ninth Duino Elegy."

I should complete the story, since it is so remarkable, even though the walk is over and done with.

As I said, for Rilke, with only a few of the Elegies written, the darkness fell again. For ten years. A writer's block of massive proportions. Then in February 1922, living in a small tower³ in Muzot, Switzerland, came what the novelist/philosopher/critic William H. Gass characterized as "the greatest inspirational storm, perhaps, in poetry's history." Rilke in a frenzy wrote the majority of the Duino Elegies, completing them. Remarkably, in that same month wrote a series of sonnets, 55 in all, the Sonnets from Orpheus, one of the most accomplished series of poems ever written. Two of the greatest, most intense creations of the twentieth century, both long, both multi-sectioned, in one month. Even Picasso, whom Rilke admired, never had a month like that.

Enough on Rilke. I told the story because it begins in walking. It is one of the most resonant narratives I know. I love the Duino Elegies even if I don't understand some of them and at times argue with what Rilke tries to tell himself, and us.

On walking: Nietzsche once wrote, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking."

And now, on to Ammons' poem. "Corson's Inlet."

I'll begin with the headnote that introduced this long email.

Since I am no longer in Washington, with legislative initiatives and emails nipping at my heels. hemming me in and commanding my attention, I have the time to look at a longer poem, one which checks in at a bit over three pages. (You might want to save this message to read in the evening, or on the weekend?) While this letter may look very long, a good part of its length is that it repeats the three page poem twice – once at the beginning, and then stanza-by-stanza in the discussion.

"Corson's Inlet"

A. R. Ammons' "Corson's Inlet" is a variety of things. It is a lyric, a very modest narrative of a walk along the beach, an *ars poetica* (the poet's assessment of 'the art of poetry'), a philosophical meditation.

In my view, it is one of the most wonderful and wise poems of the second half of the twentieth century.

As you begin reading the poem, here are two things to orient you. First, this is a peripatetic poem. 'Peripatetic:' a fancy way of saying the poem is of someone

³ His own, no longer the residence of a wealthy woman who hosted him or allowed him to 'squat' in a temporarily unused residence.

walking, in this case, walking over the dunes, along the ocean shore, and lastly and most importantly along the shore of an inlet. Second, it is in the tradition of America's greatest philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his important essay "Nature," Emerson contended "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact." In this poem, what Ammons sees on his walk is revealed as a series of emblems of what the universe is. Examining what he sees becomes the key to understanding what human thought is and can, or cannot, be.

Corsons Inlet
A. R. Ammons

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:

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:

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:

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:

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
 from outside: I have
 drawn no lines:
 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:

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:

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?

 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:

in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:

snail shell:

pulsations of order
in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,
broken down, transferred through membranes
to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no
lines or changeless shapes: the working in and out, together
and against, of millions of events: this,
so that I make
no form of
formlessness:

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:

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.

As I have said earlier as well as in the introduction, this is a peripatetic poem. The speaker is describing a walk he has taken this morning: He went over the dunes, along the shore of the ocean, and along the inlet. (No surprise here: the

headland” and returns, a right hand turn again, now moving to what was the original left “along the inlet shore.”

There is a multiple convergence at work in the shape of these lines: the display of the lines mirrors directions of the walk, while the walk out and back mirrors how the poem moves toward the outward – what the poet sees – as a reflection of the structure of the universe, or what Emerson called the macrocosm, and back towards the structure of the mind, or what Emerson called the microcosm. Thus there are four parallel structures: the lineation of the poem/the observed world/the universe/the mind.

Before we move on, let me mention the significant grounding in space and place that the opening stanza establishes. The poem begins with a brief description of his walk: not what he saw, which will come later, but what directions he walked in, and beside what (dunes, ocean, inlet). I am always astonished when I listen to the opening of what I think is the greatest artistic creation of the human mind, Mozart’s opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. After the overture, the first words we hear are a precise arithmetic measurement. Figaro, in the opening lines of the opera, is measuring where the bridal bed will go: “Cinque, dieci, venti, trenti, trentasei:” five, ten, twenty, thirty, thirty-six. Whew. Ground yourself in specifics like this, and you can move forward into anything.

Ammons has large ambitions in this poem, but he begins with directions, and then gives the weather:

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:

We may listen to weather forecasts on the radio every day (I do) but never are they as lovely as this. Not ‘poetic’ in the sense of overblown rhetoric, but ‘poetic’ in the sense that meteorological conditions are accurately described with stunning precision, intensely attentive to what it is describing. I revel in the description: pure description, with little ‘larger significance.’ I love the lines, maybe in the same way we come to love the opening of *The Marriage of Figaro*⁶.

⁶ A twenty-first century aside you may find useful. If you want to listen to Mozart’s opera, or two hours of Bob Dylan’s songs, or Beyoncé, there is a program called *Spotify* that will deliver them all on your computer. It’s free, although if you want to listen to the music without any occasional ads, it will cost you seven dollars a month. I

We might also note, although the importance of this will not be revealed until later, that the description seeking precision is remarkably unfinalized. “muggy sun...some breakthroughs of sun...after a bit continuous overcast.”

The setting established, the subject of this meditative poem is approached. The walk, as walks so often are, is a walk, and involves going in a direction but without purposive activity. Ammons he is “released” and thus liberated.

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

Note well what he is released from. Not merely forms (an abstract term, and about abstractions) but from “perpendiculars” and “straight lines” which in their geometric precision reveal (you’ll notice in the run of five nouns: perpendiculars, lines, blocks, boxes, binds) how geometry produces limitations in the realm of thought, “binds/ of thought”). If we think in precise mental categories (“forms”), we end up boxed in, blocked from what we need to be liberated from, bound and not free.

The line ending⁷ signifies in two dimensions. Our thought is bound by perpendiculars and straight lines, and at the same time it is the imperatives of “thought” – as opposed to the physical, “sight,” which he is about to turn to – that bind us, and from which a walk can liberate us.

Which world would you want to live in? One of straight lines and blocks, boxes and binds, or one of “hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and bends”? This is a real question, and not merely rhetorical, for lawyers, accountants, corporate executives, car mechanics, and all of us as we face filing our income tax forms would prefer the former. Additionally, the world can be so damn messy and uncertain that clarity is comforting. But Ammons’ lines don’t really give us a

listen for free. It *does*, I need to warn you, ask for your Facebook address, it tells your friends what you are listening to and it collects data on you. In an age when information collection is everywhere, it is important to acknowledge what is going on. Maybe the price – collecting information in return for a huge library of free music – is too high. Your choice. Similar information collection takes place on YouTube, also a great source for ‘free’ music, which has the advantage of *showing* you a huge selection of operas, performed and saved on video streams.

⁷ Technically, a caesura. A caesura is a pause caused by the end of line, interrupting what should be a unified phrase. Here: “binds/of thought.”

choice, they predetermine (for the course of this poem) the answer. Who wouldn't prefer rising to being boxed in, hues to the starkness of straight lines⁸? .)

Just as the poet has swerved from walking along the ocean's shore to walking along the inlet, so the poem swerves in this stanza from its description of setting and weather to its subject: the "shadings" and "flowing[s]" of the world and of the human mind that is open to the world. "I allow myself eddies of meaning," the next stanza begins, indicating that the swerve is an essential part of the poet's approach not only to his walk, but to the world.

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 poem mirrors the world, just as the form and content of the poem will mirror the walk the narrator has taken. "In the overall wandering of mirroring mind:/ ... Overall is beyond me: is the sum or these events/ I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting/ beyond the account." The poem quickly swerves from its beginning, as the poet has swerved from walking beside the all-encompassing ocean to walking along the inlet, as he has swerved toward a consideration of the impossibility of finding overall order.

Ammons recognizes the significance he can discover comes in "eddies of meaning." There is no overall significance, but only a direction, like that of a stream, which though it flows downhill, can most certainly swerve, and sometimes swerve severely. Or a walk. All is "motion:" the dunes with the shifting of sand,

⁸ Even the great straight line painter, Piet Mondrian, needed the boldness of colors to make his straight lines work esthetically. . .

the literal stream, the stream of his observations, the stream of his poem, “the eddies of meaning,” the walk itself. We are encountering a Heraclitean⁹ world.

The walk, in which the poet’s steps are not prescribed or precisely planned, is a metaphor for the mind which wanders, which itself responds to a world that is in constant transformation in time. Even what seems organized is happenstance and at the mercy of change. “Organizations of grass” refers to the irregular upthrusts of vegetation along the dunes: those patches of grass are there before and around him, coherent as patches but not subject to a larger principle save the accident that they are where they are and not five feet further on in a different place and that they are patches and not continuous. There is no organizing principle, which is why the mind “overall” must wander, as he walker wanders, without coming up with an “Overall” or a “sum” or a “ledger” or an “accounting.”

He explains: “In nature there are few sharp lines: ¹⁰”
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:

What a wonderful stanza! Order is really beyond us in these verses, yet all is not totally disordered. “There are areas of primrose” but the areas are dispersed, not in a predictable or clearly patterned dispersal: in actuality they are “more or less dispersed.” The bayberry appears in “disorderly orders.” In that paradoxical phrase lies the recognition the poem will come upon, again and again. Ordered but not ordered, a disorderly order. There are things – areas of primrose, orders of bayberry, rows of dunes, swamps of reeds – but they are all “more or

⁹ The pre-Socratic philosophers were all in search of the “Overall,” of the basic principle of the existent: they searched for the ruling element among earth, air, fire, water. Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BC), to my mind one of the great philosophers of all time even though what we have of his work is only series of brief fragments, was the philosopher of fire, which far from being a thing, is a process of transformation. Everything in Heraclitus is transformed. The condition which transforms, for him, is time. “In the same river we both step and cannot step.” “We cannot step in the same river twice.” Everything changes: in this poem what the poet sees and will see changes as he moves through the world in the brief time of his walk.

¹⁰ This seems a good point to note what we have observed up to this point and what will be true of the entire poem, that the predominant form of punctuation is the colon [:], a way of putting into language the discrete moments of thought in its wandering that are connected but only temporally, that do not make up either a pre-planned narrative or an accounting. The colons document shifts from one moment of thinking to another – rather like those small “organizations of grass” that he has seen.

less...disorderly...irregular.” To instance what he is going after, he qualifies the reeds: they are “not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow all . . .” But still, it is not disorder either, for the “swamps of reeds” are “predominately reeds.”

What the narrator sees on his walk demands a particular response from him. If there are no clear orders, but only things “more or less dispersed,” reaching a conclusion would be unwarranted.

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
from outside: I have
drawn no lines:
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:

No boundaries, since things are in change. The dune changes. The minute shifting of grains of sand, taken as a whole, means that tomorrow’s dune is not the same as today’s. Even on ‘solid’ land we are in Heraclitus’ ever-changing river.

There can be, if the speaker of the poem can trust to what he sees of disorderly orders and change, no boundaries, no (straight) lines. Having seen along with him the “areas of primrose/more or less dispersed,” the lack of overall order, we know why he doesn’t reach conclusions, doesn’t erect boundaries, doesn’t rule in or rule out. We understand better now what he proclaimed only at the outset:

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:

I allow¹¹ myself

He will go along with what the world shows him, not what he might impose on the world. This acceptance seems like the attitude of an explorer and not just an aimless wanderer,

so I am willing to go along, to accept
the becoming
thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
no walls:

An aside, to give you courage as you keep going.

As I reviewed what I had written, it occurred to me there is a danger that you, my reader, could get as immersed in the details of this analysis as Ammons is immersed in what he sees on his walk. After all, his thoughts about what his 'seeing' reveal to him the limitations of the mind. You might decide, not incorrectly, that there is a limitation to what I am presenting. "Too much analysis, too much thinking, this is just a walk, it has little to do with daily life¹²."

So let me break into our voyage through this poem to stress that "Corson's Inlet," beyond its interesting observations and its peripatetic thinking has the capacity to change us profoundly as we go about the business of living our lives. It tells us things we need to hear.

In one of the most resonant phrases from my reading, one which rises into my consciousness all the time, William Wordsworth wrote of his youth, "--the earth/ And common face of Nature spake to me/ Rememberable things." The poem we are looking at, "Corson's Inlet," tells us a greatly

¹¹ It is important to notice that the poem began in the past tense, as a recounting of his morning walk but changes here. It is only in the sixth stanza, which I have just cited a second time, that he is 'liberated' into re-taking the walk and so recounts what he sees and thinks in the present tense, beginning in the seventh stanza and continuing to the end of the poem.

¹² Franz Kafka, on parables, of which he was a master: "All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter." No one ever put this argument against literary texts better.

rememberable thing as the narrator considers what the earth speaks to him on his walk¹³.

The poem is one of a small handful I have read that actually says to me, “You must change your life¹⁴”

What I am insisting on, here, in this extended aside, is that the poem before us is important and worth paying attention to. Not because it is ‘artistic’ or ‘a masterpiece’ or ‘a classic.’ But because it can change your life.

If you pay great attention to Ammons, he can and will make you a larger person, more open to both the world and to your own life. This poem is a corrective to all we become because of the demands of work, because of our schooling, because of advertising, because of the need to fit ourselves into the smooth functioning of society. This poem can change your life. By changing what you strive for, what you think is realistically achievable. In a wonderful paradox, by accepting a human limitation, you and I can become larger.

I say this with modest confidence because this is what “Corson’s Inlet” does for me.

It even undercuts the enterprise I am currently engaged in, writing about poems. If in writing about a poem I intend to ‘explain’ the poem, I will do nothing but fail. Ammons can be a guide to reading poems (and writing about them). We can and should walk through poems, not explain them away¹⁵.

¹³ I know in referring back to a bunch of writers – Emerson and Wordsworth and Kafka, with Tennyson and Milton and others to come – I run the risk of seeming too ‘literary,’ But our language is always a tissue of prior texts: we know words because we have heard them spoken, or encountered them in what we read. Language always refers back, and over. Poetry in particular, as I have written before, forces us to concentrate harder on words than we usually do in the course of everyday life: That concentration is, as the critic Viktor Shklovsky pointed out, what makes certain language ‘poetic.’

¹⁴ That sentence is the end of a sonnet by Rainer Maria Rilke, and since his poem about the life-changing possibility of an artistic experience is so resonant, I think I will make it the subject of a future mailing. (I still harbor this hope, but I have not yet done it – there is no analysis of this Rilke poem in these pages. The consideration of Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo” still lies some time in the future. Happily, as it is a sonnet it is only fourteen lines long, so even though the poem is unbelievably rich, mailing will be a lot shorter than this one.)

¹⁵ Nietzsche said, in a phrase I always hear whenever I am in danger or wanting to ‘explain’ a poem, “Interpretation is the will to power over a text.” We should not want to dominate a text, but give ourselves over to it. Otherwise we encounter a soliloquy – our own – instead of a conversation, where another human being reveals through words something we might do well to hear. Walt Whitman understood the egocentrism that is always a

Ammons gets this and writes about it in a fine essay called "A Poem is a Walk." If you can stand to read more by the time you get to the end of this piece, you can find the essay on the internet just by Googling 'Ammons a poem is a walk.'

The aside is over. Back to the poem.

Ammons, his walk proceeding, continues to observe and honor a world that has neither beginnings nor walls nor sharp demarcations:

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:

The "disorderly orders" that he encountered earlier are now are now a "sharpness" spread out,/allowed to occur over a wider range/than mental lines can keep." Let me return again to Heraclitus, who was criticized by both Plato and Aristotle for violating one of the basic laws of logic, the law of non-contradiction, which stipulates that thing cannot be both true and not true. Something is either orderly, or it is not. Either it is sharp, having an edge or tight focus, or it is spread out.

Not for Ammons, walking through the world with his eyes open and his mind open as well. Not for Heraclitus either, who both could and could not step in the same river twice.

Ammons in the next stanza restates there are "no beginnings or ends...no lines" by observing that the tide which last night was full is now low, and that the "waterline [is] inexact,/caught always in the event of change." He sees something else in flux: mussels attached to seaweed on rocks drifting with the tide and the waves, alternately safe in water and then at "risk" to air and sun.

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,

danger to us as we read poems. Early in "Song of Myself," he asks, "Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?/ Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?"

waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact¹⁶,
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:

The indentation of the line charts his tightening focus, from the inexact waterline and the “shoals of mussels” to the singularity of a particular young seagull, one “mottled” as the world we are encountering is mottled, but of course also because young gulls are mottled and are not yet distinctly white and grey. The young gull is eating mussels whose shells he has broken, the gull eating beyond satiation “to vomiting.” This gull is by similarity connected to another, which has “cracked a crab” and is now “picking out the entrails,” while a smaller bird dashes in to “snatch leftover bits.”

As I went on a walk of my own yesterday, although as I walked I was not nearly as observant as Ammons, I told my wife Buff that I was working on this Ammons poem. She asked me what it was about, and since – as you are seeing – it is about a disorderliness that cannot be accounted for in “as few sharp lines,” I took an easy way out and said, ‘some of it is about nature red in tooth and claw.’ That famous phrase, “nature red in tooth a claw,” comes from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, and is a particularly memorable summation of something most of us prefer to ignore, that the ‘nature’ which we like to think gives us sustenance and relief is in actuality a place of struggle and perilous risk, where the strong feed on the weak and the strong are fed on in their turn.

In this stanza, nature is revealed as not merely a congeries of primroses and grass, but a gluttonous feast of barbaric destruction. The mussels in the second line of this stanza were “exposed to risk,” and the mottled gull made clear that the risk was not just desiccation (the sun) but also the perilous exposure to predators.

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

¹⁶ Another brief paradox of the sort that get to the heart of his observations, like “sharpness spread out,” and “disorderly orders.” A line is exact, but here – rightly, since he is considering the waterline – it is “inexact.”

fiddler crab?

Risk and terror: Ammons sees the gull but also imagines the crab. “Risk is full: every living thing/in siege.” The stanza reflects the Darwinian understanding of natural selection that Tennyson was anticipating when he wrote of “nature red in tooth and claw.” The beauty of that egret is related to, literally dependent on (in the sense that its existence depends on its killing and eating smaller creatures), violence and destruction. “The demand is life, to keep life.”

As the poet walks, the poem takes another swerve, for his vision moves from the shoreline – mussels, gulls, egret, crab – inward to shore and movement in the bushes. He sees “thousands of tree swallows.”

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:

The birds are feeding, preparing for the “flight from winter,” moving from one branch to another in search of food, “an order held in constant change,” a wholeness that is disorder (“a congregation rich with entropy”). This constantly changing scene before him, these thousands of birds feeding, “beaks at the bayberries” is “noticeable/ as one event,/ not chaos”. Not chaos, but a changing order that cannot be defined and yet is always separable from the moment before and the moment after. There is a “‘field’ of action/with moving incalculable center.” The possibility of order is there, but before him is primarily disorder: “the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness.” What extraordinary lines!

It is a strange stanza, largely abstract (order, constant change, entropy, event, chaos, possibility, rule, rulelessness, ‘field,’ incalculable, center) yet somehow seeking to anchor the abstractness of thought in the concrete observation of those “thousands of tree swallows” making specific sounds “cheet, cheet, cheet, cheet, wings rifling the green clumps,/beaks/at the bayberries.”

Almost as if he is himself dissatisfied by the abstractions, the poet turns from the birds in motion on the dunes to “the smaller view” in the next five lines.

in the smaller view, order tight with shape:
blue tiny flowers on a leafless weed: carapace of crab:
snail shell:
 pulsations of order
 in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,
broken down, transferred through membranes
to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no
lines or changeless shapes: the working in and out, together
 and against, of millions of events: this,
 so that I make
 no form of
 formlessness:

At first he sees order, “order tight with shape” as in the “tiny blue flowers...carapace of crab:/snail shell” but this order of dead¹⁷ or motionless things is quickly displaced as he regards minnows in the water close to shore and sees the “pulsations of order” that reveal what he had tried to master by turning to “the smaller view.” For in the bellies of the minnows he sees life – the digestive process, the beating of the heart – and continual movement and change. More, he sees once again the “risk” he had encountered when he observed the gull with the mussels, the egret in its feeding.

I should intrude, for those of you who have never stood by the shore of a body of water and watched minnows swimming in the shallows: so small are they, so transparent their flesh that one can see the digestive system and the heart’s beating in their bellies. Order¹⁸ dissipates and is literally “broken down” through digestion, “transferred through membranes/ to strengthen larger orders.”

¹⁷ The leafless weed suggests death, of course, but the plant still has blooms. By now, we are accustomed to paradox in this poem, accustomed to the lack of clear divisions between one state and another.

¹⁸ Here, the coherent organisms of algae or plankton or baby shrimp that the minnows have swallowed.

Contrary to his claim about “the large view,” what dominates “the smaller view” is exactly similar: there are “millions of events” ranging from the digestive processes of countless minnows to those thousands of tree swallows that prevent him from comprehending “the Overall.”

so that I make
no form of
formlessness:

There is a wisdom to this poem, but it is not the wisdom we conventionally expect, which touches universal truths. The wisdom has to do with accepting change, accident. It understands that formlessness will not resolve into larger form, though smaller forms and temporal orders may appear before us.

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

On his walk, Ammons sees the birds feeding, the minnows swimming in the water near his feet with their bellies pulsating. The particular order is accidental and “not predictable.” In one of the poem’s wonderful insights, he realizes that were he to turn inland towards the dunes, the birds might take flight¹⁹ and “some other fields of bayberry/could enter fall/ berryless.”

I hesitate to go further, knowing well I am projecting something on the poem. Still, what I project is entirely in line with what the poem proposes. There are moments when we see huge flights of wheeling birds. I recall large numbers of swallows in constant motion, always recognizable as a ‘flock of birds,’ always held together by the centrifugal force of bird-community. In constant motion, different at every moment and always chaotic, yet at the same time suggesting order. Yesterday I saw – I write this in Vermont’s midwinter, when the swallows are long gone – a flock of fifty or sixty crows, veering and wheeling as they looked for a tree-top on which to roost.

¹⁹ That imagined image, not just of the other bayberry fields, but of the birds taking flight, wheeling by the thousands as swallows can do, in constant motion and without a center and yet not formless or without order, with whatever form they have constantly in motion and constantly changing: that order of the swallows in flight, wholly imagined, following the suggestion that the route of his walk could change, is for me the dominant image of the poem. Merely suggested, and beyond that imagined on my part, not imagined for me by the poet.

When I read this poem, the formed formlessness, or the formless form, of flocks of birds in flight is what comes to mind, even though I know Ammons is describing not birds in flight but birds in constant motion on the bayberry bushes as they seek yet other berries to consume. Yet that “the swallows/could take flight” works powerfully on my imagination. Every time I read the poem. Every time I see birds in flight – not, emphatically, the geese who migrate in the skies of Vermont in the fall, in their very evident Vees, but swallows or crows – I think of this poem.

In the awareness that there is “no form of/formlessness,” that the outcomes we see are manifested “not predictably,” that everything could be otherwise and “other fields of bayberry/could enter fall berryless,” we encounter – most surprisingly I think – the poet finding that “there is serenity.” In accepting what is and what may be, Ammons is neither quietist nor passive, but instead large-minded and open to possibility, open to life what is beyond category and “image, plan,/or thought:/ no propaganda, no humbling of reality to precept.” No humbling of reality to precept.

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:

Risk, terror, death exist: “terror pervades but is not arranged.” Twice in the first four lines above he stresses that the terror is “not arranged.” “All possibilities/ of escape open: no route [is] shut.” The birds could fly off, and other bayberries be eaten; one mussel could be cracked open instead of another; one order can emerge (momentarily) instead of another. Only death can cancel the possibilities, “no route shut, except in/the sudden loss of all routes.” Yet even death is not arranged, and as one looks forward “all possibilities/ of escape open.”

The poem ends with a summary, which is paradoxically a refusal to summarize, for “*Scope eludes my grasp, there is no finality of vision.*” He will, being human, try “to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder,” but in his case the triumph of consciousness is that he can recognize his limitations, that “the Overall is beyond me.”

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.

Through the meditations on and in his walk, the poem earns not just awareness, but “serenity” and human “freedom.” Yes, “there is no finality of vision;’ yes, he has great limitations and has “perceived nothing completely.” But a capacious future opens. Here I am reminded, perhaps not so strangely, of the last lines of one of the great epics of poetry, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where Adam and Eve, cast out of Eden, leave paradise and inherit our world, the one Ammons has been wandering through:

The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.

So too, for Ammons and for us, the world is all before us. It is very hard to end poems— far more often than not, poets can begin poems, develop poems, far better than they can end them. To my mind, “Corson’s Inlet” has one of the finest endings of any poem of the past half century. It encapsulates what the poem has to tell us about the Heraclitan world and the impossibility of final summation: The world is all before us: “Tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.”

Tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.