

July 3, 2008

Dear Friends:

“Corsons Inlet,” by A. R. Ammons, has continued to haunt me since I first read it at Davidson College thirty-three years ago. I like order in life and in the world. He revels in the impossibility of order. Thus he represents a challenge which I face constantly. Ammons writes:

I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf . . .

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: . . .

Ammons does not deny that there is an “Overall,” but he allows himself only “eddies of meaning.” Perhaps by our perceptions of nature that is all we can achieve. But this points to our need for revelation. To say that “Overall” is beyond us is not to say that “Overall” cannot come to us. But this narrowing of meaning allows him to exult in his commitment to making no (other?) commitments:

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,

shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
from outside: I have
drawn no line:
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 conclusions,” we might note, other than his confident conclusion that he has reached “*no* conclusions.” That is odd. His easy acceptance of an anything goes attitude masks the reality that he is really claiming that only his attitude goes, so that he would prefer to restrict the views of those who have more restrictive views. Ammons continues:

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: . . .

But surely to say that the waterline is “inexact” and “caught always in the event of change” is not to say that there is no waterline. There is water and there is land, and there is a boundary between them. Ammons concludes:

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.

At one level, the modesty of avoiding premature judgment is a virtue. But to say that “there is *no* finality of vision” seems to be a final judgment. To say that “I have perceived *nothing* completely,” while ostensibly advocating relativism, is actually an absolute statement. But to

claim relativism absolutely is nonsensical. This poem is haunting me less and less. Finally, it is not haunting me at all.

The freedom Ammons enjoys is a chimera. He is a slave of his own limited perceptions, and the self is a harsh master. I will write more later about freedom.

Grace and Peace,

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