

Poetry
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A R Ammons

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Archie Randolph Ammons
(1926-2001)

- Historical and Literary Context
- A R Ammons
- “A Poem is a Walk”
- “Corsons Inlet”
- Analysis of Selected Passages
- A Syntactical Analysis
- Paradoxical Reconciliation



Poet + Tree = Poetr



Hello. Welcome to this lecture on Archie Randolph Ammons and his poem, “Corsons Inlet.” When a poet and a tree come together, we have poetry. This is a point that we refer to in our introductory video. A. R. Ammons is an amazing poet, on whose poetry, I did my PHD. So, there is some personal connection with this poet for me. He has been a source of inspiration for me in many ways.

Let us see the historical and literary context, see the life of Ammons briefly and then discuss his talk on “A Poem is a Walk,” briefly to understand the connection between a poem and a walk. Then, read some selected passages from this poem, Corsons Inlet offer our own linguistic and rhetorical analysis. Thereafter, we will have a syntactical analysis of a special line from this poem and then discuss how some kind of paradoxical reconciliation takes place in this poem, which is important for all of poetry.

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Historical and Literary Context



- Poets had to travel to Europe to establish themselves.
- The two world wars did not help the growth of poetry.
- The Great Depression of 1929 signaled the end of some little magazines.
- The modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot, H.D, and others did not reach all corners of America.
- The public response to new poetry was precarious.
- Most poets were struggling to establish themselves.
- A R Ammons from Whiteville, North Carolina, too worked as a school principal and a business executive in a glass factory before finding a comfortable position at Cornell University in 1965 but went on to win almost all prizes for poetry in the US.



Here is a historical and literary context. In the early 20th century, poets had to travel to Europe to establish themselves as poets. The two world wars did not help poets much or poetry much. Many other concerns were there. More than poetry, people had to struggle for so many other things. In addition to these world wars, we have the Economic Depression of 1929 which affected everybody's life in the US, including little magazines which had to close down.

The modernist poetry of Pound, Elliot, Hilda Doolittle and many others published in small magazines did not reach the whole of America. So, poets had to struggle to establish themselves. A R Ammons who was born in Whiteville, a place in North Carolina, too, had to work hard as a school principal and then as a business executive in a glass factory before finding a comfortable position as a professor of poetry at Cornell University in 1965. Later on, he went onto win almost all prizes for poetry in the US.

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A R Ammons (1926-2001)

- The Great Depression in Whiteville, North Carolina
- **Enlightened** during the WW II about the creation
- Educated in science at Wake Forest College on GI Bill
- Explored world creation stories
- Identified with the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu
- **Water as a symbol of humility**
- Silence as eloquence
- Devoted to poetry out of an inner compulsion
- Distinguished Professor of Poetry at Cornell
- A distinct voice in American poetry
- Promoted as an Emersonian by Harold Bloom



A R Ammons was born in 1926, just before this Economic Depression and then died in 2001. This Great Depression had affected Ammons' own life individually. They were living in a farm and during this period, they had next to nothing to survive. They had to go through lot of difficulties in their life. Later on, when he had a chance to participate in the second world war, he went there. And when he was serving in the Navy, he had an enlightenment which is something great. Who actually makes the distinction between land and water? He was watching the waves reaching the shore and coming back, who made this distinction? Is it God or something else?

That is how he got interest in this creation stories. How did the world come into existence? He read widely about creation stories in the West and also in the East. And when he went to Wake Forest college, which is now a university. He majored in science and studied as much as he could on his own. When he explored the eastern tradition, he found Lao Tzu and his philosophy that Lao to be close to his heard.

In Lao's philosophy, we have water as a great symbol of humility. The reason is water will never go up; it will always flow down. And also, he found something special about the importance of silence in Lao Tzu. Silence is considered to be eloquence in Lao's philosophy. He was, right from the beginning, ever since he got to read poetry, and start writing poetry, he was interested in poetry, he was devoted to poetry, from some kind of inner compulsion. That is why, in many of his interviews, he would say, if you want to write poetry, do it carefully. If you have nothing else to do, write poetry. If you have something else to do, do not write poetry. That is his advice for many young poets of his times.

Later on, he became a distinguished professor of poetry at Cornell University. And then a distinct voice of American poetry. Throughout his life time, he was promoted by Harold Bloom, the most influential American critique of 20th century as an Emersonian, Whitmanian, Transcendental American poet.

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“A Poem is a Walk”



- A poem is a walk.
- 1. Involves the whole person.
- 2. Cannot be reproduced.
- 3. Its shape occurs, unfolds.
- 4. It has a motion characteristic of the walker
- Walks/poems are useless, meaningless, non-rational.
- “Poetry leads us to the unstructured sources of our beings, to the unknown, and returns us to our rational, structured selves refreshed.”
- “Nothing that can be said in words is worth saying.”

- Lao Tzu



He gave a talk on “A Poem is a Walk” to a group of writers. It is brief talk published in a magazine later on, the title of the talk is “A Poem is a Walk.” He compares a poem with a walk and identifies four characteristics of these two actions. Both a piece of poem and a walk involve the whole person. Both cannot be reproduced. Both take a shape which occurs and then unfolds. Both have a motion characteristic of the walker and the writer. Both walks and poems are, for Ammons, useless, meaningless and non rational.

So, he says, ‘poetry leads us to the unstructured sources of our beings, to the unknown, and returns as to our rational, structured selves refreshed.’ Writing poetry or walking is a kind of journey into our unconscious, or unstructured sources of our own beings. Something unknown, something mysterious. That is how Ammons was drawn to this mysterious and then he would come back and feel refreshed. Whoever reads his poetry would feel the same and then he quotes this line from Lao Tzu, ‘nothing that can be said in words is worth saying.’ He always distrusted words, language. That is why he took interest in painting. Whatever he could not express in words, he would always paint. So, this man, this poet who did not have faith in words wrote volumes and volumes of poetry throughout his life.

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“Corsons Inlet”



- Corsons Inlet is a place & a poem.
- The place is used as a site for walks.
- **Original title:** “A Nature Walk”
- Most anthologized poem of Ammons
- 128 irregular lines in free verse
- Records the events of a day during his walk
- Offers a vision of no fixed vision



Let us see this poem on “Corsons Inlet.” Actually, it is a place in New Jersey, often used for walking. Ammons gave this original title: A Nature Walk. This is one of the most anthologized poems of Ammons. It has something like 128 irregular lines in free verse. It records the events of a day during his walk.

This poem offers a vision of no fixed vision. That is inconclusive vision. That is what we find in this poem. We have a picture of the place “Corsons Inlet,” we have Atlantic Ocean and the land coming together and then, we have this Inlet with various shapes, sizes, changing according to seasons.

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“Corsons Inlet”



I went for a walk over the dunes again this morning
to the sea,
then turned right along
the surf
rounded a naked headland 5
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 10
but after a bit / continuous overcast:



Let us read some selected passages from this poem:

“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.

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“Corsons Inlet”

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,

from the perpendiculars,

straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds 15

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 20

running

like a stream through the geography of my work:



“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:

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“Corsons Inlet”



but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events 30
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; 35

disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows
of dunes,
irregular swamps of reeds, [irregular lines of verse]
though not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all ...
predominantly reeds: 40



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, [irregular lines of verse]

though not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all,

predominantly reeds:”

When Ammons says irregular swamps of reeds, we can also notice irregular lines of verse in this poem.

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“Corsons Inlet”

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
from outside: I have
drawn no lines:
as 45

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 50
thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
no walls:



“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.

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“Corsons Inlet”

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?

70

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:

80



“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?

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:

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“Corsons Inlet”



in the smaller view, order tight with shape: 95
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 100
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 105
formlessness:



“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.”

Ammons offers two kinds of views; in the smaller view and in the larger view; the microscopic view and the macroscopic view of this form of formlessness. And he claims that he makes no form of formlessness.

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“Corsons Inlet”



no arranged terror: no forcing of image, plan,
or thought: 115
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:



“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:

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“Corsons Inlet”



I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will 120
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 125
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. 128



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 disordered,

[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.”

The last line ‘tomorrow a new walk is a new walk’ is one of the most famous lines in American poetry now. This is a kind of inconclusive conclusion that he arrived at, at the end of his poem “Corsons Inlet,” with this irregular form, free verse, irregular thought processes, the actual shape of “Corsons Inlet.”

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Thematic Contrast

- One and Many
- Form and Formlessness
- Mind and Nature/ Reality
- Order and Disorder
- Beauty and Terror
- Serenity and Restlessness
- Synthesis and Analysis
- Change and Constant
- Freedom and Restriction
- Flexibility and Rigidity
- Walking, Seeing and Thinking



Let us see the thematic contrast between one and many, form and formlessness, mind and nature or mind and reality, order and disorder, beauty and terror, serenity and restlessness,


synthesis and analysis, change and constant, freedom and restriction, flexibility and rigidity, walking and seeing on the one hand and thinking on the other hand.

The poet walks on Corsons Inlet, and then, as he walks, his thoughts starts imagining and then he gets some ideas to write this poem and he wrote this poem in a short time in one sitting, that is what he said.

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Poetic Devices

- **Metonymy:** Corsons Inlet, a place associated with walking is used for thinking/ perceiving
- **Metaphor:** walk as a liberator (13)
- **Alli/ Asso:** straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds (15)
- **Simile:** significance/ running/ like a stream through the geography of my work (21-22)
- **Simile:** swerves of action/ like the inlet's cutting edge (25-26)
- **Allusion:** Ammons's Overall to Emerson's Oversoul (30)
- **Oxymoron:** Disorderly orders (36), constant change (82)
- **Assonance:** risk is full: every living thing in (70)
- **Paradox:** that there is no finality of vision (126)
the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness: (72)



There are many poetic devices in this poem. Metonymy, we find in Corsons Inlet, it is a place associated with walking. But it is used for thinking, perceiving about the whole cosmos, about the whole human existence. We have the metaphor of walk as a liberator. We have alliteration and assonance in this particular line, 'straight lines blocks boxes binds.' Simile, we have in 'significance running like a stream;' 'significance running like a stream through the geography of my work.' Further, we have a simile in swerves of action, like the inlet's cutting edge.

Ammon's alludes to Emerson's Oversoul through this idea of Overall. This is different from Oversoul because Emerson's Oversoul attempts to transcend whereas Ammon's Overall also makes his attempt but then finally it lands on the ground. We have oxymoron in disorderly orders, constant change. Assonance in risk is full, every living thing in. Paradox in that there is no finality of vision. This is a vision of Ammon's, there is no finality of vision. And then, we have a very interesting line in this case the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness. Those who pay attention to this particular line will come to know more about this possibility, rule, sum rulelessness. We will spend some time on this shortly.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** irregular rhyme but repetitions of sounds
- **Rhythm:** the rhythm of a walk on the shore line
- **Smooth rhythm** in some lines: (Roger Gilbert)
 - waved in and out with the waterline, waterline
inexact, (63)
- **Repetition:** The words “in and out” are used often to indicate the movement of poetic, shore, and mental lines
- **Meter:** Variations in the number of syllables from 1 to 15
- **Single syllables:** as (45), beaks (88), sound (91)
- **15 syllables:** lines 41 and 126
 - I have reached no conclusions, have erected no
[boundaries,
 - Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision.



We do not have much of rhyme in this particular poem because it is all irregular. It is in irregular rhyme and verse, but we have many repetitions of sounds. The rhythm of a walk on the shore line, we can see as the lines move zig zag. However, Roger Gilbert has said we have smooth rhyme in some lines, he quotes this line, ‘waved in and out with the waterline, waterline, inexact.’

We have a number of repetition of words in this poem like in and out to indicate the movement of poetic shore and mental lines. Again, we have variations in meter in the number of syllables from 1 to 15 syllables. We have single syllables in three lines, just this word alone ‘occurs as then beaks,’ and lastly sound. We also have a long line with 15 syllables in 41 and 126, “I have reached no conclusions, have erected no [boundaries,” “Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision.” This is the kind of poem with rhyme, rhythm and meter we find in this poem called “Corsons Inlet.”

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Overall Impression

- “Corsons Inlet” is a poem that mimics its theme of the inconclusive vision by locating itself on a shore line suggesting the central **littoral imagination** of Ammons, who had a great understanding of the difference between the land and the sea while on a ship during the World War II.
- It addresses the eternal paradox of One and Many in perception and cognition but allows Ammons to have his paradoxical way of a final vision which is not final.
- It offers a liberating walk for the poet as well as the reader.
- It recognizes that “risk is full” but adds that “the demand is life,” not death.
- The poem presents both a smaller and a larger view of beauty and terror but asserts “that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.”



We will have some understanding of this poem with this overall impression. It is a long poem of 128 lines, specific to a place called Corsons Inlet and it is a specific vision of an individual poet, so, we need to read this poem several times to understand, to form our own impression.

“Corsons Inlet” is a poem that mimics its theme of the inconclusive vision by locating itself on a shore line suggesting the central littoral imagination, ‘Littoral,’ the place where water and land meet. Littoral imagination of Ammons, who had a great understanding of the difference between the land and the sea while on a ship during the second world war. He was thinking what is this life? Who made it? And most of his poems will have this thought of this whole world.

This poem addresses the eternal paradox of One and Many in perception and cognition but allows Ammons to have his paradoxical way of a final vision which is not final. Is the world one or many? Is there is a single religion or many religions? What are these different forms? Are they unified in one form or they do they remain separately?

This is a question, philosophical question for Ammons, that is why this theme of one and many is predominant throughout his works. This poem offers a liberating walk for the poet as well as for the reader. Once we go through this poem with a little interest, we will find, we are also liberated from our own rigid vision of life, or rigid views of life.

This poem recognizes that risk if full but then adds that the demand is life not death. The poem presents both a smaller and a larger view of beauty and terror but asserts that tomorrow

a new walk is a new walk. Life keeps changing, time flows, nothing remains the same, that is why this kind of poetry, is very important for us.

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A Syntactical Analysis (SPD)



- A special line in the poem:
 - “the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness” (92)
- A paradigmatic structure of paradox;
 - The possibility of ---- as the sum ----.
- **Interchangeable words:** change, conclusion, route, motion, order, line, life, reality, freedom, vision, possibility, sum, etc.
- A reversed structure:
 - The sum of ---- as the possibility of ----
 - “The sum of rule as the possibility of rulelessness”
- The interchangeable words are applicable here too



During the course of my research, I had this insight, so, we are offering a syntactical analysis of one particular line. A special line in this poem: that line is line number 92, “the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness.” We can consider this line a paradigmatic structure of paradox; the possibility of dash as the sum of dash. In these two dashes, we can have many words like change, conclusion, route, motion, order, line, life, reality, freedom, vision, possibility, sum, and so on.

We can also have a reversed structure like the sum of dash as the possibility of dash. So, we can have some lines like this, “the sum of rule as the possibility of rulelessness.” The interchangeable words are applicable here as well. So, in these normal words order that Ammons has given and the reversed order, we have proposed, we can have these different variations “like the possibility of motion as a sum of motionlessness.” Or “the sum of life, as a possibility of lifelessness.” We can endlessly create so many sentences. That is why, words are tricky and after all, the poet is making an attempt to reconcile various contradictions in life.

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Paradoxical Reconciliation



- “the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness”
- Content words: possibility, rule, sum, rulelessness
- **What is the role of the structure words “as” and “of”?**
- They indicate implicit and explicit comparisons.
- Hence, the possibility is rule and the sum is rulelessness
- Further, “the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness” means that “the possibility of rule is the sum of rulelessness”
- Thus, the paradigmatic structure, which is true poetry and imagination, according to Coleridge, reconciles all contradictions.
- **Imagination is the creator and destroyer of paradoxes.**



Let us look at the paradoxical reconciliation. ‘The possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness,’ this line has content words like possibility, rule, sum, rulelessness. Then we have to ask this question, what is the role of the structure words like “as” and “of”? We pass it that, they also indicate implicit and explicit comparisons. Hence, we have a line like ‘the possibility is rule and the sum is rulelessness.’

Further, we can have another line like this ‘the possibility of rule as the sum of rulelessness.’ It means that the possibility of rule is the sum of rulelessness. Thus, the paradigmatic structure which is true poetry and imagination, according to Coleridge, reconciles all contradictions. Actually, Ammons quotes Coleridge in his essay on “A Poem is a Walk” and says that Coleridge has given one of the best ideas on reconciliation as the function of poetry.

So, we can say imagination is the creator and destroyer of all paradoxes. That is why I have a sentence, ‘mind is the mound of all paradoxes.’

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- A R Ammons
- “A Poem is a Walk”
- “Corsons Inlet”
- Analysis of Selected Passages
- A Syntactical Analysis
- Paradoxical Reconciliation



To summarize, we can say that Ammons lived at a time when poets had to go to Europe to establish themselves as poets, but Ammons, being born in North Carolina had to content with himself with whatever little magazines he got. He was able to become a professor of poetry at Cornell University in 1965 and then become one of the greatest poets of 20th century in America.

In his talk on ‘A Poem is a Walk,’ he was able to describe the connections between a poem and a walk. We read some selections of this poem, ‘Corsons Inlet’ and analysed the poem linguistically and rhetorically. We offered a syntactical analysis with reference to one particular line saying that, that is a paradigmatic sentence for paradox. And this kind of paradoxical reconciliation is at the heart of poetry, according to Ammons and also to the great critique, Coleridge.

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We have some references. If you like, you can refer to any of these references and learn more about Ammons and his poetry. I found Ammons to be a meaningful poet, a great poet for my research and many others have done, hope you too will find some meaning in this poem. There are many other poems which are very accessible. You can enjoy. Thank you!