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**“Who wishes to walk with me?”:
The Poem as a Walk in Whitman and Ammons’s Poetry**

After a poetry reading, in an old bookstore, Billy Collins explains that he does not look for a poem's meaning, but its destination. The goal of every writer should not be: what does this poem mean, but how does it ‘get to where it is going to go.’ Such a goal is discovered during the writing process, whether it be a long and treacherous walk in the mind, or an actual liberating walk in a hilly countryside. A. R. Ammons believes that poetry does not come to life and reach clarity when “caught inside,” but is gestated during the walk (GB 93). Each new walk is an entirely new movement towards discovery and insight. In each instance, both walk and poem construct themselves along the way. In his essay, “A Poem is a Walk,” Ammons describes the walk as “[representing a] physical immediacy the restless wanderings of a mind that is rarely content to stand still” (Gilbert 217). There are countless examples of walk poems, though most of them suggest that real or fictional walks are “externalizations of an inward seeking” (4). In either case, the conceptions behind any walk poem is keeping the mind merged “with the figurations of ongoing,” and the notion that poems are *unreproducible* (GB 55). Like snowflakes, no two walk poems are the same. Although Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* dates Ammons’s National Book Award winning walk poem, *Garbage*, by 138 years, both works concur with Emerson’s idea of what makes a poem. When “the poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold...the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (Rosenthal 8). Whitman and Ammons: poets of different eras with new confessions to discover. In 1855 Whitman beckoned to Ammons, and in the twentieth-century, Ammons retorts, asking *his* reader to tramp with him on a curvy contemporary journey.

“Looking...Wandering...Voyaging...Hurrying...Walking...”¹

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The US Poet Laureate from 2001-2003, Billy Collins, had more to say about Whitman’s *Song of Myself* in a lecture, “*Leaves of Grass, Still Growing After 150 Years.*” He expressed that *Leaves of Grass* was the first poem to break standard conventions. He described Whitman’s Songs as emanating a biblical, Blakian, tumbling, forward, oceanic wave-like motion, and as having an “inevitable unpunctuated progress,” “like [that of a] movie which rolls forward.” These characteristics are evidenced since the speaker progresses through his inward and external envisaging; he wears good walking shoes and a weatherproof coat, while trudging everywhere and with everyone in America, staff in hand. Half way through Whitman’s long poem, the speaker eases up on his sight sense and becomes “afoot with [his] vision,” or his “eyes [begin] walking” (LG 62, 78). He *encloses* all that is modern and ancient, and all that is in between; a truly modernist trait. Rather than using the third person point of view, Whitman catalogs versatile verbs, and begins to *walk the walk*. Though, when he starts to slow down; before he is about to return from his long and centripetal odyssey, the speaker tells the reader that he feels “like a man leaving charges before a journey” (80). He then reaches his arms out to the reader, wraps his left hand around our waist, hands us his staff, and, with his right hand, points to where we must travel in his stead. He “tramp[s] a perpetual journey,” Gilbert explains: “like the walk, the poem unfolds temporally, moving through a series of phases, turing from one path to another, ultimately reaching a point at which it can either stop or turn back” (28). Both Whitman and

¹ Headings throughout this essay are from the verbs beginning Whitman’s catalogs on pp. 65 and 80, after he becomes “afoot with [his] vision” on p. 62. Verbs are an element of forward progression in the walk poem.

Ammons's poems and walks take multitudinous turns, but return back again, like Odysseus on his classic epic. Whitman's ending is a bit more definitive, while, in *Garbage*, Ammons leaves the reader in an ambiguous place. His cohort, Robert Frost, often closed his poems, and left his readers in a similar position. Frost preferred, or *doubted if [he] should ever turn back*.²

In Frost's poem, *The Wood-Pile*, he begins: "Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day, / I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here. / No, I will go on farther-and we shall see'" (Gilbert 28). In this poem there is no return but it is implied. Once the speaker begins his walk, the poem starts to take on its own shape, and his visualizations and insight mold the poem, both for Frost and the reader. Dana Gioia believes that the modern American poet "must not only try to synthesize the complexity of his culture into one poem, he must also create the form of his discourse as he goes along" (25). Another walk poem, that Ammons wrote in one sitting, is *Corsons Inlet*. It is constructed so as to show how shape follows the fluid contours of the walk. The poem presents itself "as [a meditation] unfolding in the course of actual walks" and "[seeks] to integrate the phenomenal data of the walk with its accompanying stream of thought." Not only is the poet creating his recitations as he walks among the inlet, but also, the shape of the poem on the page, in order to provide the reader with a portrait constructed of printed words. David Lehman writes about *Corsons Inlet*: It has '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."' The structure and spacing found throughout the poem looks as though the sun is breaking through the clouds, or the slight indentation implies that there is a 'continuous overcast' (Gilbert 212-13). Similar to the speaker in the Frost poem who continues with his walk, the speaker in Ammons's

² Alludes to Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*.

poem understands that his vision does not end when the printed poem does. His perceptions only get put on hold until the next day, since, “tomorrow a new walk is a new walk” (CI 8).

“Speeding...Carrying...Storming...Backing...Visiting...”

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Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman faithfully recorded their daily observations in journals. Ammons used this very transcendentalist discipline as an example of the unimportance of revision in his writing. In interviews and articles written about his writing process, Ammons often paraphrases Emerson’s quote from his essay “Self-Reliance”: “let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical, though I mean it not, and see it not” (120). The open-ended recording of daily observances; jotting down whatever life brings is a practice that these poets exercised. This is what poetry and the walk poem is grounded on; a “setting [of words] down without the kind of shaping and selection that written poems generally employ” (Gilbert 5). When Ammons wrote his thinnest poem, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, he structures it as a journal written on a very long coil of adding machine tape. He begins by telling the reader that he will start by writing the prologue, and the Muse “must be acknowledged, / saluted, and implored: / I cannot / write / without her help.” The next day he tells the reader that he feels differently than he did the day before: “today / I feel a bit different: / my prolog sounds phony & / posed” (TTY 1, 5). Ammons dismisses the Muse and continues on with his Whitmanian *unpunctuated, tumbling forward* progression. Like in *Garbage*, he is fully aware that his poetry has a “job to do,” and does not stop to reconsider his previous speculations, or to revise any one word or phrase (GB 24). With walk poems, “no longer [are they] dictated by a celestial muse; instead [they are] manifested in

the very hum of the senses, in the mere consciousness of reality” (Gilbert 5). In the tenth section of *Garbage*, the speaker cohesively melds writing with thought; he tells the reader that he thinks of “this tape /...as the showboat churning down the / Mississippi with the banks.” The way in which Ammons describes *Tape for the Turn of the Year* can be applied to *Garbage* also; both poems are stories which unfold with each punch of the typewriter key, turning corners and meandering through endless streams of consciousness, only to coil back again on his floor.

“Flying...Helping...Anchoring...Going...Ascending...”

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The earliest reference to the walk poem dates back to as early as Adam and Eve’s first steps in Genesis. It could be argued that the walk does not have any real significance for them, until the actual *fall of man* occurs. Until they commit the world’s first sin, their lives are bound in leisure. They are incapable of experiencing the liberation that the walk yields, until they are made to work the tractor or hand plow. The very nature and purpose of literary verse is to “make furrows in cultivated earth.” In Ammons’s verse, he can appear to be “effortful and messy.” When he furrows a page of poetry, it is neither white nor prepared for writing, but rather “strewn with dead and discarded language. His furrows are the work of a hand plow, not a tractor, and they are interrupted unpredictably, they stop short, they bump up against rocks, they are distracted by birdsong” (Baker 47). Whitman’s speaker too enjoys the satisfaction of a long day of work, where he stands before the big open doors of a barn, ready to help during the harvest. These experiences are more contemporary than, say, Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, but are meant to evoke ‘the essence of experience transfused and heightened and expressed in such fashion that we may contemplate it at the same instant that we are swayed by it.’ *Song of Myself* is esteemed “the first modern poetic sequence” since it is not ruled by rigid

thematic, formal literary conventions, such as the Elizabethan sonnet sequences. Whitman does provide a modern structure to his egotistical poem, proving that he was ahead of his time. His shameless self-promotion and in-your-face intonations prove this. Whitman and Ammons are both poets who are free to let their poems directly represent themselves, “and to create a movement, reversible and always in flux, of vital immediacies” (Rosenthal 16-17). As mentioned above, it is in Genesis that the first walk of poetry is referenced. Just as God made man out of the dust of the ground, poems are born while going through incident after incident, never really returning, but simply ending in the poet’s return to dust.

“Enclosing...Believing...Waiting...Making...Helping...”

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Gilbert uses the Wordsworth poem, *An Evening Walk*, to explain how his poem is a significant pointing to the early genre of the walk poem. The titles of several walk poems begin with the definite article “the.” By Wordsworth choosing to use an indefinite article in his title, implies that “the poem claims to represent only a *single* evening walk, not a class of walks.” Wordsworth’s “poem [then] gains sharply in specificity, in the evoked sense of a singular, unreproducible experience (43, my emphasis). The idea of each walk representing a unique, ongoing trail of thinking, leaving the reader with a wholly individualized poem, like customized crumbs left along a path in the woods, has been handed down to modern American lyricists. *Garbage* does, indeed, have a sense of approximation, or curvature in its discourse. But each Ammons poem, whether one of his longer tape poems, or a *really* short one, “[renders] the

experience of reflection, its rhythms and contours” (Gilbert 209). His poetry is often depicted as the subtitle of his book of poems, *Sphere: the Form of a Motion*. The sphere referred to is planet Earth, and Ammons’s mind roams from ethereal galaxies back down to dusty gas stations in the country. Like Whitman, Ammons’s ‘bends and blends’ of insight set off a similar oceanic wave-like motion (214-15). On a similar wavelength as Wordsworth’s, *An Evening Walk*, Thoreau experienced and wrote about his daily walks with religious fervor:

Our expeditions are but tours, and come round again at evening to the old
 hearth-side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps. We
 should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying
 adventure, never to return, prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as
 relics to our desolate kingdoms (1803).

Thoreau’s health and spirit can only be revived if he spends, at least, four hours a day “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.” Each walk is entirely unique in its own right, and, he tells us, “comes only by the grace of God.” He was a firm believer in escaping the confines of the mind, by vanishing into the deep woods. He favors the tanned weather-worn skin of calloused hands; the result of manual labor, over soft delicate skin. At the heart of transcendental theory, Thoreau recounts a Wordsworth anecdote: “When a traveler asked Wordsworth’s servant to show him her master’s study, she answered, ‘Here is his library, but his study is out of doors’” (1803-5). Walks, and the poems that grow from their seeds, make for a richness of character and good morals. Thus Spake Thoreau.³

³ A play on the novel, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Friedrich Nietzsche.

“Dancing...Drinking...Walking...Accepting...Ranting...”

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At the beginning of Gilbert’s introduction, he heads it with: “A Walk is a Poem, a Poem is a Walk” (3). This parallels the lines on T. S. Eliot’s epitaph, and those found in *Four Quartets*: “In my beginning is my end. In my end is my beginning” (23), and Ammons plays off on Eliot’s lines with a garbologist’s ideology: “in your end is my beginning (GB 36). These modernist turns of phrase all harken back to a *classic* modern poet, whom Collins comedically tells us, proved his omniscient endlessness, and revolted the need to sound “more literary” by his exclusion of a middle name. Again, Whitman was ahead of his time; he improperly cocks his hat at the angle *he* liked, indoors and out, and he tells the reader he is immeasurable. In this sense, Whitman’s immeasurability, melded together with his omniscience, likens him to God; the latter always was here and always will be. The cyclical nature of *Song of Myself* continuously rolls on, *makes things new* for the reader (writing and *walking* at the same time), showing us that the end is just the beginning. He comically notes that those more refined sounding authors, ‘with three names,’ have long beards that continue on growing beyond the grave. Whitman asks the reader, at the onset of *Song of Myself*, to assume his or her position beside him. At the end of his tireless travels, he again asks the reader: “Who will walk with me? (90),” before retiring back to the dirt he sprang from. It becomes the reader’s turn to take over where Whitman left off (*in your end is my beginning*). Like Ammons, Whitman and his reader venture off into every crack and crevice of American life, minus “the bitchy requirements / of form or rhyme” (GB 120). He does eventually settle back into the grass that he so loves, and like that grass akin to his beard, Whitman’s literary influence is still growing today. In *Garbage* Ammons writes:

“in your end is my beginning, I repeat; also,
my end; my end is, in fact, your end, in a way:

are we not bound together by our ends: and when,
end to end, our ends meet, then we begin to

see the end of disturbing endlessness:” (63).

Both Whitman and Ammons’s American long poems embrace a progressive quality that brings a freshness with each individualized walk, or piece of garbage they find along their route.

Ammons’s distaste for punctuation reinforces the continuous flow of waste, which then gets recycled into a new form; a rejuvenating walk in the countryside or down a bohemian city street in San Francisco; a wholly new unconventional poem, scribbled in an aged leather-bound journal.

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