Roger Gilbert. *Walks in the World : Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. pp. 290.

Almost a quarter of a century ago, in the Fall 1968 issue of *Epoch*, A.R.Ammons published a short essay entitled "A Poem is a Walk" which, as time was to show, formulated one of the crucial poetic manifestos of the latter part of the twentieth century. Arguing there an analogy between walks and poems, Ammons offered a rationale for the kind of poetry which he had already been writing and for which he was soon to become known: one loose in structure, digressive, unfocused in its interests and goals, and uncommonly - almost unselectively - attentive to the external circumstances of its making.

That essay, memorable for the eloquence with which Ammons asserted there the poem's right to be - in the manner of walks - aimless, diffused in attention, and erratic in course, is one of the sources of (perhaps was even an inspiration for) Roger Gilbert's study *Walks in the World : Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry*. This is not to say that Gilbert has written a book which merely develops - in a critical, systematic fashion - the ideas sketched out by Ammons. Their two statements on poetry and walking are related but different in focus. Ammons is concerned with the walk as a metaphor for the poetic process; to him any poem, or rather any genuine poem, is a walk. Gilbert is interested only in one particular kind of poetry - the poetry in which the analogy proposed by Ammons, has been taken literally, that is, the walk and the poem have been fused, the former made the acknowledged occasion, subject, and the structuring device for the latter. The effect of the fusion is what Gilbert labels "the walk poem."

Walk poems, Gilbert argues, make an unrecognized and unself-conscious, but distinct and much practiced genre. On the basis of a scrupulous discussion of the analogy proposed by Ammons (in which Gilbert devotes as much space to what links as to what differentiates poems and walks) and following a reflection upon the form's historical development and its relation to kindred forms, past and present, Gilbert formulates a definition of the genre. The walk poem, he writes, usually carelessly lumped together with descriptive and typographical poetry, is possessed of distinctive characteristics which earn it a separate status. In its classic form, it is occasioned by and it makes its subjet the experience of walking in landscape from which it borrows its sequential structure (from inception, by way of attainment or frustration, to return) and which it attempts to faithfully reproduce in its drama, forward movement, spatial arrangement on the page, tempo and rhythmic structure. Characteristically, the poem is a blend of a journalistic account of the physical experience itself, and of the reflection generated by it, with the reflection never permitted to dominate or obscure the character of the occasion. The poem typically records these physical and mental events in the present tense in an effort to realize what Gilbert sees as the genre's distinctive ambition - erasing the distinction between the experience and the text.

Walks in the World is primarily a study of the walk poem as it has been practiced in America in the twentieth century. Though by no means an American genre (precursors of the walk poem can be identified in antiquity, and the first true specimen of the form to be written in English is "The Country Walk" by a minor eighteenth century poet John Dyer) the walk poem has found in the United States a particularly fertile ground for development. The American tendency to see experience as charged with immanent aesthetic value, and the belief that by merely transcribing facts and events that value can be revealed, has been coincidental with the assumptions underlying the concept of the walk poem. Poetic and prosaic transcriptions of walking, plentiful in America in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth have become so numerous as to encourage a classifying effort.

Gilbert classifies walk poems according to the kind of response which the walk is recorded to elicit from the peripatetic speaker. The occasion may, as is the case in Robert Frost's poetry, lead the walker to moments of revelation and truth, and itself become a parable for the mind's way to knowledge. Or it may primarily stimulate and energize the mind, which is how the walk functions in Wallace Stevens' poems. Or it may be appreciated aesthetically in the way W.C.Williams appreciates it, for instance, in *Paterson.* These three modes of bringing together the walk and the poem practiced at the beginning of the century by the three poets seem to have virtually exhausted the options available. All notable younger practicioners of the genre whose poetry Gilbert discusses in the book follow in Frost's, or Stevens', or Williams' footsteps. Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, A.R.Ammons, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and Gary Snyder - however varied and original are their individual strategies for transforming the experience of walking into poetry - only experiment with, modify, push to the furthest limits the patterns they have inherited from Frost and the two modernists.

The ambition of the walk poem to assert a privileged poetic status to a transcription of an experience - a transcription which optimally does not impose upon it, but is journalistically meticulous - involves Gilbert in a more general discussion of the limits of poetry. The problem which any poet faces in writing a walk poem is how to render the texture of the experience of walking with maximum fidelity, communicating something of its natural diffuseness and opacity, and yet make the text meet the standards of a self-contained literary artifact. In defining those standards, Gilbert takes a decidedly conservative attitude. He is not one of those extremists who claim that poetry depends on taking a certain *attitude* to discourse rather than on specific properties of that discourse, and who are, therefore, ready to accept as a poem any text in which the uneven right margin implicitly communicates: "this is poetry; read it with all the skill, intelligence, and understanding you can bring into the act of reading." For Gilbert, to become canonical, a text must exhibit some kind of formal unity, and must be marked by lyric condensation and singularity. In his discussion of individual walk poems, he concentrates on how they achieve these goals, and how even such poems as O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them" or Snyder's "A Walk" bestow upon apparently insignificant, unfocused, and disorderly experience some kind of closure and intensity. When a text fails to accomplish these objectives, he believes it becomes a piece of mere journalistic transcription, not a poem.

Regrettably, however, Gilbert does not deal in the book with such walk-poem failures, even though he mentions O'Hara's later poetry as moving in that direction, and even though ample material illustrative of the problem could be found, for instance, in the work of Ammons. The omission is regrettable in as much as looking at such less obviously canonical samples could have either provoked Gilbert to espousing a more inclusive definition of poetry or to challenging the liberal views. It could have, also, resulted in interesting discussions of literary texts about whose generic status there is some critical disagreement.

But such a wish that the author had addressed one more problem can only arise out of a sense of profound satisfaction with the work that he *has* done. *Walks in the World* is an epitome of criticism at its most admirable: thorough, meticulous, disciplined, and absorbing. In the flood of critical statements that so often seem irrelevant, or marginal, or only self-absorbed, Gilbert's book stands out as ambitious in scope and depth, richly informative, and - a fact not at all insignificant - also readable because unencumbered with opaque critical jargon and mindful of the reader's needs to be aided in understanding. It succeeds, therefore, as few critical books do: a pleasure and a satisfaction to read, it sheds light upon those corners of the modern poetic scene that have as yet been little inspected, and in doing so, contributes to mapping out that scene's full variety and complexity.

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