

Poems, from Spoils of the Park



Plaque commemorating Ralph Waldo Emerson's sojourn on Schoolmaster Hill. Photograph courtesy of the author. [Click to enlarge.](#)

A Walk in Franklin Park

An entrance leads into some nondescript woods, to a dale where a dilemma presents itself: to follow the enticing stairs up the rocky hill into the forest, or the path into the tunnel? The path enters a wall of puddingstone, reminiscent of grottoes at Tivoli, which you can hear the traffic passing over. Olmsted marked his parks with the crushed concrete of skyscrapers, to accent the green.

A grotesque frame for the "magic wardrobe" effect: on the other side of the tunnel you discover countryside as Browne or Repton might have sketched it. "Country": a broad open green, a valley that curves invitingly upward, toward masses of trees on the outcrops, framed by giant oaks. One half-expects flaky-coated sheep to edge into the open. But instead, here and there, the isolated figure of a golfer.

It is the hour of the conjugal stroll. Couples on bicycles, debriefing the day. The TB patients wear hospital smocks. A facility operated by the Massachusetts State Department of Public Health was built at the foot of Olmsted's park. Public open space is vulnerable to schools, low income housing, hospitals, zoos

. . . all such “spoils of the park.” It can be a lovely situation for the convalescents.

As one follows the rim of the gentle valley, traffic whizzing up the carriage way to one’s left, a textbook succession of beautiful landscape views, only missing the sheet of water, unfolds. (Yet something a touch rough, even savage, haunts this composition. The materials are not quite “right,” American picturesque.) Olmsted preferred to speak of his parks in terms of music.

A poem at Schoolmaster Hill commemorates Ralph Waldo Emerson’s stay there, while teaching school in Roxbury: “Long through the weary crowds I roam; A river-ark on the ocean brine.” The poem includes references to frozen hearts and hasting feet, driven foam, secret nooks, frolic fairies, and groves “Where arches green, the livelong day,/ Echo the blackbird’s roundelay.”

An origin myth for Olmsted? On spiritual maps an “origin” can mask the true point of emergence. From the bench—the best view at Franklin Park—watch the golfers tee off in succession. To exit the park, follow a curving path. It curves some more. Follow it, curving. You are getting Olmsteded. It’s like watching an accident unfold in slow motion. Nothing you can do about it.

Olmsted’s park designs are delightful when you have leisure but a nightmare when you have to get somewhere. (Can I have some leisure please?) You see a greensward at the end of the curve and can only hope against all odds that it is not the same greensward you just left. You spend a lot of time going nowhere. There is something monstrous about the loop.

For all your study of this park, see how lost you are? Your knowledge of the park is only as good as your knowledge of the neighborhood. Those “planned neighborhoods” one sometimes mistakenly turns into, when trying to get across town. And the refreshing life of the unplanned. What lurks beyond the green screen? How do I get out of this damn park?

General Scheme of Power Distribution of the Niagara Falls Power Company, *The Niagara Falls Electrical Handbook: Being a Guide for Visitors From Abroad Attending the International Electrical Congress*, St. Louis, Mo., September, 1904. Published under the auspices of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, 1904. Courtesy of the SUNY Buffalo Library, Buffalo, New York. Click to enlarge.

The Power of the Falls

In the 1870s Olmsted and Vaux marked the head of the Niagara River, and by association all the waters of the Great Lakes, with Front Park. In the late 1880’s they would mark the landscape where those waters drop over the Niagara Escarpment on their way to Lake Ontario—a major hydrological and aesthetic power spot, the Goat Island Niagara Reserve.

By 1882, seven mills along the Niagara Gorge north of the American Falls

produced power for Jacob Schoellkopf's Hydraulic Power Company. Partly thanks to Nikola Tesla and his alternating current transmission system, this power reached Buffalo in 1896—completing a loop of water and electricity, sent back upstream, the first long distance transmission for commercial purposes.

Buffalo soon became the City of Lights. Frederick Church, whose huge painting "Niagara Falls" was first shown in 1857, lectured sometime before 1869 on the Falls' impending ruin: mills, flumes, shops, icehouses, signboards, hotels, and fences defaced and crowded the once natural riverbank. People paid a fee to look through holes in a fence to see the Falls.

Olmsted drafted and delivered a report in 1865 that articulated the philosophical basis for state and national parks, advocating that portions of natural scenery be guarded and cared for by government. To simply reserve them from monopoly by individuals was not enough. They also should be "laid open to the use of the body of the people." Magnificent natural scenery was a commons.

Olmsted's and Vaux's report for the Goat Island Reserve mentions the changing public attitude toward natural scenery: a century before, the Falls might have been termed hideous or awful, while sixty years before, they were looked at chiefly as a source of power. Now their particular weather was sublime. Niagara Falls, once Onguiaahra, the Strait.

In 1763, Seneca Indians killed eighty citizens and British soldiers who were transporting material along the Niagara Gorge. John Stedman, one of two survivors of the Devil's Hole Massacre, claimed the land and islands above the Falls for himself. In the 1770s, he raised a herd of goats on "Goat Island." Listen to the Falls under the creamy white blossoms of the basswood.

To make peace the Seneca ceded to the British a four mile wide strip of land along the east side of the Niagara River from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. The paths and walks at Niagara Reservation are calculated to draw the walker back from the sublime, to linger in beauty, just as Olmsted led Richardson on a long, teasing walk before letting him see the Falls.

The pools, riffles and rapids by Luna just above the Bridal Falls are intimately seductive, without effective barrier. A terrifying intimacy, when you know where it leads: "the densest region of shade merges its identity into a desperate kiss." The design invites "an all-consuming thirst for open air and danger." Listen, and you will hear the massive ground tone of the Falls, just downstream, offstage.

The state cops keep an eye on "people they see standing in the same place for long periods of time or walking about aimlessly, muttering to themselves or looking distraught." One study has logged 20-25 suicides a year, and notes that the most popular time is Monday at 4pm. Honeymooners flock to the pools above the Falls in a spirit of contradiction.

Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated several miles above me, as I waited for a

taco in Niagara Falls' economic drop-out zone. Here is where Elon Hooker built the ideal workers' village, on a toxic waste dump. Here also is heroism, where Lois Gibbs organized the Love Canal Homeowners Association, nursing her children in front of national television cameras.

Amidst land scraped bare by retreating glaciers and thrust under the sky, tabula rasa between two Great Lakes, Niagara Falls channels one-fifth the planet's fresh surface water. Maybe it's the ions, static in the gorge that lifts the hair from your skull. The park has its rangers and its Mennonites, and its group of communicants, receiving instruction from the Cave of the Winds.

The Canadians played it right. It was only a matter of time before the USA would preserve Goat Island, and erase industry along the gorge, restoring a natural look to the Falls, as seen from the other side. Where Canada's Frankenstein lifts a Clifton Hill cheeseburger, grinning back at the toothless storefronts of Niagara Falls, USA, the economic gradient feels steep.

In a gentler dell, at a wooded bit opposite Crow Island, upstream of Bridal Falls, the watery mirrors cause us to reflect on the mythology in the course of our lives. Thanatos holds our ankles as we contemplate the riffles. Tesla suffered a peculiar affliction in which blinding flashes of light would appear before his eyes, often accompanied by visions.

The "American Electrician" gives a description of an early tesla coil wherein a glass battery jar, 15 x 20 cm (6 x 8 in) is wound with 60 to 80 turns of AWG No. 18 B & S magnet wire (0.823 mm²). Into this is slipped a primary consisting of eight to ten turns of AWG No. 6 B & S wire (13.3 mm²) and the whole combination immersed in a vessel containing linseed or mineral oil.

"It's called the reverse waterfall. Essentially, the shape of the land underneath the surface of this very narrow inland bay. It's really deep in the middle, much more shallow on the sides. So, when the tide changes, the middle surges upward and turns into this churning white water, in the midst of a very smooth, placid sort of flow on either side."

In 1926, Tesla commented on the ills of the social subservience of women and the struggle of women toward gender equality, indicating that humanity's future would be run by "Queen Bees." As she talks to you, the Falls make their own weather. The weather drifts. At the heart of power and contradiction, a delicate spiral rises turning toward the sky.

"Design Map of South Park," Olmsted Job #718, South Park, Buffalo, NY, F.L. & J.C. Olmsted Landscape Architects, 1888. Olmsted Lithograph Collection. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts. [Click to enlarge.](#)

South Park

Here is a view of the Niagara River from the Robert Moses Parkway, south of Niagara Falls. Here is a pumping station. Here is Front Park, that once overlooked the head of the river, at Lake Erie, now best seen from I-90, the thruway that obliterated the park. Here is a view of Riverwalk, zig zagging into the Lake. Here is a broad view of the shallowest Great Lake, from the Skyway.

Olmsted honors the lake, courses of waterways and associated wetlands, and employs them as a principal resource in his design, seeing the landscape as the Kahkwa or Seneca did. As part of the whole. Water takes the place of turf, in the kind of landscape composition he has mastered but is eager to adapt to a watery environment, where park goers enter by boat rather than foot.

Olmsted's Northern designs also shelter memories of the bayou and the "restful, dreamy nature of the South." These dreams of a lagoon interface with a Great Lake would not mature with Buffalo's South Park. Even though Buffalo got called the Venice of the North. In the Buffalo South Park proposal, packet boats were to ferry park-goers through islands marked out by windmill-powered lights.

"At intervals there will open long vistas over water under broad leafy canopies . . . verdant grottoes . . . spacious forest glades . . . nurseries for song birds." The plan is unique for balancing water with land, in an imbricated yet simple pattern, including secluded picnic spots and migratory bird exclosures. Bridging the bounded with the open horizon, Olmsted's parks are harbors for possibility.

As the 1888 design entailed excavating more than half a million yards of land, Buffalo's park commissioners deemed it too expensive. Olmsted's son John and his partners in the Olmsted firm took over the project. Their 1892 plan outlined a smaller inland space, in the "English deer park" mode, that eventually would include a water feature, a conservatory, botanical garden and arboretum.

Olmsted considered the Buffalo parks his "best-planned" system, due to the city's extensively realized parkways. We drive around in circles, past Father Baker's Basilica, where the stations of the cross are lit in neon, looking for South Park. After asking directions of a woman and her granddaughter, who give me three tomatoes from their garden, we find the entrance to the park.

Olmsted decries "the present railroad evil" and "the barbarity of a great number of deadly grade railroad crossings." What fuels growth chokes off life. He proposes a counter-system of parkways, "not to be dealt with on the principle that they are local affairs any more than the parks with which they connect." Olmsted's logic was reversed when Robert Moses turned his parkways into high speed thruways.

It is a deer park in the midst of residential and industrial South Buffalo, between rail yards, scrap yards and brownfields, a few miles north of the Ford Stamping Plant. The trees are decidedly less well kept here. Dead snags stand

at the edge of the water feature, which is lily choked. On the way out of the park, I photograph a mysterious mailbox, standing in the grass.

I have always regretted the use of a private automobile to reach the park. As part of Buffalo's emerging master plan, the bicycle paths running up the Niagara River from Tonawanda will be connected to South Park. But who will fill the border vacuum? Who will draw a view of Buffalo from the Niagara River, from the breath of a green artery, from the social dance on a packet boat seen from outer space.

Photograph courtesy of the author. [Click to enlarge.](#)

The Foundation of All Wealth

Come to the park bent and unbending
stimulate exertion of parts
receive pleasure unconscious
to influence the mind of
imagination

The lawn curves back of thought
sound minds in sound bodies
all the art of the park
not fully given to words
or enameled flowers

The daisy we did not stop for
therapeutic for the masses
not interrupting us or calling
out gave a more soothing refreshing
sanitary experience

Statement of Poetic Research

My research poetics are less invested in biography than in geography, less focused on rhyme than on response. Crucial to my sense of literacy, of documentation and of history, is an extension of these terms to cover the traces and signs written in the land, or produced in the wraparound space of our environments. Gary Snyder reminds us that, "A text is information stored through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts." If by "information" we also mean a nexus of social, ecological and political concern enmeshed in an aesthetics, then we might say that the landscapes realized by our landscape architects are texts, disguised as "nature," and vice versa: and how do we respond to these?

Research then occurs along a continuum from the depths of the archive to depths of the ramble. Walking and writing become extensions of the same investigation. Of course, a continuum on one plane is seen as a series of strata from another,

so the poetic researcher attends to how documents get sited, reinforcing established ideologies or inserted disruptively into other planes of meaning, context and conduct. A lot of the poetics of research has to do with re-siting the archive. Or citing the archive in a way that exposes it as non-site. Words need to be carried outdoors, or a bit of earth brought in, lodged in a climate-controlled box. Librarians become exceptionally wary around poetic researchers, for good reason.

The current project, *Spoils of the Park* (named after a pamphlet Olmsted published in 1882, lamenting what had become of his Central Park), began when I wondered, what would happen if we read Frederick Law Olmsted as we might read one of the great American poets? Olmsted's art has been overgrown by its successes: many of his closest readers do not even realize that his parks were made, nor have they ever heard of Olmsted. In Olmsted's own words, "This may seem a contradiction in terms. It is not. When an artist puts a stick in the ground, and nature in time makes it a tree, art and nature are not to be seen apart in the result." Olmsted's own writings are too focused on the practical to be classed as literature or art; many of his words and actions paint him as a reformer, concerned with public health in an age of hygiene. (Olmsted headed the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War.) Yet Olmsted clearly saw himself as an artist.

Olmsted's parks aim chiefly to affect, beyond the body or the faculty of reason, the imagination: "A great object of all that is done in a park, of all the art of a park, is to influence the mind of men through their imagination." Olmsted saw his parks as settings for "unconscious or indirect recreation." In his designs, he sought an effect on the human organism by "an action of what [the park] presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words." Olmsted frequently resorted to musical metaphors when describing the effects of his park designs.

Like the poet, the artist or the composer, the park-maker works with materials of the unconscious, and in particular with what we now might call the environmental unconscious (ecocritic Lawrence Buell coined this phrase). In an essay on trees, Olmsted compares a wild flower on a grassy bank to an imported flower blooming under glass in an enameled vase: "the former, while we have passed it by without stopping, and while it has not interrupted our conversation or called for remark, may possibly . . . have had a more soothing and refreshing sanitary influence." What touches our senses peripherally most affects our health.

The popularity of Olmsted with the urban planners and their social engineering fantasies took a hit in the 1970s. We now live in a time when the eccentricities of Olmsted's vision can better be appreciated, its successes balanced with its failures, and when a broader view can be taken of the variety of factors contributing differently in the specific case of each park—much as Olmsted himself might have approached his works, more than a century after his

death. We also live in a time when the spatial productions of democracy, i.e. public spaces, are fast eroding. Olmsted's nuanced, "impractical" yet wholly pragmatic approach to the complex politics and economics of public space during a Gilded Age may be more relevant than ever.

Much as archives lie in the dark or only come to light through the specialized discussions of researchers (still dark to the public at large), whole greenswards and entangled banks of our urban environments lie just beyond the field of public attention. As Olmsted's principles make clear, in the case of his parks this is partly by design: the therapeutic agency of his parks works most precisely through indirection, unconsciously. In his manifesto, *Investigative Poetry*, poet Ed Sanders urges poet researchers to "leave well-defined gaps in the text or in the presentation equal to the circumstances concerning which they have no knowledge: that is, their AREAS OF DARKNESS." While we have at least four biographies, several book-length studies, and a score or more of coffee table volumes illuminating the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, it turns out that poetry may have work of its own to do, in the greenswards and entangled banks.

If the poem is itself an archive, then its legibility may constitute an anti-archive, or "anarchive," of suppressed or marginalized histories. Poetry begins to generate its own unearthly light precisely when, as Sanders notes, it dives into areas of darkness. Poems (and I consider Robert Smithson's great essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," to be a kind of poem) seem especially suited to sounding and communicating the effects and contradictory vectors of Olmsted's compositions. Only the poet, furthermore (and I consider a scholar such as Walter Benjamin, attuned to the semiotic and surreal surfaces of human cities, to be a kind of poet), grants him or herself permission to bust out the archive in public places, and to detonate public concerns within the linear orders of the library. It is the poet, who is "always on," who remains uncontained enough to attempt wholly impractical acts of reading.

Olmsted's vision, his history, and the history of which he was a part, are vast, complex and ramifying in cellular and indirect fashion, like his parks. Poetry as a mnemonic device, and as a kind of oral record, might help to affix and circulate some of this history, to make it a more active part of the common discourse. I recognize the contradiction in suggesting that we lay bare the device that functions best through camouflage; but the critical ecological pressures of our times call for a more deliberate approach to our environments, to those environments supposedly in a "state of nature" as well as to the environments clearly bequeathed to us by the designs of artists. Poetry also can retain an echo of, and deploy within its own sonorities, the non-linear juxtapositions embodying gaps, the breaks where the poem's charge sparks.

The poetic form of this research project is evolving. I have written and spoken elsewhere of the lyrical impulse at the heart of research, especially in the context of natural history research around the intersections of poetry and bird

song. With Olmsted, where the materials are more patently historical, I have found the lyric line somewhat intractable. Information, especially of dates and places, of acts and speeches, gets unwieldy around the line break. Or it may be that the expansiveness of Olmsted's designs calls for a more expansive rhythm, a response at the level of phrase and sentence rather than syllable and word. Much of the project is first drafted as prose and documented through photography and field recording. These layers of the project are accessible at my blog: <http://olmstedsparks.wordpress.com>

Poems emerging from this prose currently settle into kind of regular, isometric stanza-like boxcar windows on Olmsted's prospects. I have taken some inspiration from the movement of minimalism in land-based contemporary art, literature and landscape design, where geometric forms are considered more effective (than "squiggly lumps and bumps") in focusing attention on natural scenes. There may be one other explanation.

Much of the travel for the field work conducted for this project occurred by rail—another underfunded public resource. I wanted to see the landscapes much as Olmsted might have, as he traveled tirelessly from site to site (during his work on the Biltmore grounds, Olmsted even had the use of Vanderbilt's private rail car). I have aimed to keep track of the class tension, the global effects of the rail industry and the mobility of capital that funded and built these parks.

What does it mean to claim a "poetics" from Olmsted's designs? To oppose a set of facile analogies—rectilinear, orderly, industrial, urban as prosaic; curving, random, green, rural as poetic? To locate, against the stop signs of the city, a landscape without punctuation marks? Investigative poetry troubles the binaries, such as work vs. leisure, and the associated logic of capital that obviously undergirds so much of Olmsted's project. Yet what one finds, in doing the research, is that Olmsted himself has already troubled the distinctions.

Further reading

Gary Snyder discusses what he calls "Nature's Writing" in the essay "Tawny Grammar," *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco, 1990). There are many books written at the nexus of walking and writing; two valuable studies are Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton, 1991) and Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman, OK, 1989). On "site" and "non-site," see Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (n.d.) and "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in *The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), which volume also contains the key 1973 essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." Many of Frederick Law Olmsted's writings first appeared as self-published pamphlets, such as *Spoils of the Park: with a few leaves from the deep-laden note-books of "a wholly unpractical man"* (Detroit, 1882), or as documents produced by agencies

like the Boston Parks Department, which published *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters* (Boston, 1886). This latter essay includes the comment on parks working like music; thanks to Mark Swartz, U.S. Park Ranger for the Olmsted National Historical Site, for drawing my attention to this passage. The essay "Trees in Streets and in Parks" was published in *The Sanitarian* X, No. 114 (September, 1882). The other Olmsted quotations in my statement can be found in *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes*, ed. S.B. Sutton (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). For the "environmental unconscious," see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). Jane Jacob's sociological critique of the Olmsted approach to park design helped tarnish the legacy of his parks during the 1960s and 70s: see *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961), especially the chapters "The uses of neighborhood parks" and "The curse of border vacuums." Ed Sanders wrote the definitive manifesto for poetic research, from an activist standpoint, published as *Investigative Poetry* (San Francisco, 1976); there have been subsequent versions and refinements, such as "Creativity and the Fully Developed Bard," in *Disembodied poetics: annals of the Jack Kerouac School*, ed. Ann Waldman and Andrew Schelling (Albuquerque, NM: 1995). For the therapeutic agency of parks, see Olmsted's publication, *Mount Royal, Montreal* (New York, 1881), where he calls "charming natural scenery" a "prophylactic and therapeutic agent of vital value." A more thorough discussion of Olmsted's park psychology can be found on my blog, www.olmstedsparks.wordpress.com (Day 3, Part iii). Also see Robert Hewitt, "The Influence of Somatic and Psychiatric Medical Theory on the Design of Nineteenth Century American Cities" (University Park, PA, 2003). On poetry as "anarchive," see Stephen Collis, *Anarchive* (Vancouver, 2005). Both for its attention to the semiotics of the city (including parks and gardens) and for its practice of citational montage, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (trans. Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, Mass., 1999) has been inspirational to my own practice of poetic research. While Eric Havelock has written eloquently on poetry as oral record and mnemonic device, in *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: 1988), Susan Howe has taught me more than anyone about the critical vitality gaps and breaks bring to poetic history; see, for instance, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH, 1993). On the role of minimalism in land-based contemporary art and landscape design, see Peter Reed, *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (New York, 2005), where Reed cites landscape architect Martha Schwartz, on the "humanism" of geometry in landscape compared to "the disorientation caused by the incessant lumps, bumps and squiggles of a stylized naturalism." Too little has been written on the economics of the Olmsted Firm parks (not to speak of urban ecology, more generally). Two exceptions are "Place-based urban ecology: A century of park planning in Seattle," by Sarah Dooling, Gregory Simon and Ken Yocom (*Urban Ecosystems* 9, 2006) and *Eden by Design: the 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew plan for the Los Angeles region*, by Greg Hise and William Francis Deverell (Berkeley, 2000). The best critique of the prosaic urban/ poetic rural dyad, from a Marxist standpoint, is Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*, especially

the chapter "Pleasing Prospects" (New York, 1973).