Excerpt from "Sites of Writing: From Frederick Law Olmsted to Robert Smithson," the second chapter of *Ecopoetics: Outsider Poetries of the Twentieth Century*, a dissertation completed for the SUNY Buffalo English Department (2005), by Jonathan Skinner.

In this chapter, I look at the question of the *where* of writing, in particular at possible relations between writing, as practice, and the practices of walking, landscape architecture and sculpture, in the context of urban open spaces. The chapter is framed by a discussion of Frederick Law Olmsted's Buffalo parks and their role in my own writing, with an account of the walks during which I meditated the dissertation. I discuss William Carlos Williams's pastoral excursion in the "Sunday in the Park" section of *Paterson*, and what I call (after critic Roger Gilbert and theorist Michel de Certeau) Williams's documentary method of composition.

Where this excerpt begins, I am discussing that method: I turn to some further ideas on walking by Jeffrey C. Robinson, and then to Charles Olson's on-foot writings, in particular to a poem from his epic *The Maximus Poems*, OCEANIA, written on check stubs during the night of 5-6 June, 1966. (I am fascinated by the fact that Olson did not seem to use a desk, in his last years, and did a lot of writing on the move.)

Considerations of Olson's stance as a walking writer ("I come from the last walking period of man," he writes, late in Volume III of *The Maximus Poems*) lead me to look at another break from typewriter-based "projectivism," in the instance of Olson's handwriting. In particular, I consider the "difficult texts" from *Butterick's Editing the Maximus Poems*, the handwritten poem beginning "I have been an ability—a machine . . ." that ends in the nautilus tail of "What is the heart, turning . . . ," and the spiraling "My beloved Father . . . ," as well as the curling rose of "Migration in fact . . ." (Only the latter is reproduced as handwriting in *The Maximus Poems*.) Olson's spirals lead me to Robert Smithson's spirals (of the mirror installations and the *Spiral Jetty*) and, finally, to a consideration of other makers who have taken writing off the page and into the landscape.

The excerpt ends there. The chapter continues with a more in-depth study of Robert Smithson and Frederick Law Olmsted, in the context of the history and theory of walking (including Michel de Certeau's situationist "everyday practice") as well as of my own documented walks in the Tifft Farm nature preserve, Buffalo's "Dogtown." I am happy to forward a complete copy of the chapter, if there is interest.

8 November, 2005
For Olson Now

them.[14] This documentary method of composition would, of course, be taken up by "postmodern" poets such as Charles Olson, Paul Metcalf and Susan Howe. It is also the method of this chapter, whose composition is geared to the spaces of Buffalo (where it was written) rather than to an overriding "theory." What is notable about *Paterson*'s "Sunday in the Park" is its coherence around "Walking —" (a motif, word plus dash, punctuating the section at least seven times), which is what, of course, one does in a park—being a good compromise between the "exertive" and "receptive" modes of recreation Olmsted envisaged for his spaces (with a decided bias toward the latter). Gilbert points out that the "walk poem must walk a fine line between journalism and poetry" (32). Williams evidently (with his juxtapositions of verse and newspaper description) has literalized such a balancing act; this chapter also walks a line (perhaps not so fine) between journalism and criticism.

In his book, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image*, Jeffrey C. Robinson notes that, "When I walk, my mind does not flow like a stream. More literary than that, it works in mixed genres: at times autobiography, polemic, natural description, dialogue, essay, even treatise, story. Sometimes it seems a genre that keeps resisting genre" (5). What seem to combine in the pleasure of walking are, paradoxically, the desire to be free and to be interrupted. As Robinson puts it, "The walk is an occasion of limited vulnerability. I offer myself to unpredictable occurrences and impingements. . . . the walk implies a mixture of an alternation of committed responses and disinterested reflection. . . . The walker observes things from a distance, and if the power of the object is in some way too

[14] We would call it a "theater of memory," if it were not for Williams's emphasis on *active*, rather than recollective, imagination—more like a cartography of images. Furthermore, the secret struggle of the section is the failure of Paterson to take the world, as it were, in a "missionary position"—as "a world/ (to me) at rest." Rather, Paterson—a place, after all, as much as a person—continually fails in the effort to "subject" a world supposedly distinct from one's self/place. The poem is partly about this continual lapse into connectedness and vulnerability, into, one might say, a certain objectivity—hence the syntactical ambiguity of "subject" in "subject to my incursions," subjected but also subjecting. The struggle is also part of Williams's ongoing quest for nativist authority as an American poet.

compelling, he by definition detaches himself from it by walking on" (4). The implication is that we think differently when we walk. The interest is to find out how we *write* when we walk.

> [Charles Olson] wrote on everything, whatever was at hand, including restaurant placemats, discount coupons from supermarkets, paper towels the nurse brought as he lay dying in the hospital, just as he wrote in his books, on his maps and Tarot cards, on the window frames and wainscoting of his apartment in Gloucester, on the walls beyond blackboards in the classrooms where he taught, and even inscribed money as souvenirs. Some of the [*Maximus Poems*] were written on check stubs and recopied, on blank checkbooks or envelopes torn open and spread flat, or on a card from a deaf mute portraying the hand alphabet of the deaf . . . In another case, a partially opened letter lay, presumably, at hand on the kitchen or bedside table. He began a poem on the back of the envelope and continued on to the back of the protruding letter, in which position it was found preserved among the papers, like a figure from Pompeii.
> (George Butterick, Introduction to *A Guide to the Maximus Poems* l-li)

Fielding Dawson adds: "I recall no desk where he wrote, and I have a nagging thread that says he wrote at the little table in the kitchen" (Bollobas 60).

Charles Olson roamed the archive substrate, the "strange attractor"[15] of his poetry configuring materials to make them legible (brought into light), alive, "of use" (in collaborator Robert Creeley's phrase)—at once drawing on and enriching the potential of this material just as the farmer cultivates good soil. (An image from Thoreau,[16] the "composting" metaphor has been extensively deployed by Jed Rasula to articulate what he

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[15] I am alluding, here, both to mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot's "attractors"—competing centers of influence on the plane of a mapped (iterated) nonlinear equation, determining the self-similar boundaries of fractal structure (hence "strange attractors")—and to Ezra Pound's oft-repeated neoplatonic image of "rose in the steel dust . . . so ordered the dark petals of iron" (Peitgen and Richter 8; Pound 27).

[16] "When I looked into *Purchas's Pilgrims*, it affected me like looking into an impassable swamp, ten feet deep with sphagnum, where the monarchs of the forest, covered with mosses and stretched along the ground, were making haste to become peat. Those old books suggested a certain fertility, an Ohio soil, as if they were making a humus for new literatures to spring in. . . . Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils" (Thoreau, *Journal*, March 16, 1852).

calls the "composting tradition" in American poetry, from Dickinson and Whitman to Howe and Mackey: "The Romantic phase of English poetry is separated from that later branch we know as American by nothing less than the recovery of half the total span of the Western literary record. . . . American poetry is the first full opening of a field of archaic, scattered, incomplete, and scarcely surmised literacies from that compost library unearthed in the nineteenth century" [*This Compost* 13-14].) But Olson also roamed his home town. Though his *Maximus Poems* begin with the archive, the town record, eventually this gives way to the "deeper" muthological record, forcing the poem back (and up or out). Almost as if the boulders of Dogtown (an uncultivated section of Gloucester strewn with glacial deposits, that would become the mythopoetic backwater of *The Maximus Poems*) exert a geomagnetic force that affects the "iron filings" of the poet's language. Just as the tide under the bridge of the OCEANIA poem (*The Maximus Poems: Volume Three*)—written by lamplight on blank checks[17]—seems to govern the movement of that section.

> And the tide
> came to a stop
> while I wrote up to the last line over
> on the bridge
> abutment (actually
> swinging
> gate of
> bascule
>
> And as I write these
> lines & have only stopped to watch
> the police
> cruiser

[17] The editor's note reads, "Originally written the night and early morning of 5-6 June 1966 in a pocket checkbook, over and on the backs of unused checks, and then copied by the poet, with an effort to regain the original order of writing, in a small notepad" (Butterick 677).

check me out writing
in the lamp's light now
on the Cut side of
the bridge & lit a cigarette the

tide's now going
back to ocean—

(*The Maximus Poems* 538-539)

Much of this poem, titled after "the Child/ of the Moment of the Mind/ and Thought" (538), is a transcription of Olson's pacings around the Gloucester harbor in the early hours of a sultry summer night—not visually, as in the panoptic (seagull's view) mapping of the "Meeting House Plain" area of Gloucester in "Letter, May 2, 1959" (of the first volume of *The Maximus Poems* 150), with a string of o's approximating an "old stonewall," or as in the numeric map of the soundings of Gloucester harbor that ends that poem—but *periodically*, with a kind of provisional tentativeness, extending itself, as Larry Eigner would say, "like a walk":

> Coming to weights, and feeling them. . . . You can't want or try too much to continue either, but better be willing enough to stop anytime, although, say, you'd like to live forever. In this way a poem will extend itself, naturally, quietly, and be like taking a walk, light, in the earth.
>
> ("Be minimal then . . ." *areas/lights/heights* 8).

The rhythm of Olson's poem is one of stopping, seemingly drawing the poem to a close, then picking up again to extend itself a bit further: the writing seems ready to stop at the bottom of the first page, with a place and time stamp, "Ipswich/ Bay under Cut Bridge/ Sunday June 5/ 1966," which as the poet notes in the next stanza coincides with the stopping of the tide: "And the tide/ came to a stop/ while I wrote up to the last line" (539). The going out of the tide, however, apparently inspires another rush of several stanzas (mostly mundane notings of time, place and weather) that end with a dedication,

"for/ Robert Hogg, Dan Rice and/ Jeremy Prynne." Then again, with the slowing of the tide and the dying of the wind, the "smell/ of summer night/ and new moan [*sic*]/ hay," along with the appearance of a quarter moon, possess the poet who finds himself, once again, writing at the light under the bridge. Twice more, he writes "& I go off/ a last time/ to leave/ the bridge . . . & I go off/ a last time/ to leave this gate" until he is, finally, caught by the dawn:

> chop now
>   suddenly
> the warp of ocean's own
> swell clangs
> in the water before my eyes as dawn's here & the 1st sputtering
>
> of the gulls tells
> that day is coming (542)

Still the poet lingers to watch the "gill-netters" going out and ends up finally at the "head/ of Harbor Cove" drinking a root beer while "several cars/ of fishermen . . . turn down the Fort . . . to go aboard & go out/ to// sea" (538-544).

The shape of the poem's stanzas (it is one of the skinnier of *The Maximus Poems*—barring the one long line quoted above) clearly traces rectangular, checkbook-sized blocks of writing. The tidal frame of the poem makes irrelevant whether the sequencing and starts and stops have to do with the checks being jumbled out of order (as Butterick notes, in *Editing The Maximus Poems*, that apparently, judging from a comment in Olson's notebook, the poet spent three hours trying to reconstruct the poem) or with "projective" discontinuities. The poet has made himself available to "unpredictable occurrences and impingements" (Robinson), like the passing of the police cruiser (no doubt concerned, or just curious, to see what this large man is up to, scribbling on his checkbook under a lamplight at 1:30 in the morning—perhaps a familiar sight), interruptions the poet has

come out in search of. Or perhaps the compulsion to write has interrupted a night-time walk, given that the poet appears to be caught without his notebook. (Nor would the choice of *blank* checks be indifferent, except that the poet has made no comment on his materials within or around the published text.) The opening stanzas provide a clue to the undertow of this poem:

> I've seen it all go in other directions
> and heard a man say why not
> stop ocean's tides
> .   .   .
> no paleographic wind will record these divergent
> and solely diverse animadversions—some part also of emotions
> or consciousness. Actually the stirrings now of man faced
>   with a wall going
> up—man is now his own production he is
> omnivorous, the only trouble with his situation is he eats
> himself and since 1650 this
>   infestation
> of his own order has
> jumping to
> 2,700 million and
>   going to 6,200 on
>   January 1st 2000 is
>
> his—the People are now the science
> of the Past—his
> increment.
> .   .   .
>   He is only valuable
> to himself—ugh, a species
> acquiring
> distaste
> for itself. This tonight

> after a weekend is the burden
> and gives scum on the river carrying
> the tide . . . (538)

Butterick provides a source for the population figures in the poem, "from an article in an unidentified journal, a torn page of which, bearing Olson's underlinings and calculations, was found among the poet's papers from 1965-66" (Butterick, *A Guide* 677). The article notes the human population growth curve, rising exponentially from 5.3 million approximately 10,000 years ago to 86.5 million 6,000 years ago, and then increasing slowly over the next few millennia until about 1650 (pop. 545 million) when a "revolution in man's control over his environment set in." World human population nearly doubled in the next 150 years (to 906 million in 1800), and almost tripled again by 1950 (2.4 billion). The pre-1965 figures pointed (accurately, we now know) to 6.3 billion humans by the year 2000 (current ecologists call this growth rate the "J-curve"). Further calculations are made on the envelope of a letter from Jeremy Prynne postmarked 9 May 1966; it is possible that Prynne sent Olson the article (especially since Olson dedicates the poem to him, along with a Black Mountain painter and a former Buffalo student). The article notes "industrial methods of environmental exploitation and control" with which "it became possible to change the ecological balance once again in a most drastic fashion and to support a vastly increased world population" (677).

The pacings of this poem, then, are "stirrings" before an inexorable proposition. The misfortunes of the crew of The Essex or the Donner Party (episodes of cannibalism under duress that Olson had made key parts of early works, in *Call Me Ishmael* and the projected though unrealized poem, *West*) are now generalized on a global scale:

> Within three days these four men, calculating the miles they had to go, decided to draw two lots, one to choose who should die that the others might live, and one to choose who should kill him. The youngest, Owen Coffin, serving on his first

> voyage as a cabin boy to learn his family's trade, lost. It became the duty of Charles Ramsdale, also of Nantucket, to shoot him. He did, and he, the Captain and Brazilla Ray, Nantucket, ate him. (*Collected Prose* 12-13)

"Omnivorous" man is now a geological force—"why not/ stop ocean's tides"—and his "own production," but "he eats/ himself," in a situation where some will die "that the others might live" (though no longer quite so democratically). This is not a Malthusian necessity, as Olson sees it, so much as the depraved way of humans ("man devours man"), doubly unnatural when the old eat the young. (Ironically, the Essex Crew might have escaped eating one another if they had not avoided nearby Tahiti, but because they "dreaded cannibals" they steered, fatally, for a "civilized harbor" on the South American coast.) In Melville's time it was possible (just) to regard the Essex cannibals with interest, as "marked" men: "the most impressive man, tho' wholly unassuming, even humble, that I ever encountered" remarks Melville, on the surviving Captain Pollard (marginalia cited by Olson in the "Usufruct" section of *Call Me Ishmael* [33]). But now, with three strong words—"infestation," "ugh," and "scum"—Olson measures the nauseating predicament of (an insidiously less deliberate) globalized cannibalism. The "weight" this poem comes to, its "burden," then, is the "distaste" man will acquire for himself as a species. (In this poem, Olson plays the haunted Captain, taking on his burden and his rounds as—Pollard's career once he gave up whaling, noted by Melville—"a night-watchman.") Burden, of course, also means refrain, possibly even a dancer's refrain, one Olson works out on foot to the rhythm of the incoming and outgoing tides. The poem begins with the human hubris of "why not/ stop ocean's tides" and ends with men quietly going "out/ to// sea." Its verses enact the process of rubbing off the former thought—as the tide washes "scum" back out to sea—in the presence of diurnal, planet-sized rhythms, which reset the poet's clock, as it were, to the time of men who live by the tide. The movement of the

poet, walking back and forth, in and out of sync with the tides (along with the idiosyncratic writing surface—not unlike a palm-sized piece of papyrus) generate the poem's stanzaic friction. Several of the *Maximus Poems* written in this period (like the "path finding" of "AN ART CALLED GOTHONIC") stem similarly from the poet's walking—as Olson declared himself to be, finally, not so much postmodern as peripatetic: "I come from the last walking period of man" (*The Maximus Poems* 622).

This method gives us a different version of the "projective verse" that is all-too-often associated with the disenvironed image of a man sitting at a typewriter (as if body, breath, typewriter and paper were all that went into the making of a "projective" poem). While we celebrate this prosthetic model, we forget that Olson wrote much of his later verse by hand—including some of his most visual work, as in the "Rose of the World" poem (479), or the long sequence beginning "I have been an ability—a machine—" that contains the spiraling nautilus of "Obadiah Bruen" and the anthropomorphic "My beloved Father" poem, plus three pages of an abstract graphic energy that apparently exceeds transcription ([. . .] stands in for them in Butterick's edition of *The Maximus Poems;* see exhibit on the following page) (495-499).

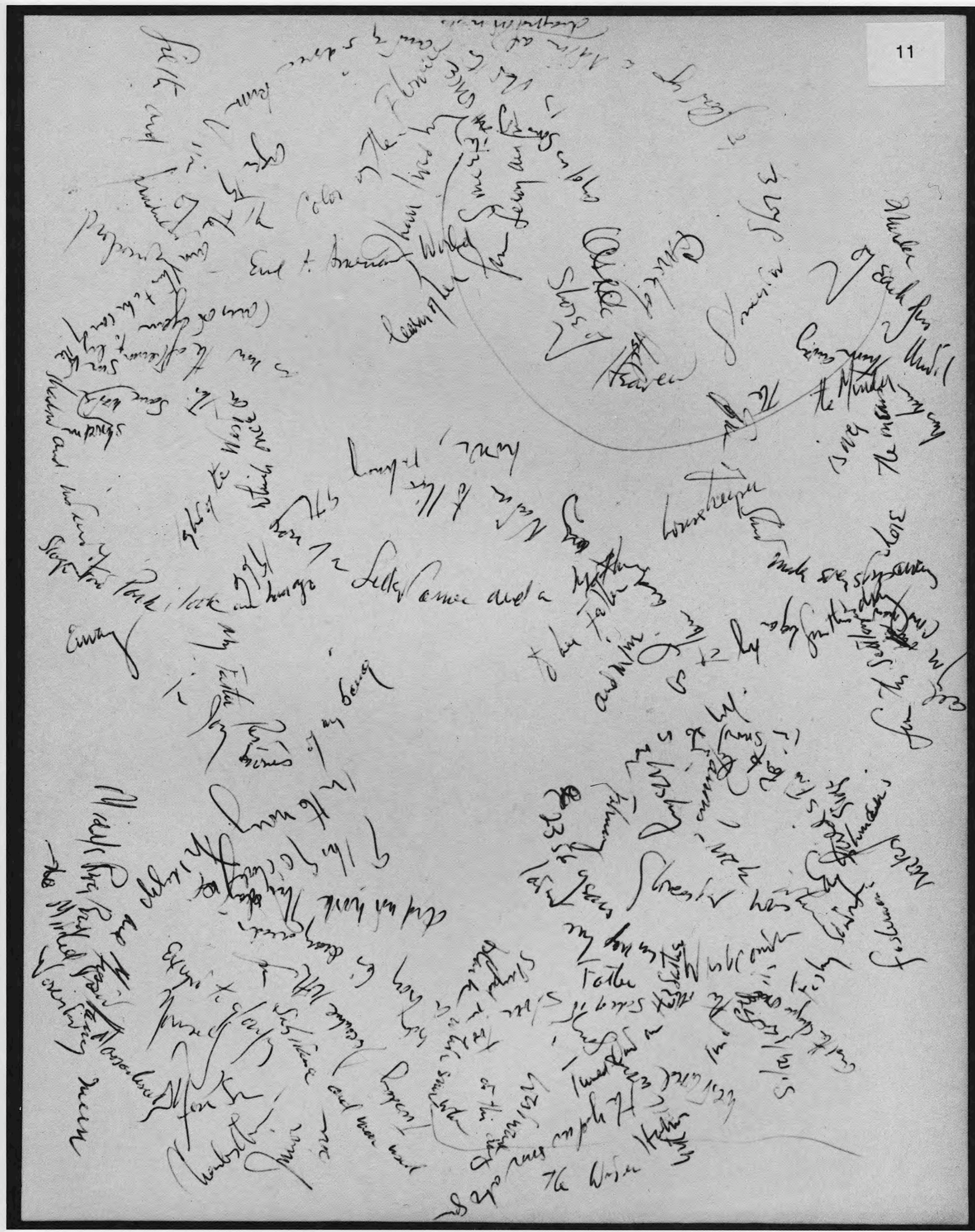

Fig 1.2, Charles Olson, "Difficult Manuscript 11" from George F. Butterick, *Editing The Maximus Poems* (Storrs: U of Connecticut Library, 1983).

At about the same time that Robert Smithson was busting out of the "pure walls and pure floors" of the art gallery, Charles Olson was taking writing off the page. Smithson held onto his "nonsites" and mirrors as methods of containment; similarly, Stephen Fredman has argued that Olson's "muthological" poetics—his talks and his various forms of prose—are a method of Emersonian containment or "grounding" Feldman sees as integral to American modernism.[18]

Fig. 1.3. Robert Smithson: *Eight-Part Piece* (Cayuga Salt Mine Project), 1969; *Chalk and Mirror Displacement*, 1969. James Cohan Gallery, NY <http://www.robertsmithson.com>

Both artists gravitate toward the spiral, circling—turning or *troping*—into centers of introverted containment: Smithson when he surrounds mirrors with piles of salt or chalk ("the container is amorphous, the mirror is the rigid thing. It's a variation on the theme of the dialectic of the site/ non-site" 169), Olson when he begins to write of migration ("the pursuit by animals, plants & men of a suitable . . . environment" in "Migration in fact") and, as Charles Stein describes it, "Through the physical movement of his hand over the page, [he] seeks a graphic center at which point the central image of

[18] "Modernism, as an esthetic movement, confronts the rupture of the modern by embracing its unsettling quality through formal innovation. The inventions of modernism work to destroy traditional contexts and to create new unities through purely formal means, such as the collage. Grounding, on the other hand, seeks to reinvent context, to dig down into the site of rupture in the hope of finding, not the old tradition or a new tradition, but the basis of tradition. Lacking the authority a long-standing tradition confers, American poets have had to invent alternative, provisional ways of grounding their poetry, thus assuming the work of tradition in the absence of a unified context" (*The Grounding of American Poetry* vii).

the poem reveals itself," Gertrude Stein's iterative rose folded over (*The Secret* 146): "if I twist West I curl into the tightest Rose . . ." (*Maximus Poems* 481).

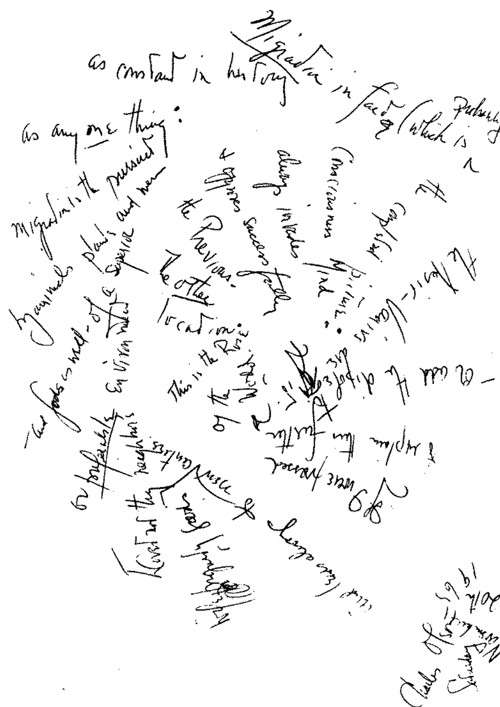

Fig. 1.4. Holographic copy of Charles Olson's "Migration in fact," printed in *The Maximus Poems*, Volume Three (*Maximus Poems* 479, 565).

Stability is tenuous here: as Smithson reflected on his Spiral Jetty, "The dizzying spiral yearns for the assurance of geometry. One wants to retreat into the cool rooms of reason" (*Writings* 113). ("Oh, for the happy days of pure walls and pure floors!" he exclaims at a particularly vertiginous moment of "Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan" [102].) Plenty of good thinking has been done about the relationships of a "body" to sound and to writing, conceived as marks on a neutral surface (from Olson's own essay "Projective Verse" on). But the "projective" or uncontained writing practices of migratory poets—in pursuit of suitable environments, too restless to sit still at a desk—have yet to meet with a criticism that has thought fully about the support, the surfaces and environments of writing.

Too often the neutral, static surface of the "page" is taken for granted, even in scholarship highly attuned to the materiality of the letter, rather than dealt with as a (possibly mobile) construction in its own right. While one effect of "book arts" is to emphasize and explore this constructedness, book arts also tend to reify the Western notion of a "book" that has framed literary art from Gutenberg to the advent of the digital text—obfuscating more culturally, technologically and environmentally nuanced understandings of the writing process. One approach to writing off the page hearkens back to an archaic gesture, comparing Olson's graffiti in his Gloucester house to Aurignacian cave painting (see Butterick's allusion to the writing "on the window frames and wainscoting of [Olson's] apartment in Gloucester" *A Guide* pp. l-li), just as Olson himself compares graffiti at Buchenwald to paintings at Altamira ("La Préface," *Collected Poems* 46). Jed Rasula "projects" Olson's verse back onto the leavings of the "compost library": "modern American poetry has been a resuscitation of reading into wreading, or nosing into the compost library" (*This Compost* 18). Gary Snyder associates human writing with marks left by other species ("The craft [of 'wild' writing] could be seen as the swoop of a hawk, the intricate galleries of burrowing and tunneling under the bark done by western pine bark beetles, the lurking at the bottom by a big old trout. . . ." in "Unnatural Writing," *A Place in Space* 170) or even with hydrological and geological markings: "The calligraphy of rivers winding back and forth over the land leaving layer upon layer of traces of previous riverbeds is text" (*The Practice of the Wild* 66).

But well within human history, there are multiple approaches to writing off the page, and outside the book, that critics could draw on: from Guruwari animal track designs to Nazca lines and Inca quipus, from pictographic Ojibwa birch bark incisions to Dakota buffalo-hide winter-counts, from Japanese theatrical makeup to Emily Dickinson's fascicles and writings on envelopes and scraps of paper, from Ian Hamilton Finlay's poetry garden,

Little Sparta (and the landscape tradition of monumental inscription it renews), to David Antin's sky writing poems or to a range of Situationist graffiti, from Hebrew night sky alphabets and Kunstwaffen's bovine text-works to Steve McCaffery's massive typewriter assemblage, "Carnival," and Jenny Holzer's theater marquee and electronic signboard aphorisms, from Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay's *The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France* to Allan Kaprow's word environments and Cecilia Vicuña's elemental "Precarios" (exterior as well as interior installations), from sound poetry in its various international manifestations (virtually a discipline in its own right) to writing in digital media.[19] Finally, manifold ephemeral printing projects of the 1970s (mail art, newspapers, broadsides, bumper stickers, fans and fly swatters), aimed at placing poetry, politically, provide situationist examples of poetry liberated from the book and often from the page (see Alastair Johnston's "Bibliography" of the maverick activist press, Zephyrus Image, which includes a good deal of the history of 1970s Bay Area small press culture). All of these examples offer formal possibilities for a writing whose relation to place is different from the topographical process of mapping.

Living in cities made me a walker: London, Paris, New York City. The first thing to do in the city is head out into the crowds. Having company or engagements can in fact be a hindrance, constraining the possibilities of the open street. In cities you walk to

[19] See *A Book of the Book*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay—in particular the contributions by Susan Howe, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart: Emily Dickinson and the Illogic of Sumptuary Values"; by Nancy Munn, "Guruwari Designs"; by Marjorie Perloff, "from *The Futurist Moment*"; by Cecilia Vicuña, "Libro Desierto/ Desert Book"; by Jacques Gafferel, "Celestial Alphabet Event"; by Roland Barthes, "The Written Face"; by Allan Kaprow, "Words: An Environment"; by Alec Finlay, "Afterword to *Little Sparta*"; by Charles Bernstein, "The Art of Immemorability"; and, especially, the essay by Thomas A. Vogler, "When A Book Is Not A Book." For more on indigenous pictographic writing practices, see Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania;* and Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes.* For more on Emily Dickinson, Cecilia Vicuña and Ian Hamilton Finlay, see Marta Werner, *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*; M. Catherine de Zegher, ed., *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña*; and Alec Finlay, ed., *Wood Notes Wild: Essays on the Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay.* For more on sound poetry, see Adalaide Morris, ed., *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*; and Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word.* For more on digital media, see Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, and Brian Kim Stefans, *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics.*