

Olson and Subjectivity: “Projective Verse and The Uncertainties of Sex
Donald Wellman

I begin under the mantel of my personal psychology, intellectually inured to the distracting wash of visual excitation that is typical of postmodern culture, but pulled insensibly by the demands of an economic system that produces stress without yielding satisfaction. I am a desiring machine, sometimes buoyed by a throaty weave in the middle registers, then spurred by the intimation of soprano flights over harmonic base tremolo, vocal flights that my own physical apparatus is unable to produce: krk krk krk. “Enyalion of / brown earth,” Charles Olson writes, “Strod the yellow earth / with a long dry harsh call / krk krk krk (*Maximus* 610). And on the recto of this page, “Strod the water’s edge & the / land as though there were some reason to / do such a thing” (609)—that is as George Butterick ordered the text of *The Maximus Poems* on the evidence of dated scraps of paper (Olson himself may have chosen to frame the matter differently). Just prior to Enyalion’s cries, is the following, more physical and less metaphysical passage:

O

& wobbly again from
etc and
solid pure hunger

Charles Olson alone
still Saturday-Sunday night
June 1969 (Maximus 618)

“O” – a pun on identity, sharp cry and hollow note, an urgency at the center of being with which I identify poetically. I hope now to have placed myself exactly for you in response to a question raised by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, when she asked, with respect to Olson’s

Gloucester in his last years, is a record of immediate observations,² often too, as it always had been, it is a gloss (written so as to discover and learn from moments of felt individuation), framing his observations with words and phrases, as if to excavate by paring away a meaning not yet resolved.³

To read Olson, it is crucial to grasp the difference between the moment of perception and the moment enacted in language. And that difference becomes more palpable at the end of his life. “Nasturtium / is still my flower but I am a poet /who now more thinks than writes, my / nose-gay” (*Maximus* 632). The locus of satisfaction is not in the poem, but elsewhere. Or to put it differently, the satisfaction in the poem (or the language) is not constitutive of a person, but is itself, itself, and therefore has to take the form of an incomplete registration. It is here with respect to the emergence of subjectivity that Olson’s stance differs most importantly from that of writers who have learned from his example. Previously I have addressed this distinction when discussing the work of Nathaniel Mackey. I now turn to some remarks by Lyn Hejinian, “It is on the neurotic boundary, between art and reality, between construction and experience, that the person (or my person) in writing exists”(170). For Olson one side of this boundary is marked by contingencies, the other is the space that he seeks to frame (or block out). Limits then are felt from this side of the real,⁴ rather than constituting it, as is the case with Hejinian.

Olson’s letters to Frances Boldereff form a necessary companion to reading the laws that he attempted to put forth in “Projective Verse,” especially those that describe “a stance toward reality,” one of his two aims in the essay. In this second sense, the

² “And the tide / came to a stop / while I wrote up to the last line over / on the bridge / abutment ...” (*Maximus* 539).

³ Here our example is a juxtaposition of “up” and “down” fragments gathered by Butterick on the basis of dates and therefore in a sense outside the poem.

“projective” is primarily a matter of the breath that enacts perceptions so as to sustain an emotion that is itself primary with respect to the forms that emerge on the page. His projective psychology claims to situate itself at a remove from the usual constructions of self-centeredness. “Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the subject,” Olson writes in “Projective Verse” (24). That there is completion or satisfaction in such momentary illuminations, he would insist, in 1950 (from another letter to Boldereff), an end to “confusion”:

And it would be my impression today, that all the daily agonies & hells we know, despite the gaining of power, is that, to hold the Single is only allowed us in moments ... (512)

It seems to me self-evident that he became addicted to such daily agonies as the enabling condition for individuation. Thus he pushed others away from himself (Connie, Frances, Bette, his children) and seemed always to communicate best at a distance (through letters to others like these to Boldereff or those to Creeley in the same years), at a distance from others and at a distance from himself:

— & that,
therefore, we must grant our confusion as much as ourselves as our ambience, & yet, by that granting, not for one second, not push, contrive, will, believe to move *toward* the SINGLE, just as, knowing that the Double is confusion, it is also the structure by which the end of confusion, the momentary end—as in your arms—becomes possible. (513)

And it is frightening how much he did push others away from his arms so as to remain in this self-sorry condition (which he seems to understand as an enabling openness).

With physical satisfaction, desire stops its welling turmoil and rests at a distance, but all who have been at that *sub rosa* distance, know about its surprising reflux, newly entwining lack with fullness. Again in the Boldereff material, a letter of his dated May

⁴ “Limits / are what any of us / are inside of” (*Maximus* 21).

25, 1950 ends, “Will you cover yourself with this verse?” and her answer of May 29 includes the sentence, “Damned sight less painful to have some god strew chopped hunks of one’s flesh than sitting at some damned typewriter and strewing one’s own flesh all over the place eh! Olson?!” (354). No doubt the poetics of “Projective Verse” owe much both to her bluntness and to her mysticism. Her letters to him frame and engender his anxieties: “& you think air mail correspondence is the only issue!” he comes back to her,

when, you dumb dame (even you!) a man is being born, right in front of all our eyes, a male child!”(361). He comes at her this way because he wants her ear to his struggle, “aw, i give up. shit. stamina, stamina, that’s what ain’t, not intelligence The trouble with the whole damn business, it’s a schitz proposition –and proceeds from dividing the life up between now, and the hereafter which just ain’t. the magic the immortality, (which, as i say, you and i proved before we ever felt a bed under us) is HERE, HERE, where time is ...” (361)

Of all women, Frances Boldereff best understood his calling (in the sense of a priestly vocation), *Call me Ishmael*, and how it justified torment. Still the charge of narcissism seems to me to be the fundamental case laid at his door by both Boldereff and DuPlessis. Out of deepest insecurities both concerning his manhood and posture in the world, he framed the doctrine of “lyrical interference” so as to pursue by avoidance his own satisfaction. Still, mindful of his bluster, the “satisfaction” which DuPlessis demands might not sound so uncompromising.

Still, with respect to poetics, “satisfaction” has a ring of closure to it, suggests some level of formal perfection. With reference to the body, it mirrors release as the object of love-making, “orgasm,” another word that begins with “o.” DuPlessis’s reading of the ways in which a male-gendered poetics has colonized the female body throughout the history of modernist poetics cannot be contested. “Satisfaction,” in her usage, may also be understood as a logical requirement rooted in objectivist poetics. Only to sharpen

a difference with Olson, I will paraphrase Louis Zukofsky: the poem in its composition of particulars satisfies or achieves a perfection or a rest, marked by a relation of form among its parts (“An Objective,” 1930—31). Olson’s “objectism is far more pronouncedly “kinetic” than Zukofsky’s objectivism; but like Zukofsky’s, his doctrine also claims to construct an abstract form that is determinative of a sympathy between, on the one hand, the energy that the poet has invested in making or realizing a form that is true to the objective contents of the poem and, on the other hand, the energy that the reader of the poem is able to feel.⁵

It is this last condition (the transfer of feeling or energy) that his body of work does not satisfy and not because of its fragmentary nature. Running contrary to his aim, the primary emotion that his language evokes in many readers is exclusion or alienation. Sometimes this effect is due to the difficulties represented by his range of references. More disturbing is a form of exclusion endemic to his diction. DuPlessis, as many before her have done, points out that the all too usual strategy of presenting the female position without reference to the social facts of female experience now conditions many responses to modernist art and literature. How maddening then that in this *seminal* text, usually taken to be the most significant departure from modernist norms, poets are always called “boys!” DuPlessis’s illustrates how “Projective Verse” (the essay) creates male hegemony, effectively excluding women from the community of poets. Concerning male desire, as it is inscribed in his text, she writes, “the sexuality of the mother is the hidden terror for any baby narrating Oedipus” (41). And Olson’s language as he lays down the

⁵ This understanding of abstract form seems a reflection that can be traced back to Ezra Pound and Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky’s notion of internal necessity calls for the work to arouse “a similar emotion in the observer” to that which inspired the artist (23). In “Projective Verse,”

laws of syllable and line, using a figure of incest between mother and son to engender these twins, seems to justify her criticisms.

Traces of a colonization of the female position are evident on many pages of *Maximus*, but sex also remains uncertain throughout the poem. For instance, he begins the poem by describing the boat cradled in the arms of Our Lady of Good Voyages, in this way: “the underpart is, though stemmed, uncertain / is, as sex is, as moneys are, facts!” (*Maximus* 6). What I think DuPlessis fails to consider is the degree to which Olson effectively is “able to slide between genders” (her paraphrase of Helene Cixous 47) and participate in an anti-masculinist poetry, “undoing masculinity in and of poetry” (49). And I think she does this because of her antipathy for the psychological cost (to him and to others) of his struggle to create something in the way of an “open form” that is finally unstable and unresolved.

Olson’s conception of “open” also has sexual connotations that might violate a woman’s sense of her body. “Incompleteness” too is often gendered female, in the culture at large. Nonetheless, Olson seems to me to teeter on the edge of redefining “lack” in his grasp of the ways in which rational humanism has long estranged the soul from the body of desire. His recognitions and historical researches foreshadow our postmodern understanding of the way in which experience is mediated by constructions that are intrinsically alienating.⁶ His antidote to distraction, concentration on the rush of perceptions, moving INSTANTER on one another, ironically has become a shared reality

Olson states his point this way, “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . , by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader” (16).

⁶ “I take it that these two planks of the old humanism—the Individual and Society as you would hear it shouted from the soapboxes, wherever you still turn; this is the garbage you are asked to listen to. Neither of these two planks are anything but stereotypes and rigidities which, if you think of it, your experience

under postmodern conditions, further de-centering the subject by means of a wash of images that Jean Baudrillard has called pornographic.⁷ Take a deep breath here, citizen.

Still Olson grasped the difficulties of subjectivity and desire under such conditions.⁸ And by this I do not mean simply that he felt the deadness of the surface or the specific dullness of post WW II USA. The dead surface of the mind is a constant theme throughout the history of modern poetry. Instead the method that he chose, in order to preserve a space of difference, a *polis*, represented initially in *Maximus* by the Gloucester of his childhood, re-enacts his own childhood trauma, exacting with tremendous physical and emotional cost, the dismemberment of the body, as opposed to “the coming into manhood” that is the normal pattern of the male development.

In the reading that I am offering here, I have been following Slavoj Zizek’s elucidation of the Lacanian concept of separation. Zizek asserts that a “surplus of the Real over every symbolization ... functions as the object-cause of desire” (qtd Egginton 43). By this logic, to bring presence and lack into alignment is to experience trauma as the absent cause of history—so goes the master narrative of post-structuralist psychoanalytical theory, beginning with Freud’s discovery of *nachtraglichkeit*, passing via Lacan’s intensive re-reading of Freud into an understanding of *forclusion* (or the necessary internalization of separation)—all persuasively summarized by William Egginton in his article, “A Wrinkle in Historical Time,” published in *Substance*. Egginton describes the relation between history and trauma this way, “the recognition of the

contradicts every instant: you are at once individual and social and neither is crucial or interesting as, for example, that you *have* to have company, and, say, on the other hand, that you shall die” (SVH 37-38).

⁷ And significantly a condition Baudrillard treats as fact rather than a condition to be changed, reminding me of the Olson’s acceptance of quotidian confusions, as necessary background for his resolve to remain open to the “Single.” See quote from letter to Boldereff above.

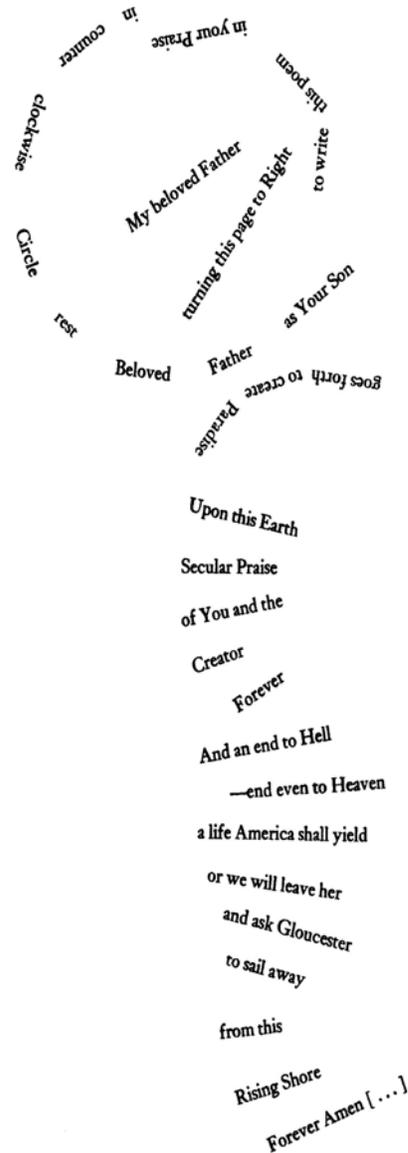
subjective role of the historical in the constitution of subjectivity, an understanding that the objective, symbolic past which we approach as our radical other, is at the same time the most subjective truth of our subjective being” (48). It seems to me that Olson was here first and that in this he anticipates much of the essentially anti-Freudian analysis of desire, going so far as to posit uncertainty of desire above the demand for phallic supremacy that was so essential to self-recognition of manhood, a culturally determined and reinforced process at the time of Olson’s youth (or Hemmingway’s for that matter). His insecurities fostered both brash language (overdetermined phallicisms) and self-destructive behavior.

An investigation of gendered, sexed and unsexed figures in *Maximus* reveals a phallic narcissism, super-posed upon what Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called a “body without organs.” Properties of desire juxtapose the projective to the “machinic” with respect to different articulations of fused images. “I have been an ability—a machine—up to / now” (*Maximus* 495), he writes in 1966, beginning to awaken emotionally with these lines to the fact of his second wife’s tragic death in an automobile accident little more than a year previous (Byrd 190). The fusion of figures on the immediately following pages of *Maximus* includes references to his father, his mother, his lost wife and himself. The line above continues:

An act of ‘history’ my own, and my father’s
together, a queer [Gloucester-sense] combination
of completing something both visionary—or illusions (projection? Literally
lantern-slide on the sheet, in the front-room Worcester,
on the wall, and the lantern always getting too hot
and I burning my fingers—& burning my
nerves (495).

⁸ “Colored pictures / of all things to eat: dirty / post cards / And words, words, words /all over everything” (*Maximus*17).

Although the word “queer” is exceptionally overdetermined, both by underlining and a phrase in brackets, the immediate concern of the surface of this page is how sons deal with their father’s influence. Olson cites his father as the source of a stance that set the child “so patently / against my mother that I have been like his stained shingle /ever since Or once or forever It doesn’t matter” (495). Four pages later, at the distance created by Bette’s traumatic death for which Olson blamed himself, he memorializes his love for his father by visualizing a cosmos in which the words, “My beloved Father” are inscribed on the head of a phallus penetrating the Rose of Heaven.



How it is that Olson admitted the love of men for men (“queer” –not in the “Gloucester sense” of the word), providing further examples of fused sexual presences, is another compelling subtexts of *Maximus*. His initial take on homosexuals like Duncan and Goodman,¹¹ when he first met them at Black Mountain College, was insecure and competitive. On the other hand, reliving the personal trauma of having lost, in ways for which he felt culpable, the companionship of his wife, as we have just seen, it is his memories of his father that sustain him. His performance in Berkeley, 1965, was in no small part a quest for admission by queer men, Duncan, Ginsberg, Spicer, Blazer, etc., as father of sons, who desiring acceptance over matched them in excess, for the institutional moment, carried with it the need for the father (to embarrass himself before his sons, to eschew the fatherly restraint, associated with middle class families, and to act out, as one of the boys in a giving birth to the new poetics. According to Tom Clark’s *Charles Olson: The Allegory of the Poet’s Life*, the following summer was marked by the same pattern of excess (330-332).

With respect to Olson’s desire to be identified as the father of a community of poets, a similar foundational act enters the pages of *Maximus III*, in the section “[to get the rituals straight I have / been a tireless Intichiuma eater and crawler of my own / ground ... even the Earth 7,500,000 off us / is my / gravel” (556). This is perhaps the most interesting evolution of the model of the *polis* in *Maximus*. According to Jane Harrison, Olson’s source, the Intichiuma is a male totem cult, concerned with the fertility of totem species like birds or grubs. Procreation of the totem species is ritualized as a cult

there appeared surprising signs of change. At twenty-four, he belatedly discovered masturbation, and ‘came through sexually’ with a woman for the first time.” (Clark 28; phrases in single quotes are from the Olson Notebooks at the University of Connecticut)

¹¹ See Clark 224, for instance.

activity of motherly men. In this section, Olson recalls a picnic where the 3 year old Ella, daughter of Panna Grady, gave him particular delight because of her enjoyment of his pushing her on a swing. His own daughter Katie seems to have been present. His thoughts here turn toward those poets who have meant most to him, with a special tribute to Allen Ginsberg and John Wieners. The gist is that the cult of womanly men, specifically those poets whose “mental level” permits “participation mystique” have “carved out of nature and God” (a reference to Puritan foundation myths) through their efforts in their poetry, “the / paths (Intichiuma / made known, Love made known MDCCCCLXVI (*Maximus* 557) –the institutional moment, inscribed here with Roman numerals, as on a monument. The Intichiuma is bisexed, like the Uroboros, phallic and procreating as the tail slithers down its mouth—as the earth (female) and her history, her progeny, the food stuff on which the totem cult sustains itself, is consumed ritually. The love he shares with motherly men inscribes the hope to make possible the fertility represented by the young women and female children identified in the poem. There also seems to be a Sufi model for the actions of mystical intelligence at work on these pages. If sometimes it seems he can only relate to women indirectly, this indirection was patently the case with men. Apparently only on his death bed could he accept Duncan’s embrace and relax and find a repose before death in his arms.

I want to make it clear with reference to my earlier comment on Butterick’s ordering of the poetic fragments, that near the end of his life as well as near the end of his text, there is no definitive, factual Olson, only unordered fragments. He effectively, almost by design, escapes his reader’s embrace. The record, as page folds back on and over itself, is a-temporal without a start, end or culmination. The figure registers visually

without a clear sense of next, but rich with potential for nexus. The most helpful clues to those who desire to engage him are figures of containment, most often gendered female and figures of production, most often gendered male. Those gendered female are also figures of admission (seeking admission, displaying, admitting—to trace connotations through a verbal arc as these figures double over on themselves). Those gendered male, include acts of penetration, inscription and witness, the later fusing the genders with a sense of his weakness and inadequacy as a participant, fusing admission in its female sense with confession. The desire to inscribe or penetrate the body that is female admits of a desire to be held that makes sex itself uncertain:

Gather a body to me
 like a bear. Take it on
 take it on my left leg and hold it off
 for love-making, man or woman
 boy or girl in the enormity
 of the enjoyment that it is
 flesh, that it is to be loved, that I
 desire it, that without it
 my whole body is a hoop
 empty and like steel
 to be iron to grasp
 someone else in myself
 like those arms which hold
 all the staves together
 and make a man, if now as cold and hot
 as a bear out of me.

The Telesphere, (*Maximus 576*)

Contrary to the notion that the sexuality of the mother is the source of male terror, it seems to me that Olson envisions her sexuality in the starkest terms. Poems from 1950, addressed to Frances Boldereff, “La Chute” and “The She Bear” celebrate maternal forms of sexuality. In “The Telesphere” the man giving birth to himself becomes a female bear, recalling the letter to Boldereff in which he marveled, “a man is being born,

right in front of all our eyes, a male child!”(361). Autopoesis (certainly not vanity)¹² is distinctive of both his narcissism and his writing projects. Early works like “Apollonius of Tyana” map a topology where the son, given outward direction by the mother, returns from his periplum to occupy the coital position of the father, forming a fused figure of uncertain sex. at the center of the projected cosmos. One might read this as the classic, narcissistic resolution of the Oedipal family romance, wish-fulfillment, suppressing trauma. In sharp contrast to the possibility of such a reading, the concluding pages of *The Maximus Poems*, map out a topology of sex, enabling the son to experience the mother’s body. The form of language here celebrates castration (dismemberment):

The Island, the River, the shore
 the Stage Heads, the land itself,
 isolated, encased on three sides by
 the sea and water
 on the fourth side, Eastern Point an arm
 such as Enyalion’s to protect
 the body from the onslaught of
 too much and give Gloucester
 occasion, give her Champlain’s channel
 in & out (as her river
 refluxes), a body of land, hard on granite yet
 arched by such skies favoured by such seas and
 sweetened in the air so briar-roses grow
 right on her rock and at Brace’s Cove kelp
 redolents the air, jumps the condition and strain locus¹³
 falls or emerges as the rain on her or the sun
 [Saturday May 24th
 . LXIX (Maximus III. 209)

This is a visceral projection the mother’s body that “sweetened the air ... kelp redolents the air.” Customarily, as here, land is gendered female; the river here is inseminating,

¹² Slavoj Zizek writes, “the subject is an effect that entirely posits its own cause” (37). In this paper I use both “autopoesis” and “emergent subjectivity” as reflects of this effect.

¹³ “A Strain is a complex integration of simpler feelings” (Whitehead 439) and to Olson’s understanding a “strain locus” is a set of lines--projectors--the future in a sense” as described by the non-Euclidian geometry that fascinated Olson. (cf Butterick 733).

masculine, “in & out”—but it is also a reflux, associated with feminine flow. To follow this further requires knowledge of Gloucester’s physical topology and “her” history. The Cutt, the bed of the Annisquam or Annie’s Quimm, is both male and female; for the Cutt, “on the fourth side” (that which makes Eastern Point into an island, is both the cite of castration (the wound) and the womb. It is the site of reflux of life and death, symbolically continuous with “Champlain’s channel.” A similar figure, standing astride the Cabot fault, “one foot on the Westward drifting continent” is one of the more memorable projections of Olson’s desire to weld his cosmos together.¹⁴

Some further conclusions: Enyalion, a composite figure associated with Mars and Tyr, disrobes himself, displaying his beauty to protect the mother, the land, apparently for what is to be the father’s pleasure, “the rain on her or the sun” (but note the pun on “s-o-n”). However, Enyalion, the son, not only shows his shining and beautiful body to protect the mother, but also gives his arm (you know the expression, “I’d give my right arm to ...), that is he tears it off and sprinkles his blood over the land (or maybe the wolf Fenris bit it off, or maybe the reference is to Cuchelin displaying his tumescence to the maidens—all of these references are parts of the Enyalion complex in *The Maximus Poems*). One projection, among the polymorphous variants, is unavoidable, the land, Eastern Point, in what might be described as a moebius move of the imagination is not only feminine, but also masculine, for it is itself the arm or the male member that has been detached at the Cutt. I am lead to ask is it only through castration that coitus occurs, only through loss that love is found. That at least seems to be the condition that Olson

¹⁴ Andrew Ross, in *The Failure of Modernism*, has written convincingly of “the economy of subjectivity in *The Maximus Poems*, citing Olson’s stated “desire to literally map out a bodily subjectivity across Gloucester’s topography.” In what I have just read, although I have emphasized the uncertainty of sex, I have largely followed him.

now celebrates, in this fused figure of mother and son.

In unsexing the son, by admitting and enacting castration trauma (and there are multiple instances of this in *Maximus*),¹⁵ Olson has dug deeper within the psyche than is usually the case when speaking of wish-fulfillment or male privilege. His emasculation has rendered him a womanly man, able to love, but at the distance that separates life from death. In a sense, he had to kill (himself?) first, in order to assert his manhood in this awkward, unsexed or bisexed form: “o kill kill kill kill kill / those / who advertize you / out). The “you” here being the bi-sexed form of a “satyr lesbos vase” emblematic of a time before the divisions that now divide us in our own house.

¹⁵ See for instance, “the Alligator / clapping at my balls // the Soul / rushing before (415).

WORKS CITED

- Butterick, George F. *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*. Berkeley: U Cal P, 1980.
- Clark, Tom. *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life*. NY: Norton, 1991.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Manifests" in *Diacritics*, Fall/Winter, 1996: 31-53.
- Egginton, William. "A Wrinkle in Historical Time." *Substance* 81(1996): 30-55
- Hejinian, Lyn. "The Poetics of Everyday Life." *The Person: Poetics Journal* 9 (1991): 166-170.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. New York, 1947.
- Maud, Ralph and Sharon Thesen, eds. *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence*. Wesleyan: University Press of New England (Hanover), 1999.
- Olson, Charles. *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Berkeley: U Cal P, 1997.
- Olson, Charles. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Robert Creeley. NY: New Directions, 1966.
- Olson, Charles. *The Maximus Poems*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Berkeley: U Cal P, 1983.
- Olson, Charles. *Special View of History*. Berkeley: Oyez, 1970.
- Ross, Andrew. *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry*. NY: Columbia, 1986
- Zizek, Slavoj. *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. London Verso, 1994.
- Zukofsky, Louis. *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*. Expanded edition. Berkeley: U Cal P. 1981.