

These two volumes are two excellent examples of recent scholarship on American poetry seeking to develop new perspectives on its modernist inheritance, social contexts, and hemispheric dimensions (see also McGurl 29; Patell; Burnett; Chaitas). Harris Feinsod, in his groundbreaking study of twentieth-century poetry, aims to redefine our understanding of modern ‘American’ poetry by introducing us to numerous poetic conversations between North and South America that shed new light not only on the poetry itself, but also on comparative Cultural History. Feinsod’s volume is a valuable contribution to the prestigious series on “Modernist Literature and Culture” published with Oxford University Press and edited by Kevin J. H. Dettmar and Mark Wollaeger. This series now includes over twenty volumes in the field of Modernist Studies, with a focus on interdisciplinary books that explore the cultural bearings of literary modernism across multiple geographies, symbolic forms, and media. This particular volume includes an introduction and six chronologically arranged chapters: “Hemispheric Solidarities: Wartime Poetry and the Limits of the Good Neighbor” (chapter one), “A Xenoglossary for the Americas” (chapter two), “The Ruins of Inter-Americanism” (chapter three), “The New Inter-American Poetry” (chapter four), “Questions of Anticommunism: Hemispheric Lyric in the 1960s” (chapter five), “Renga and Heteronymy: Cosmopolitan Poetics after 1967” (chapter six). Feinsod addresses the cosmopolitan, (anti-)imperialist and (anti-)communist dimensions of the poetic landscape in the Americas by focusing on figures that acted at the intersection of literature and politics. Notable examples are Cuban revolutionary José Julián Martí y Pérez (1853–95, who has been compared to Octavio Paz), Malcolm X (1925–65), and most prominently Pablo Neruda (1904–73; 40–41, 70–74, 230, 281, 83, 291, 403, 405). The main strength of the volume is Feinsod’s concise comparison of canonical and non-canonical poets from the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America who sought to write a transnational “poetry of the Americas,” which amounts to a remarkable feat of synthesis and has resulted in a model literary history. He innovates fields of Comparative Poetry and Hemispheric Literary History by surveying diverse fields, for instance, the poetics of diplomacy, the symbolic use of foreign words, Cold War social repression, the genre of the meditation on ruins, and cosmopolitan strategies of collaborative authorship. He uses archival sources on well-known poets such as William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Pablo Neruda, Elizabeth Bishop, and Julia de Burgos as a point of entry into the works of lesser known poets such as the Ecuadorian Jorge Carerra Andrade (1903–78) and the U.S. Americans Lysander Kemp (1920–92), Paul Blackburn (1926–71), and Margaret Randall (born 1936), thereby opening new horizons to his readers. He argues that the idea of a poetry of the Americas followed Martí’s “new and particular tension between an incipient poetry of the Americas and the inequities of the inter-American political system” (2) and subsequently motivated both Latin American and U.S.-American poets to counteract and subvert any attempts at establishing a robust cultural hemispherism. According to Feinsod, the poetry of the Americas coevolved with the modern inter-American political system.
Limits of space prevent me from analyzing each chapter in detail, though I may reflect briefly on his investigation of Charles Olson’s (1910-80) work in the third chapter, “The Ruins of Inter-Americanism.” Feinsod’s analysis follows Estuardo Nuñez and Guy Davenport and traces Neruda’s influence on Olson’s “The Kingfishers” (1949) by reading both Neruda’s and Olson’s work through the lens of “ruin poems” (158–59; see also Nuñez; Davenport). Feinsod offers a substantial contextualization and evaluation of Olson’s Mayan Letters, concluding that if “Ed Dorn once read Olson ‘from Gloucester out,’ Mayan Letters makes it possible to read from Campeche in,” a circumstance that, along with other texts, contributed to shifting Olson’s view of his own vocation from “poet, writer” to the enigmatic (and religiously charged in ways often overlooked) “archaeologist of morning” (160–61).

If there is one point on which this impressive study is strikingly silent, it is the significance of the Bible and religion for poetry, modernism, and politics, a fact that comes clearly to the fore in Feinsod’s readings of poems such as “The Kingfishers.” Of course, ‘ruins’ is a biblically charged term that recurs throughout the Bible with an especially strong prominence in the Old Testament and more particularly in the Prophets (English Standard Version Student Study Bible, Isa. 27.26 and 58.12, Jer. 2.15, 26.8, Mic. 3.12, Acts 15.16), a dimension significant for Olson’s poem and its biblical and prophetic tone. An exception to Feinsod’s silence is a passing reference to Kenneth Rexroth’s designation of Allen Ginsberg as a minor prophet (171) and the “Catholic cultural backgrounds” (194) of Lawrence Ferlinghetti (born in 1919) and Nicanor Parra (1914-2018). Feinsod’s focus on pre-Columbian ruins and what he, following Allen Ginsberg, repeatedly calls “spontaneous bop prosody” (146, 171) falls short of offering an in-depth analysis of this poem. Contributing to this imbalance is the disproportionate focus on Olson’s poetry, which may compel the reader to question the approach as a whole in terms of its value in interpreting single poems—one work that may be especially resistant to such reduction is Olson’s iconic poem “The Kingfishers,” which Feinsod calls his “key poem” (164).

Despite this critique, Feinsod’s careful contextualization of the anthropologist-poet Robert Barlow’s and Olson’s poetic approaches makes a significant contribution not only to Olson Studies, but also to Comparative Literature more generally. Particularly valuable is Feinsod’s perceptive engagement with the Nahuatl language and Aztec culture in his examination of the work of the lesser-known Robert Barlow, whose approach was an inspiration for Olson following Barlow’s premature death (158–65). Indeed, Feinsod’s well-written and innovative study is based on a careful reading of primary sources, and it offers a comprehensive survey of the evolution of the poetic scene throughout the Americas while pushing the boundaries of established understandings of Literary History that are still generally dominated by paradigms of national literature. In this respect, this study not only deepens our understanding of poetry scholarship and Literary History, but also may help reform the way Literary History is taught. This will entail applying Feinsod’s insights in innovative anthologies and in courses and seminars that allow students to immerse themselves in the work of a single author, allowing one to focus also on the hemispheric dimensions of their work.

The illustrated volume includes copious endnotes (341-90) and a helpful index (391-413); a commented bibliography would have made the substantial research even more accessible to the readers. The volume recommends itself not only to scholars interested in modern American poetry of the latter half of the twentieth century, but also to those interested in the manifold interrelations of North,
Central, and South American cultural histories, which are in such dire need of more substantial research.

In *Charles Olson and American Modernism: The Practice of the Self*, Mark Byers focuses on the work of a single author. Together with Feinsod’s study, it demonstrates the continuing viability (and necessity) of Literary History and single-author studies. Byers’s study comprises seven chapters: “The New Failure of Nerve” (chapter one), “From the Barricade to the Bedroom” (chapter two), “Uninhabited Kingdoms, New Worlds of Space” (chapter three), “Throw Down Glyphs” (chapter four), “Difficulties of Discovery” (Chapter five), “Egocentric Predicaments” (chapter six), and “Maximus: ‘The Practice of the Self’” (chapter seven). Byers situates the work of American poet Charles Olson (1910–70) at the center of the early postwar American avant-garde. He shows Olson to have been one of the major advocates and theorists of American modernism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as a poet who actively responded to the political, ethical, and aesthetic urgencies of contemporary American art. Reading Olson’s work alongside the work of his contemporaries associated with the New York schools of painting and music (and the exiled Frankfurt School), the book draws on Olson’s published and unpublished writings to establish an original account of early postwar American modernism. Olson’s work illustrates two primary driving forces of formal innovation in that period: the evolution of a new model of political action pivoting around the radical individual and, relatively, a powerful new critique of instrumental reason and the Enlightenment. Extensive archival research allows Byers to connect his reading of Olson’s work with interpretations of painters and composers such as Barnett Newman (1905-70), Mark Rothko (1903-70), David Smith (1906-65), Wolfgang Robert Paalen (1905-59), John Cage (1912-92), and Morton Feldman (1926-87). Following the recent interdisciplinary trend in scholarly work on American modernist visual art (Bergmann Loizeaux; Breitenwischer; Bernes), Byers situates Olson’s work in its broad artistic context, thus undertaking a task that had previously never been properly undertaken. Byers has now devoted an entire study to it—indeed, a necessary study, as his ample findings reveal.

In his account of mutual influences within the late modernist art scene, Byers carves out how, in contrast to painting, “American writing had become professional and, as a consequence, pedestrian” (3) and therefore sought inspiration from the visual arts. This ossification of late literary modernism provides the starting point for his revisionist study, which—like Feinsod’s—takes the political circumstances into account—the most salient is the fragmentation of the left and waning of the experimental impulse of the New Deal and the artists’ being no longer energized by the idea of concerted political action for social change (8). Byers claims that “Olson anticipated a new American modernism that would leave behind prior commitments to collective political action and its associated visual and literary styles” (10). This development brought abstract expressionism “perilously close to becoming the official style of postwar American capitalism” (11). By means of such comparisons with visual arts, Byers sheds an interesting light on the political circumstances of the 1940s and their potential significance for Olson’s work from the point of view of American poetic history. According to Byers, the self-set task of the new literary modernism is to reconceive of political agency from the perspective of the individual (13).

More generally than Feinsod, Byers interprets Olson’s “archeology of morning” as “an attempt to recover varieties of experience obscured by the ‘domination’ of scientific rationality, ‘logic,’ ‘classification,’ ‘discourse,’ and other structures of modern intellectual life” (15). Byers reveals the extent to which the
debate on the innovative character of Olson’s prose and poetry is still open. Byers emphasizes the ethical urgencies of the early postwar moment in the U.S. as the seedbed of Olson’s work (17).

Similar to Feinsod, Byers neglects the religious dimensions of Olson’s work, even though the connections between the different disciplines of art, which are the focus of his volume, have much to offer in this respect (this aspect is also largely ignored by the studies on the intersection of art and literature referenced earlier: Bergmann Loizeaux; Breitenwischer; Bernes). One could argue that an intense quest across the whole aesthetic range as it marked the Black Mountain College and Olson’s work in particular always makes reference to basic categories of thought; Byers points to this in his emphasis on the destabilizing philosophy and critical attitude, characteristic of Olson’s generation, towards previous scientific convictions, without however touching upon the religious dimension. This is most apparent in his reading of “The Kingfishers” (60, 76-77, 95, 101-32), which does not shy away from commonplaces, for instance, that Olson’s quote of Arthur Rimbaud’s Une Saison en Enfer, “si j’ai du goût, ce n’est guères [sic] / que pour la terre et les pierres” can be interpreted as the (humbling and chastening) “peculiarly American gesture” of being grounded in space rather than time (73). The significance of the poem surely goes beyond the “imagined conjunction between physics and society” that Byers identifies in his focus on indeterminacy (132).

As far as Literary History is concerned, his investigation of “the incentives driving a new, vernacular American modernism” (19) would have profited from greater terminological clarity (although his study nonetheless contributes to our understanding of modernity). He is to be commended for avoiding vague postmodern terms, though a clarification of what he means by this “new, vernacular American modernism” (how he reads Olson’s postwar vita nuova), and how his perspective relates to works in the field of postwar American Literary History would have been helpful, especially given Olson’s towering influence over later poets, for example, Susan Howe (born in 1937; 17, 19, 66, 86-87, 177-78).

Byers thus offers a well-written and balanced study in the burgeoning field of Olson Studies, while contributing to the history of postwar aesthetics. Particularly notable is his treatment of German-language authors and scholarship. The illustrated volume contains a bibliography and an index. Despite my critique, it will be a valuable addition to the fields of Olson Studies and the history of late modernist American art, and may serve, along with Feinsod’s volume, as a model for future scholarship on poetry.

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Works Cited


