

Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 286pp.

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The winner of the 2015 *Choice* outstanding academic title, Christine Gerhardt's *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (2014) is an indispensable ecocritical study of the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman that brings welcome and sophisticated attention to these writers' complex representations of the natural world, stressing the productive "tension between hubris and humility" (225) in their depictions of nature and the earth. Despite the prominence of nature in these poets' work, and despite the flourishing of ecocritical approaches in recent years, scholars will find relatively few critical studies of environment and place in their poetry. *A Place for Humility* steps into this void, promising to spark a vibrant critical conversation about the categories of nature and environment in these poets' work that may join those surrounding keywords like "gender" and "sexuality." It deserves the attention of both specialists in US poetry and environmental criticism, along with generalists looking for contemporary successors to landmark works like Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Leo Marx's *The Machine and the Garden* (1964), and Angus Fletcher's more recent *A New Theory for American Poetry* (2006).

Gerhardt's study foregrounds what she terms "environmental humility," placing the poets in dialogue with their culture's ideas of nature and wilderness (51). Underscoring their engagement with proto-ecological writers like George Perkins Marsh, Frederick Law Olmstead, and Henry Thoreau—to which one could add the surprisingly rich environmental consciousness seen in *The North American Review*—Gerhardt highlights these poets' "environmentally suggestive de-centering of human authority" (55). Her focus on the analytic category of ecological humility—a term that has gained more traction in philosophy and environmental ethics than literary criticism—also nods to environmentalists Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, for whom humility indicates both awe in the face of natural wonders and an intensified sense of humans' embeddedness in the natural world. This double sense of humility as interdependence and compassion, present in traditions as varied as Christian stewardship theology and Taoist and Buddhist thought, finds its implicit counterpart in elements of the Romantics' awe in the face of nature. With such varied and complex antecedents, the concept of humility is protean and powerful—so much so that some readers may wish for a more extended consideration of its multiform dimensions in the book's introduction. Yet as *A Place for Humility* turns its attention to incisively nuanced close readings of poems, the author's use of environmental humility is an

undeniably potent tool for understanding these poets' work in novel and striking ways.

Part 1 advances the counterintuitive claim that the nineteenth century's "new sciences are about humility" rather than mastery, countering the view that "nature must be seen as capital" as outlined in the work of environmental historians Donald Worster and Carolyn Merchant, among others. For Gerhardt's revisionist account, these new sciences are less about human domination over nature than a proto-ecological awareness of the interrelatedness—and even community—of human and nonhuman natural elements. In the place of Victorian science as a force of modern resource exploitation and human control, Gerhardt proposes a fresh account of its "humbling attention to the smallest natural phenomena" (37), with special attention to "undervalued species" and the minutiae of the natural world. Sensitive readings of canonical poems like "There Was a Child Went Forth," alongside neglected lyrics like Dickinson's "The Grass so little has to do—," highlight the crucial importance of nature's smallest citizens—its insects; its minor birds and animals; the grass of Whitman's familiar title.

In this reverence for nature's insignificant details, Gerhardt finds a stance of humility toward the natural world in tension with our traditional understanding of Romantic and modernist attitudes of mastery. It is a challenging task because, as Gerhardt notes, these poets' attention to minor details—humble or unnoticed phenomena—does not *in itself* indicate an attentiveness and respect toward nature, but may also signal a desire to "control such entities" (38). Gerhardt explores this provocative tension without oversimplifying. She offers suggestive observations concerning these poets' witty, satirical spoofs of the Romantic sublime; their devastating take-downs of their contemporaries' sentimental domestications of the natural world; and their antagonistic indebtedness to the bombastic confidence of many of the era's scientists.

Though it is undoubtedly true that Dickinson's poems frequently embrace small-scale natural elements, Gerhardt's innovative claims about these poets' "humbling attention to the smallest natural" details find more resistance in Whitman's oeuvre, where a domineering persona and overweening assertiveness are often the order of the day, as she herself notes. In Whitman's well-known command to "merge" into "one identity," Gerhardt interestingly posits not the bossiness D. H. Lawrence famously condemned, but a dissolving of human agency (85) and a commitment to what she calls "nonhierarchical difference" that forges a complex ethical relationship to the earth. By contrast in Chapter 6, in discussions of "Song of Joy" and "Song of the Redwood Tree," Gerhardt speaks of Whitman's keen sense of the "joys of the power to dominate nature" (173) and "people's paradoxical joys in dominion over nature" (187). There is

much to admire in this complexly layered account of these poets' ambivalent stance toward the natural world, though at times such assertions of hubristic "joy in dominion" and "power" jostle somewhat uneasily with the book's overarching claim for environmental humility.

In Parts 2 and 3, Gerhardt unexpectedly turns to local history, so that Dickinson's Connecticut Valley and Whitman's Brooklyn/Camden become the sites of a sort of modified regionalism *avant la lettre*. This emphasis on place is a valuable contribution of *A Place for Humility*, and it has implications for our understanding of female nature writers of the period such as Susan Fenimore Cooper, or Lucy Crawford, author of the 1846 *History of the White Mountains* (arguably among the first works of nature tourism). From a different perspective, however, while Gerhardt's account stresses the regional specificity in Dickinson's depiction of New England's distinctive agrarian economy or Whitman's sense of the regional differences in practices of logging, farming and fishing, a case may also be made that many of the latter poems celebrate the commercial monocrop cultivation associated with the advent of agribusiness. In *Autumn Rivulets*, for example, we see the poet enumerate the specific contributions of the "buckwheat of Michigan," "the cotton in Mississippi," and the "flax of the Middle States," all brought together in a unified, "fused" "national chant."

Elsewhere, Gerhardt's focus on "local geographies" allows her to develop suggestive observations about these poets' debt to scientific practitioners of bio-geography (112), who range from Thomas Jefferson and Amherst's Edward Hitchcock, to Mary Lyons and Olmstead. Similarly the naturescapes seen in these poems are notable for their attentiveness to concrete details. At the same time, they challenge the notion of epistemological certainty seen in the emergent scientific disciplines. Regarding the latter, *A Place for Humility* ambitiously considers intellectual currents in geology, geography, zoology, and natural history. While chapters 3 and 5 make intriguing suggestions about the agrarian milieu in Amherst, for example, further research in this area might profitably consider the agricultural science that was vitally important to the region and to the Dickinson family specifically. Moreover in his letters Whitman repeatedly asserts that he "long[s]" for "a quiet little farm," and knowledge of scientific agriculture pervades *Leaves of Grass*. The mania for agricultural science seen in publications like *The Atlantic Monthly*—and the *Connecticut Valley Farmer and Mechanic*, whose founder was Dickinson's friend Samuel Bowles—may usefully complement Gerhardt's trenchant observation that for these poets respect for the "earth is inseparable from the urge to control it" (207).

The final section of *A Place for Humility* continues its careful analysis of these poets' "deference to the land" with thoughtful emphasis on the global dimensions of their

proto-ecological thought, the “emerging notions of the whole earth as a living, vulnerable natural phenomenon” (191). In analyzing Whitman’s “vast rondure swimming in space,” and Dickinson’s “The Earth and I and One,” Gerhardt brilliantly traces these poets’ “mode of global envisioning” (189), as she lucidly describes their efforts to grasp the earth in its holistic entirety. Beyond their imaginative juxtapositions of the local and the global, these final chapters reprise the book’s central, generative tension “between hubris and humility . . . in many nature-centered poems” (225) in the American tradition. While for some readers this crucial insight may read as a logical inconsistency, *A Place for Humility* does not shy away from contradiction and paradox. In so doing, Gerhardt furnishes new ways of understanding the tangled ethical relationship to the natural world that emerges during this era and the surprisingly active role that poetry plays in these transformations. Such scholarship might even lead us to consider the possibility that rather than “proto-ecological,” this earlier historical epoch—and its poetry—should instead simply be seen as part of the unfolding story of modern movements for ecology and environmentalism.