

centuries. If anyone still believed in the intellectual isolation of the Myth of Amherst, this book would destroy that belief.

Brantley claims to illustrate Dickinson's "art of knowledge as distinct from her 'art of belief'" (5). The latter is Roger Lundin's phrase, and while I appreciate Brantley's desire to distinguish his recent work from those studies more intently focused on religion (including his own earlier work), the real strength of this book lies not in the distinction it draws between empiricism and religion as influences on Dickinson but in the way it fleshes out the continuities between empiricist and late Romantic thought. These continuities lie predominately in the area of experience, specifically sense-experience. Brantley shows how Locke, Darwin, and Wesley peopled Wadsworth's prose and hence directly influenced Dickinson. Brantley presents Dickinson as a candid friend of pragmatism, also acknowledging (though perhaps slightly underplaying) the way she cast her ironic eye on the "twig of Evidence" (Fr373), at which, he says, "she can never stop plucking" for material knowledge (26). Her irony is not a barrier to engagement—quite the opposite—but it is often her slightly unfriendly starting point. However, Brantley brilliantly elucidates the importance of empiricism to Romanticism, comparing Dickinson's Romantic imagination with that of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Emerson, Percy Shelley, and John Keats. Brantley also draws links with William Blake, though these are through similarities in temperament rather than influence. Readers of this book might feel as if they have entered midway through the conversation. This may frustrate some but, for many, it will be a conversation they do not want to leave.

CECILY PARKS

Gerhardt, Christine. *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. \$48.

If American lyric poetry were a globe, it would be tempting to place Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman on different poles. Dickinson, it could be argued,

wrote lines such as “I wish I were a hay - ” as if no one were listening, whereas Whitman declared, “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,” as if everyone were listening. Implicit in the urge to position the two poets this way is a perception of humility, and such (op)positioning reveals how humility is gendered, as well as how humility is communicated via form (think of Dickinson’s stripped lines opposed to the fleshy Whitmanian line), speaker (Dickinson’s slippery “I” opposed to the speaker who contains multitudes), and subject matter (the single hay stalk opposed to the countless stars embodied in a grass blade). In her exciting book *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*, Christine Gerhardt illuminates the complex and often subversive role of humility in both poets’ work in order to link Dickinson and Whitman as environmentally-aware writers of place in the nineteenth century.

Gerhardt incorporates humility into ecocriticism by elegantly reminding us that the word *humus* provides the etymological source for the very human attitude of humility: “Humble and human share the same root: the earth” (14). While humility may not be a surprising ethical perspective vis-à-vis the natural world in our contemporary culture of environmental crisis and climate change, Gerhardt demonstrates how it was a radical stance in nineteenth-century American writing about nature: throughout *A Place for Humility*, Gerhardt places Dickinson’s and Whitman’s poetics in dialogue with each other and with a nineteenth-century discourse of nature and science that was being developed by figures such as Edward Hitchcock, George Perkins Marsh, and Alexander von Humboldt. By highlighting the poets’ understanding of and challenges to emerging ecological discussions in geography, natural history, and conservationism, Gerhardt makes a valuable case for the environmental awareness and foresight of their work.

The book’s first section, “Noticing Small Worlds,” highlights what Gerhardt calls “small nature poetics” (77). The two grass-focused lines quoted above, which appear in Dickinson’s “The Grass has so little to do” (Fr379) and section 31 of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” exemplify what Gerhardt describes as Dickinson’s and Whitman’s “frequent acts of noticing previously overlooked, supposedly minor flora and fauna” (26). Humility in poems such as these is more complicated, however, than noticing a small familiar thing: “From different perspectives, Dickinson and Whitman express a sense of humility that stems not only from the sheer act of noticing the smallest creatures beneath one’s feet, but also from their identification with the small, which is counteracted by the realization of nature’s unspeakable otherness” (22). In other words, Dickinson and Whitman enact an eco-ethical paradox: how to write about the natural world in such a way that

respects that world's complexity without reinforcing its otherness. Their writing wrestles with what all environmental writers wrestle with: the way that writing about nature distances us from it.

To mediate this distance, as Gerhardt shows, Dickinson and Whitman deploy strategies of description to construct "dynamic local landscapes that retain a remarkable degree of autonomy and dignity, while letting their speakers rethink their position to the point of virtually canceling out their poetic voice" (91). The book's second section, "Describing Local Lands," presents poems such as "Frequently the woods are pink -" (Fr24) and "It will be Summer - eventually" (Fr374) to reveal how Dickinson's spare poetics and self-effacing speaker link her work to the scientific approaches in the emerging fields of "botany, geography, geology, and especially biogeography . . . which studied local natural units primarily by way of detailed descriptions" (88). Dickinson's environmental savvy is matched by Whitman's in poems such as "Out of the Cradle" and "As I Ebb'd," in which Whitman creates a "speaker-poet [who] steps back behind the natural scene he encounters and transfers the narrative momentum to the land itself, foregrounding its self-sufficient agency" (119). Refining an argument that has been evolving since Lawrence Buell's path-breaking book *The Environmental Imagination*, Gerhardt argues that such speaker-subverting description by both poets implies a humility that privileges the autonomous natural world.

A Place for Humility gracefully moves back and forth between Dickinson's and Whitman's poems while building outward in environmental scale with each successive section. In Part 3, "Narrating the Regions," Gerhardt highlights the "specific narrative elements" that the poets deploy in order to address rapid industrialization on a regional scale and to "reconsider some of America's most prominent cultural narratives about how to use the land economically" (144). Their poems emerge as contributions to frontier myths that, as the nineteenth century progressed, were increasingly the stuff of nostalgia. In an era of expansive farming, logging, and fishing, Dickinson poems such as "A - Field of Stubble, lying sere" (Fr1419) and "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (Fr344) indicate that the old stories of human relationship to the land are failing nineteenth-century New England environmental realities. Dickinson's poems express a narrative dilemma that is also an ethical dilemma: what stories do we tell now to make sense of an environment that we have exploited and often misunderstood? Moving to Whitman and the west coast, Gerhardt makes a nuanced case for Whitman's "Song of the Redwood Tree" as a poem whose eco-ethical narrative has eluded those critics who read the dying redwood's soliloquy as a celebration of Manifest

Destiny's destructive impulses: Gerhardt argues that the redwood's intentionally unconvincing renunciation serves as a critique of the cultural narratives that have led to the tree's demise.

In the coda-like final section of *A Place for Humility*, "Envisioning the Earth," Gerhardt reveals how Dickinson and Whitman draw on transcendentalism as much as the grounded specifics of natural phenomena to think about the global environment and to question the human mind's ability to navigate it. For scholars in the field of ecocriticism, this section provides a fine example of how ecocritical readings of poetry, even deeply subjective poetry, can address the global—a fittingly far-reaching conclusion to Gerhardt's ecologically-motivated study. For scholars of Dickinson, *A Place for Humility* gestures toward more ecocritical readings of Dickinson's poems, and toward the ecocritical monograph on her work alone—which waits to be written.

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Kohler, Michelle. *Miles of Stare: Transcendentalism and the Problem of Literary Vision in Nineteenth-Century America*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014. \$55.

With a rare combination of thoroughgoing erudition and playful close reading, Michelle Kohler redefines Ralph Waldo Emerson's consequence for the American scene. First, Kohler argues that Emerson assigns "the imagination's tasks to the eye" (5). Then, she shows how such "American seers" as Frederick Douglass, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, William Dean Howells, and Sarah Orne Jewett "critique, mock, ironize, fracture, reverse, or otherwise seek to work through the contradictions and equivocations within" Emerson's "transparent eyeball" metaphor (5, 206). Kohler demonstrates that Emerson's originality stokes his influence: what makes him great—his all-seeing eye—accounts for the difference he makes, especially through disagreement, to generations of American writers. A milestone in American studies, *Miles of Stare* establishes a focused but flexible outlook on the difficult fascination of American literary vision.