



**Handley, George B. *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2007.**

In the midst of the ecocritical struggle to reconsider the ways in which people understand nature in its naturalness, George B. Handley takes an interesting approach by looking at the ways in which poetic language mediates and transforms a sense of place. Handley focuses on the works of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott for artifacts of analysis and seeks to create a revised way of reading. Handley proposes a template of “reading as poetics” that looks at the poetic capacity for a cross-cultural sense of place. Initially couching his readings by discounting the canonical ideal of the “New” World, Handley’s readings form transnational connections as a way to show how the “ruse” of newness enables the remaking of a world “into an image of the old and familiar” (19).

Handley begins his work with one of his strongest chapters in which he explicates the postlapsarian Adam and the implications of the “American” Adam. For Handley, these myths sustain the illusion of Manifest Destiny while, perhaps more importantly, validating the assumption that the “Edenic virgin soils” needed the taming, restoring hand of the colonists. Handley covers many seminal texts, ecocritical figures, theorists, and an array of terminology within this section, including an impressive array of Hegelian precepts. While this section is not for the theoretically ill-versed or fainthearted, he cogently evaluates the Adamic American myth’s capacity for a subjective projection that whitewashes historical remnants. Handley proposes a renunciation of such historical vacuity in favor of historical continuity—continuity founded through an aesthetic association with the land that engenders new imaginations of identity. This is what makes Handley’s book unique and a valuable contribution to ecocritical discourse. Rather than attempting to evaluate human relations with nature and place as unprocessed, Handley looks at the merit within the metaphor.

Through this lens, Handley examines the three poet’s liberty from the restrictions of fixity by their capacity to reimagine language and systems of signification. Handley suggests that this aptitude can create a new environmental consciousness and ethics. Handley promotes imagination because it goes beyond the known and the visible, and this potential lies largely in metaphorical language that has no pretense of correlation between language and object. Handley has no illusions relating to the flaws of the poets concerned, and he remarks upon Whitman’s “guilt” in “believing in poetry’s constative rather than merely performative function.” The result is a loss of “wonder and bewilderment before nature,” the fault of his ideological yolk (127). It is this failing that Handley ultimately proposes should be overcome. In dreaming of new worlds, he suggests taking advantage of nature’s relative opacity and the written word’s correlation with the sensory. By analyzing poetry about place and concurrently looking for figurative language’s ecocritical value in understanding a sense of place, Handley

writes a valuable resource for anyone interested in the occasionally disparaged role the imagination plays in the conception of space and place.

*--Stephanie Lyells, Washington State University*