



**Giesecke, Annette, and Naomi Jacobs, eds. *Earth Perfect?: Nature, Utopia, and the Garden*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2012.**

The image of the mythological Garden of Eden has maintained a vital and enduring position in the Western cultural imaginary. In literature and art, as well as architecture and urban planning, gardens serve as symbolic, metaphorical, and physical anchors of this ancient place, reminding us of humanity's original act of transgression while sustaining the utopian dreams of redemption and restoration. *Earth Perfect?: Nature, Utopia, and the Garden*, edited by Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, is an ambitious and thematically rich collection—containing six sections and seventeen contributors—that seeks to address the epistemological status of the garden and its relation to utopian thought through an examination of a diverse array of literary and artistic discourses, geographic sites, and cultural and material practices. Careful to distinguish vital lines of demarcation between the human and natural world, Giesecke and Jacobs assert in their introduction, “the garden is a human creation driven by the desire to find an ideal place in nature—a second kinder nature as opposed to a nature that can be unpredictable and harsh” (9). Consequently, the contributors of this collection explore ideas implicit in this assessment of the garden as it relates to order and progress, nature and boundaries, wilderness and utopia, within the context of the differing ways in which gardens accumulate meaning and come to define human relations with local geographies and the world as a whole.

United by these common themes, the authors in this collection deploy an impressive array of methodological and theoretical approaches in addressing the nature and meaning of gardens within the utopian context. Stephen Forbes, for instance, details the development of botanical gardens in China, Egypt, Babylon, Ancient Greece, and the Aztec empire, while Arie Graafland's nuanced consideration of Versailles, or Annette Giesecke's meditation on the Roman house garden prompted by a visit to Pompeii, offer more detailed historical studies of specific gardens. Other contributors such as U We Claus, Morna Livingston, Naomi Jacobs, and Susan Willis, writing from experiential knowledge, succeed in presenting intimate portraits of gardens and the work of gardening in places as geographically diverse as Amorbach im Oldenwald, Germany; Slavonice, Bohemia; Bangor, ME; and Killingworth, CT. These portraits present readers with insights that are both practical and intellectually challenging. Essays such as these demonstrate the elusive but essential relationship between the cultivation of knowledge and the need for a kind of praxis that can help lead us to solutions that may help us better address global environmental challenges. Indeed, such a discursive melding of theme and content, thought and labor, is essential if Jacobs' assertion that “every garden is a utopian text” is to be taken seriously (156).

In addition to the site-specific studies of these guiding principles, contributors also engage with an impressive array of literary and philosophical topics that frame the garden as an indispensable element of utopian models. Of particular interest to scholars in the field of ecocriticism, for instance, is Linda Schneekloth's essay, which includes a particularly insightful treatment of Margaret Atwood's 2009 novel, *The Year of the Flood* that intersects with the broader discussions of modern ecological problems initiated by writers such as Chellis Glendinning, Bill McKibben, and David Orr. Through her analysis readers are urged to consider the consequences of humanity's “suicidal and ‘eco-cidal’ behavior,” as a means of leading us

back to sense of “adoration” and respect for our lost Garden/utopia (59). Similarly, Jennifer Atkinson offers a compelling and theoretically sophisticated reading of Richard Powers’ *Gain* (1998), in which “the garden presents a template for non-parasitic increase that disrupts the seeming inevitability of capitalism’s subtraction-based accounting” (260). These critical essays extend the North American ecological discourse embedded in texts such as Ernest Callenbach’s classic *Ecotopia*, while drawing connections to the utopian themes embedded in the work of European writers and philosophers such as Thomas More, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, and William Morris, as well as in the mysterious and esoteric early Renaissance text, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Donald Durham’s exploration of the relationship between architecture, gardens, and utopian order, as revealed through his reading of Kobo Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes* takes this mode of analysis a step further and demonstrates the promise of interdisciplinary approaches to literary texts. Dunham’s exploration of the distinction between “human nature versus nature as the other” brought to bear in Abe’s novel (142), is further emphasized through his consideration of architectural design that endeavors to harmoniously merge with landscapes. The adaptive strategies integrated into the work of such luminaries as Bjarne Mastenbroek, Bernard Khoury, Albert Frey, Raymond Loewy, and Adalberto Libera, culminate in Albert Frey’s desert architecture, which Durham affirms as “the real deal, nature clearly and firmly taking possession of architectural space” (151).

Rounding out this collection is a final group of essays that considers the aforementioned issues through the lens of art, photography, geography, and architecture. Patrick Healy, for example, offers a unique perspective on the garden and utopia in conversation with Heironymus Bosch’s sixteenth century masterpiece, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Reading Bosch’s imagery within its religious and philosophical contexts, Healy persuasively suggests, “the Garden of Eden, Earth’s primordial, most perfect state and constant focus of nostalgic utopian yearnings, contained dystopian elements that precluded any hope for a return to Paradise” (81). In the more than five centuries since Bosch gave substance to his radical artistic vision it seems that many have yet to come to terms with his insights.

As a whole, *Earth Perfect?* offers an extraordinary range of approaches to address the place of the garden in both ancient and modern utopian thought. There are, of course, a few places where associations with the organizing themes may seem strained, such as in essays on zoos and prisons, but even in these cases, the authors provide insightful contributions to the broader cultural and historical issues that inform the text’s discursive subject matter. It also bears noting that the works included are supplemented by an abundant selection of illustrations that enhance the clarity of the ideas presented, while making for an attractive presentation. While the theoretical complexity of many of the essays may limit the accessibility of this collection, it is, indeed, certain to provoke reflection among scholars and professionals in a range of disciplines and occupations on the complex and ever-shifting relationship between humanity, the garden, and the natural world.

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