

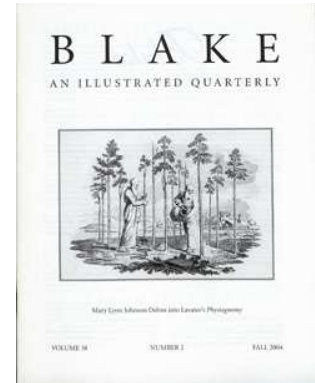
# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

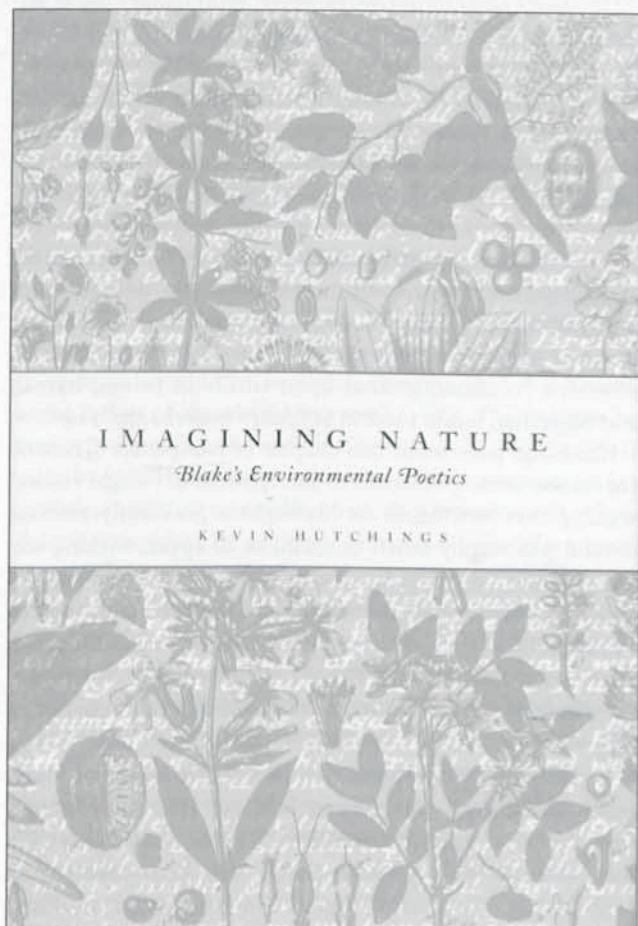
R E V I E W

## Kevin Hutchings, *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics*

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Kevin Hutchings. *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. xiv + 256 pp. \$75.00/£57.00 cloth; \$22.95/£17.50 paper (2003).

Reviewed by JENNIFER DAVIS MICHAEL

The past ten years have witnessed a wave of "green" criticism among Romanticists, reacting against both the Yale critics such as Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, with their emphasis on the imaginative sublime, and the new historicists and Marxists, some of whom, like Alan Liu, deny the existence of "nature" apart from human property and power relations (Liu 104). A primary function of ecocritical readings is to show that the Romantic poets, rather than escaping from history into an imaginatively constructed "nature," are demonstrating "how human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature": i.e., a nature that has an existence apart from that culture (Bate 103-04).

Blake's denunciations of "vegetated" nature and his well-known proverb that "Where man is not nature is barren" have made him an inconvenience, if not a stumbling block, for the ecocritical movement. While James McKusick makes a convincing case for Golgonooza as an "Ecotopia" of "human-scale technology" and offers an interesting reading of *Jerusalem* plates 18 and 19 as a warning against pollution (McKusick 102-05), he generally overlooks Blake's negative depictions of nature in order to claim Blake for the ecological cause. The other leaders of eco-Romanticism, Jonathan Bate and Karl Kroeber, largely avoid Blake.<sup>1</sup>

Kevin Hutchings' impressive book challenges and dissects the longstanding orthodoxy of Blake's hostility toward nature. *Imagining Nature* is at once a powerful rereading of Blake and an intervention into what Hutchings sees as the "dichotomy" in which ecocriticism sets itself above and apart from all other (i.e., social and political) ways of reading. On the contrary, Hutchings argues, environmental initiatives have always been shaped by social, political, and economic forces (he cites E. P. Thompson's account of the Forest Laws), and to pretend otherwise is both naïve and dangerous. Hutchings hopes "to delineate an alternative, distinctively Blakean view of the relationship between humanity and nature" (3). The key to this view is a "doubleness" he finds in Blake's representation of nature and its objects. On one level they are ideal and infinite, the "world in a grain of sand." At the same time, they operate "discursively," meaning they are constructed through human perspectives and power systems.

Hutchings' argument, clearly aimed at specialists, has profound implications for the ways in which we read Blake's statements about "nature," and hence for our interpretation of Blake's overall vision. He suggests that Blake's suspicion of "nature" is directed not toward its material reality but rather toward the ways in which human beings have constructed, named, and exploited "nature." In other words, when Blake represents nature negatively, through a figure such as Vala or the Polypus, he is criticizing a discourse of nature, a construction of the human mind and society. This means that many of Blake's anti-natural statements are aimed at discourses of nature, not nature itself.<sup>2</sup>

In order to substantiate his claim, Hutchings must first establish that there is a "nature itself" for Blake. In his first chapter, he challenges a series of factors that have contributed to Blake's reputation as "nature's Romantic adversary," beginning with Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*, which immediately overshadowed Mark Schorer's book, *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, published the previous year. Whereas Schorer emphasized the contradictions in Blake's attitude toward nature, Frye not only insisted on the unity of Blake's philosophy

1. Mark Lussier's important article, "Blake's Deep Ecology," is a significant exception to this avoidance.

2. Claire Colebrook made a similar argument in these pages recently about Blake's anti-feminist rhetoric.



but fixed it in firm opposition to nature. Subsequent generations of Blake scholars have accepted without question Blake's contempt for the natural world, swayed not only by Frye's argument but also by the well-known marginalia in which Blake denounces "natural objects" in favor of imagination. Hutchings suggests that these off-the-cuff comments should not outweigh the affirmations of nature that appear throughout Blake's work. Neither Blake's self-proclaimed rejection of deism nor his apparent embrace of antinomianism, according to Hutchings, provides consistent evidence of his opposition to nature. Blake's biographical association with the city is also, he points out unnecessarily, insufficient evidence that he rejects the country.

Chapter two, "Nature's Economy and *The Book of Thel*," begins with a provocative discussion of anthropomorphism and the tendency for Blake's critics to read the Eagle and the Mole, for example, as "anything and everything but eagles and moles" (76). Hutchings makes a moral case for "attempting at least to imagine the needs of the non-human world" (77), in part by refusing to appropriate animals and plants for symbolic ends. While Blake's insistent emphasis on "the human form divine" makes his attitude toward such anthropomorphism less than clear, Hutchings cites "The Fly" as evidence that Blake could and did imagine a fly and a human being on equal terms—even having the man call himself "a Fly" at the end of the poem (83). In his reading of *The Book of Thel*, Hutchings echoes Helen Bruder's argument that the utilitarian philosophy articulated by the figures in Har is sharply delineated by gender, so that the Cloud's masculine "self-assertion" is set against the self-effacement of the Lily and Clod. (One wonders if the female figures would be similarly condemned if they were to assert themselves.) Where Hutchings usefully expands this argument is in his contrast of Blake's poem with Erasmus Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation*. Whereas Darwin uses figurative language to naturalize "the gendered economy of human relations," Blake's allegory demonstrates and questions the ways in which our anthropomorphic discourse "can 'naturalize' the ideological interests of the *status quo*" (99). While I find this idea persuasive, as it helps to account for the fact that the poem seems to support entirely contradictory readings, I'm puzzled by Hutchings' assumption that the word "Har," "followed on two occasions by a grammatically unnecessary period" (not uncommon in Blake), must therefore be an abbreviation for some other word, a word he arbitrarily decides is "Harmony." (Why not "harvest," "harp," "heart," or "hard"?) A footnote acknowledges and dismisses the reference to Har as a character in *Tiriell*, contending that the unpublished poem would not be relevant to "Blake's small contemporary reading public" (224n10). Hutchings' argument over the next few pages that Blake is making an ironic comment on natural "harmony" is rather hindered than helped by what he acknowledges is a conjectural association. Nonetheless, his conclusion that "Blake's *Thel* both celebrates and abhors" a holistic, interdependent model of life on earth offers new light on the ambiguity of the poem in the context

not of Innocence and Experience (as it is usually read), but of nature and the constructions we put upon it.

Hutchings remains uneasy, however, about Blake's use of anthropomorphism. In his third chapter, "Milton's Environmental Poetics," he considers instances, both verbal and graphic, in which Blake seems to humanize the things of nature. For Blake, he says, "our encounters with non-human entities are always in some sense anthropomorphic encounters with ourselves," and yet those entities appear to resist our "disfiguring" gaze (117). This intractability of nature is crucial to Hutchings' reassessment of Blake's antipathy to Newton. Both Blake and Newton, he suggests, affirm the "otherness" of nature, but for Newton that reality is knowable through the laws and language of science, whereas for Blake the imagination yields a prophetic "common ground upon which all beings, human and otherwise, might meet in visionary interchange" (120).

Hutchings goes on in this chapter to complicate Newton's reputation among Blakeans as the epitome of "single vision," arguing that Newton in fact brought a previously abstract natural philosophy down to earth, so to speak, making science a "materially engaged praxis" (123). In this he was not entirely at odds with Blake, who abhorred the mystification of a priesthood keeping the secrets of the universe. Blake's attack on Newton thus has more to do with Newton's contemporary reputation and the uses to which his theories were put, as well as his emphasis on the laws of nature. Hutchings makes a generally convincing connection between natural and moral legalism, although the evidence he draws from Blake's color print "Newton" seems loose at best (Newton is sitting on rock; the Decalogue was carved in stone). He reads *Milton* as an "antinomian rejection of legalism in both its physical and moral manifestations" (129). The interdependence of time and eternity in this poem directly challenges Newton's absolute definitions of time and space.

"Jerusalem's Human Ecology" is the most compelling chapter of the book, arguing that *Jerusalem* is not the anti-natural poem that most scholars have assumed it to be. Its complexity, Hutchings argues, involves both essentialist and discursive or deconstructive modes of critique, aimed at challenging the discourse of "natural" religious and legal authority. His best example of Blake's strategy comes not from *Jerusalem* but from *Milton*, when Los states that "this mournful day / Must be a blank in Nature" (E 102). As Hutchings puts it, "Los erases the totality of nature's cultural inscriptions," leaving a *tabula rasa*, but that primitivist ideal appears only as a blank, an absence (155). The point seems to be not that nature has no objective reality, but that that reality cannot be known. *Jerusalem* then becomes not a critique of nature per se, but a critique of its constructions.

The argument in this chapter focuses especially on the figures of Vala and the Polypus, both of which become destructive because they are products of "institutionalized discourses" (175). Hutchings makes the provocative suggestion that Vala's role is to some extent predetermined by the necessities of the epic form, and that "Blake condemns nature in advance



by making Vala occupy the structural space attributed to Satan or Hell in influential epics like *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*." At the same time, however, since Blake has deconstructed the Heaven/Hell dualism in *The Marriage*, he "inadvertently encourages his readers to question the structurally similar Eternity/Nature dualism that haunts his own epics" (174-75). Hutchings goes on to point out that Vala's naming by others is an important part of her presentation, especially since the grossly unreliable Sons of Albion, as well as the self-absorbed Albion himself, are the ones who identify her as "Babylon" and "our Mother! Nature!" (E 163).

At the same time, Hutchings reads the Polypus as Blake's critique of "deep ecology." Just as the Polypus threatens to absorb all things and beings into itself, "too much identification with the external world can, in Blake's thought, lead to a harmful annihilation of the identifying self" (197). The Polypus becomes "a figure for the indissociate human" (199); paradoxically, by identifying too much with our environment, we lose ourselves and thus our ability to see that environment. Albion deteriorates when he anthropomorphically projects himself onto his natural surroundings: this denial of otherness makes relationship impossible. But so does the loss of self in the absorption of the Polypus, which again is not a natural product but a dark construction of the human will.

In the "Coda: Blake's Apocalypse, Druidism, and the Humanization of Nature," Hutchings resolves much of the lingering ambiguity over anthropomorphism and whether "humanizing" nature is a positive or negative process in Blake. Certainly, as he acknowledges, self-interested and instrumental readings and discourses of nature are ultimately destructive both for human beings and for the rest of the environment. On the other hand, the mutuality that characterizes the end of *Jerusalem* depends on recognizing the independent value of all things, that they are worthy of "conversing" (though he does not draw on that particular term). Hutchings concludes with the suggestion that when "Lion, Tyger, Horse, Elephant, Eagle Dove, Fly, Worm, / And the all wondrous Serpent ... Humanize" on plate 98 (E 258), they not only become human (as most readers have concluded) but make others humane in a "profound 'ministry of reconciliation'" (217).

In conclusion, *Imagining Nature* does more than fill a gap in Blake studies; it re-imagines nature in the context not only of Blake's work but implicitly of all human imagining. While a few points in the readings, as I have noted, seem stretched or loosely supported, the real value of the book rests not in such details but in its ability to see, as Blake would say, at once the Thistle and the Old Man. This book will change forever the way we read Blake's reading of nature.

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Reviewed by CATHERINE L. MCCLENAHAN

With this affordable edition of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Robert Essick and the Huntington Library have made Blake's illuminated text and related visual material available in hard copy to a wide audience of Blake students, scholars and fans, and given easy access to one more copy to compare with those available on the electronic Blake Archive (copies a, A, C, J, F, G, and P). Based on the Huntington's copy (designated as copy E), this edition provides full-size color reproductions of all 11 plates, a printed version of this copy, bibliographic and textual notes, about 50 pages of detailed commentary that includes monochrome reproductions of pencil drawings from Blake's Notebook, and a bibliography of critical studies.

*Visions* could scarcely ask for a more experienced and informed editor. As Blake readers know, Essick is one of the world's experts on Blake's printing methods and visual designs and a noted scholar of Blake's writing. One of the editors of the Blake Archive, he has also edited or co-edited other illuminated books for the Blake Trust/Tate/Princeton series (*The Early Illuminated Books* and *Milton*), catalogues of Blake's separate prints and commercial illustrations, catalogues of the Blake holdings in the Huntington collection, and collections of essays on the relation of Blake's images and texts. Despite the relatively affordable price, there is nothing cut-rate about the look or feel of this volume: both are equally attractive, right down to the little motifs from the visual designs that are placed on the verso sides of pages that begin or end sections, the crisp, readable typeface of the printed sections, and the pleasurable feel of good paper stock.