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James Bogan and Fred Goss, eds., *Sparks of Fire:
Blake in a New Age*

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James Bogan and Fred Goss, eds. *Sparks of Fire: Blake in a New Age*. Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1982. xii + 462 pp., illustrated. Cloth, \$35.00; paper, \$12.95.

Reviewed by Jenijoy La Belle

There are scholars who work on Blake—yet are not Blakeans. They may find Blake's insights profound, but they do not embrace them as a personal creed. There are, however, those who study Blake because they believe in him. *Sparks of Fire* is primarily a product of this second type of relationship with the poet-prophet-painter. As one of the editors writes, Blake's "urgency led me beyond the academic to this book and to a devotion to human wholeness in my writing, teaching, living, and loving" (p. [461]). Not surprisingly, such a book must be found wanting if evaluated by the standards of traditional historical scholarship. To be appreciated, *Sparks of Fire* has to be seen as an anthology by True Believers preaching to the already converted.

The editors, James Bogan and Fred Goss, stressing the etymology of the word, describe their "anthology" as "a gathering of blossoms" (p. [iv]). Over one hundred ar-

tists, writers, musicians, students, and dreamers contributed their eclectic creations. The collection includes songs, poems (both rhymed and free), book reviews, short stories, pictures, visions, cartoons, cantatas, "conversations" with Blake, mythological charts, astral projections, wish-fulfillment fantasies, mystical experiences, musical scores, explications, photographs of naked bodies in "The Golden Positions," reproductions of Blake's art, reprints of scholarly articles, brief selections from early critics (such as Gilchrist and Swinburne), and a checklist of useful books for beginning students of Blake. What this volume purports to do and what, in large measure, it does do is to open anthology publication to a variety of modes of expression by breaking down the customary distinctions between scholarship and creative art. Yet, it does have its own kinds of generic requirements. All the contributions are, in a sense, pro-Blakean. The Master's Romantic ideology is never questioned.

Apparently, one of the ways of determining if a person is a true Blakean is by the extravagance of his initial response to Blake. These primal experiences often have the characteristics of religious conversion. One contributor, Howard McCord, who preaches "Brother Blake," read *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* while he was flying up the Ganges in a DC-3: he reports that he "would never have landed if the plane hadn't" (p. 59). Perhaps the most exorbitant example in *Sparks of Fire* is Paul Metcalf's claim that when he suddenly "discovered" Blake's paintings, he had "an unrelieved and unrelenting 90-day erection" (p. 168). The transpersonal significance of this response (to anyone other than Mrs. Metcalf) is questionable. In the face of such exaltations, the prudent reviewer hesitates to comment. The road of excess leads to the phallus of wisdom?

Sparks of Fire begins with "A Montage of Quotes [sic] from the Nooks and Crannies of William Blake's Complete Works" (pp. 3-7). This selection sets a high standard of writing which unfortunately is not matched by most of the poetry and prose in the volume. Even Blake's own words fall on hard times in some later sections. In Paul Piech's "Graphic Manifesto," accompanying a much reduced reproduction of his poster print of "The Tyger," he writes that books go on shelves and are forgotten. But this is "not the case with posters; they go on to walls and are looked at. . . . They demand study. People stand and re-read them. They make an impact" (p. 11). Piech also points out that this particular "poem poster" is his press's best seller. Unhappily, he retitles the poem, misquotes the third line of the first stanza, omits a word from the fourth line of the second stanza, and leaves out stanza four entirely. The next contribution in the anthology is Allen Ginsberg's "To Young or Old Listeners: Notes on the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* [sic]." These are the liner notes to his 1969 phonograph record. (The notes were reprinted in the *Blake Newsletter*, 4, Winter 1971, p. 90.) Ginsberg, in his commentary

on "The Little Black Boy," quotes, "And we are put on earth a little space that we may bear the beams of love" (p. 19). But Blake writes that we are put on earth that "we may learn to bear the beams of love." I know that this is a minute particular and that the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life; yet it is as if textual inaccuracies are not just cheerfully accepted by some contributors to this book, but actively promoted by them. To pay close attention to the letter of the text is almost a sign of one's spiritual incapacity. One cannot charge the contributors or editors with mere oversight, for purposeful textual carelessness is part of the volume's implicit ideology. Eric Chaet speaks for more contributors than just himself when he begins his poem, "Report to Blake" (p. 93):

Blake, I won't read your work again right now.
Maybe never, or maybe sometime
when I don't know what else to do.

In all the genres of art, visual and verbal, the quality of the contributions is wildly uneven. Except for British artist Paul Piech's bold linocuts and Finnish artist Bo Ossian Lindberg's historical montages, the graphics are uninteresting and, in several cases, painfully amateurish. Sincerity cannot overcome a complete lack of talent. The poems range in length from Robert Creeley's pleasing "Blakean Haiku" ("I blake for animals. / Who / be you?" p. 331) to lengthy excerpts from sweeping epics. They vary in quality by an equal measure. In a passage from Swinburne's monograph on Blake (1868), reprinted in this volume, he criticizes Blake's poetry for being "at times noisy and barren and loose, rootless and fruitless and informal" (p. 189). Most readers of this journal would probably not assent to this typical nineteenth-century view of Blake. But it does seem to be the kind of verse perpetrated in many of the poems in the volume. There are several worthwhile poems, however, which do suggest a fruitful relationship between the modern poet and Blake. These include the sections from Robert Kelly's erotic epic *The Book of Water*, Clayton Eshleman's confessional "Niemonjima," Roger Zelazny's "The Burning," and Jared Carter's "The Man Who Taught Blake Painting in His Dreams." Least successful are the poets who imitate, rather than assimilate, Blake. One such example is Margaret Flanagan in "The Winter," beginning

Winter! Winter! freezing white
In the polar wastes of night.

Deaf to metrical accent, she questions, "Did He who made summer make you?" (p. 247).

Some of the best scholarly essays, such as Albert S. Roe's "Blake's Symbolism" and Morris Eaves's "Teaching Blake's Relief Etching," are reprints. Since Roe's study was first published in 1953, Ginsberg's record-blurb in 1969, and Eshleman's poem in 1973, one begins to wonder about the accuracy of this volume's subtitle. Scattered references to cannabis, dope, Richard Nixon,

Aldous Huxley, "the fuzz," the Beatles, and psychedelics would seem to place the New Age in the 60s, spiritually if not chronologically. One poem even concludes with the strikingly original phrase, "Far out" (p. 100).

Some of the tastiest reading in the book is in "Notes on the Contributors" (pp. 447-54), where we learn about the authors' previous incarnations and future plans. We wait with bated breath for Dr. Jo-Mo's "autobiographical science-fiction cartoon-novel," now more than ten years in the making. We discover which contributors live in caves or in canyons or on farms. One lives in bliss. Another "lives somewhere in New Jersey." Jonathan Greene "lives at the end of a road to nowhere which makes sitting naked with spouse in the garden possible." Joan Stone works "in a studio overlooking a Kansas wheatfield, combining gestures with words for video." (Gotta watch out for those wheatfields.) Paul Johnson has beaten Urizen at chess. Roger Easson is "warring on Blake's Polypus on the banks of the Mississippi." Several contributors claim direct communication with Blake, but the writing belies all such assertions. F. Adiele maintains that when she compared her short story, "The Fountain," to "some pieces of the Master's poetry that I had never read, I found direct parallels in concepts and even sentences." This may be the most derogatory comment on Blake to be found in the anthology.

Finally, in this remarkable book, even the "Credits" are fun to read. Is there really a Toothpaste Press? a Treacle Press? an Institute of Further Studies? a Kulture Foundation? Floating Island Publication? Hanging Loose Press?

The crowning multimedia dimension of this publication is the record *Blake's Greatest Hits*, sent at no extra charge with hardbound copies and available separately from North Atlantic Books for \$2.50. The "hits" turn out to be Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso repetitiously chanting their way through "Nurse's Song" from *Songs of Innocence*; a country blues version of "Ah! Sun-flower" by Tom Nichols; and Evan Tonsing's instrumental (toy piano and flute), inspired by *The Book of Thel*. Only the last bears listening to more than once.

At the beginning of the anthology, there is a one-page section entitled "What to Do with This Book." It concludes with a quotation from *Jerusalem*, plate 3: "Forgive what you do not approve." Perhaps the editors should have continued quoting from the plate: "& [love] me for this energetic exertion of my talent."¹ In spite of a good deal of what we may not approve and in spite of too many half-Blaked ideas, there is no denying the sense of energy in the book, the sense that many different kinds of talents have exerted themselves in response to Blake. As Bogan and Goss write (p. [v]) in "To the Reader," "Blake is a fire-source but enjoins those who catch flame from him to shine according to their own genius."

¹ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Newly Revised Edition, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 145.