

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

M I N U T E  
P A R T I C U L A R

## Mars and the Planets Three in America

Michael Ferber

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 15, Issue 3, Winter 1981/1982, pp.  
136-137



stand somewhat apart since it uniquely contains the 'Explanations' sheet unbound, whereas all other coloured copies that include this sheet have it bound in one of three positions." Now that it is recognized that this copy does *not* contain the Explanation leaf, it cannot be located as copy I-16. Even if it *did* contain this leaf it would not, according to the editorial criteria presented on pp. 60-62, be appropriately placed as copy I-16 since the surrounding copies, I-13 through I-15, are all seriously imperfect in one regard or another.

Copies I-2 through I-14 have been arranged together by Grant-Rose-Tolley-Erdman, since all those copies contain what the editors have optimistically labeled "grotesque colouring" or "grotesque painting"<sup>7</sup>; within this group copies I-2 through I-7 are arranged together since they contain the leaf of Explanation bound after p. 95. These copies are further arranged "according to the earliness of provenance that can be established with some certainty." Copies I-8 to I-10 have the Explanation leaf bound after the Advertisement, and copies I-11 and I-12 lack the Explanation leaf entirely. Copies I-13 through I-15 also lack that leaf, and are further deficient in lacking either text or colored engravings. The newly-discovered copy of *Night Thoughts* cannot be placed as copy I-16 since that would put it in the midst of seriously defective copies. Since it contains "grotesque colouring," lacks the Explanation leaf, and has demonstrable provenance closest to copy I-12, this new copy can best be located as copy I-12A. It must be pointed out that the editors of *Night Thoughts* are inconsistent in the arrangement by earliness of provenance, and one might at the same time question the wisdom of organizing a census in part on such slight grounds as the binder's location of the Explanation leaf.

It may well be that this colored copy of *Night Thoughts* has escaped the notice of Blake bibliographers since it appeared in the Bishop sale under Young's name at the very end of the last catalogue volume, and was not mentioned under the general Blake heading. When one considers the prices fetched by other Blake works at that sale, it seems that this copy of *Night Thoughts* might well have brought more if catalogued with the other Blakeana earlier in the sale.

<sup>1</sup> William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's "Night Thoughts," edited with commentary by John E. Grant, Edward J. Rose, Michael J. Tolley, co-ordinating editor David V. Erdman (Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Moss, "The Coloured Copies of Blake's *Night Thoughts*," *Blake Newsletter*, 2 (1968), 19-23; G. E. Bentley, Jr., "A Census of Coloured Copies of Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797)," *Blake Newsletter*, 2 (1968), 41-45.

<sup>3</sup> "The Blake Collection of Mrs. William F. Tonner," Philadelphia Museum of Art *Bulletin*, 67 (July-September 1972), 5-31.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Donald Trued, Lutheran Church in America (New York), for permission to publish this note. Inquiries concerning this volume should be addressed to him at 231 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that this leaf was printed to complete this copy of the book, and that it is not therefore otherwise recorded.

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning that plates vary from copy to copy in the presence or absence of engraved imprint lines, a point mentioned by Easson and Essick. Grant-Rose-Tolley-Erdman are right to suggest that uncolored copies exist in which the engraved titlepage to the Second Night appears in the earlier state; one such copy was presented to The Pierpont Morgan Library by Miss Louise Crane in memory of her mother, Mrs. W. Murray Crane, and I have examined two further copies in private collections.

<sup>7</sup> The explanation of this phenomenon will be discussed in a future article in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*.

## MARS AND THE PLANETS THREE IN AMERICA

Michael Ferber

**W**e are still very far from understanding the passage about Mars in plate 5 of *America*, despite the recent proposal, put forth by Rodney M. and Mary R. Baine in *English Language Notes*, 13 (1975), 14-18, that Swedenborg is behind it. I have been puzzling for several years over the Swedenborg quotations they offer, but I cannot see their bearing, however interesting they may be in themselves, on the meaning of the *America* passage. The idea that the spirits of Mars are the best spirits, the notion that Mars represents a balance of intellect and emotions, and the other odd Swedenborgian speculations seem at best only vaguely relevant and at worst quite contrary to the tenor of the rest of the poem. They come up first against our inevitable association of Mars with warfare, an association Blake gives no suggestion we should break. As the Baines admit, moreover, Swedenborg cannot account for "the planets three." Even, finally, if we somehow knew that Swedenborg's *Earths in our Solar System* were the "source," we would still be faced with the problem, worse than the one we had before, of how its meanings fit together with the rest of the poem.

In any case, I have a few tentative suggestions about the passage. I cannot make it all cohere, but the connections I offer are the sort of thing we ought to do to it; someone with a fresher eye will doubtless recast these suggestions to make better sense of the passage.

When the wrathful Prince of Albion arises dragon-like at midnight, he "flam'd red meteors" (3:14-16); this alone would make him resemble the red planet with its terrible wandering comets (5:2-3). When Albion's Angel sees the terrible Orc rising over the Atlantic, Orc first seems a comet and then seems the red planet Mars which once enclosed such terrible comets in its sphere. At that time "the planets three" flew round the crimson disk. I take it that Blake is not distinguishing comets from planets, except for the planet red itself; the terrible comets are "wandering," after all, and "wanderer" is what

"planet" means. To be enclosed in Mars's sphere, as the comets are, and to fly round the disk, as the three planets do, are the same thing, for "sphere" probably has something of its older cosmological meaning as one of the concentric transparent globes around the earth; it can mean "orb" or "orbit" but probably not "disk." So we have the suggestion that Orc was once one of these three planets revolving about Mars.

But then the Sun becomes a problem. It too seems to have been orbiting Mars, either as one of the three or, as I think, a fourth planet-comet, before it was "rent" from the red sphere. Two lines later a voice comes forth and gives the great speech on plate 6 beginning "The morning comes." Isn't this speech about the arrival of the sun from its orbit about Mars? True, the song the redeemed captives sing begins "The Sun has left his blackness," not "redness," but from an earthly vantage the former age seemed black, a dark age of Empire dominated by warfare, or Mars, which of course is only visible at night. Since Orc presides over this dawn, we may associate him with the Sun, once of Mars's sphere. Now he seems, to Albion's Angel or Prince, to be Mars, because he rises warlike against him, but it is the wrathful Prince himself who is the original Mars. It is he who "burns in his nightly tent" before he rises at midnight flaming the red meteors like comets (3:1, 3:14-16).

When Orc the Sun (and son) leaves Mars the wrathful Prince, Orc presumably takes the three planets with him, or threatens to. Who are they? Since Orc-America is wandering out of the British Empire, we should look to see who else may be drawn into orbit around him. I think Blake tells us: it is "Ireland and Scotland and Wales" (15:13), who made up the original Empire. (A less likely threesome is "France Spain & Italy" (16:16), but they seem to be little empires themselves.) The "burning winds" of revolutionary fervor driven by Orc and the fierce Americans cause the Guardians of the three original colonies to forsake their frontiers (abandon the original Empire) and "deform their ancient heavens" (15:11-15). "Ancient heavens," which brings back the astronomical theme, is a phrase we have met before, when the frightened Angel of Albion addresses Orc: "Ah rebel form that rent the ancient / Heavens" (9:14-15). And "rent" we have met once before this, when "the Sun was rent from thy red sphere." The connections seem clear enough. America is the new center, the new sun, for the satellite nations that once revolved around warlike, imperial England, but in erupting out of England's sphere of influence America has taken on the features of its father, at least from the father's point of view.

We need resort to no arcane source to map things thus far, but a few reminders of the common tradition may help fill in the map. The "Archetype of mighty Emperies" may be the ancient palace of Ariston (10:8), but the prototype of mighty Emperies is certainly Rome, which worshipped Mars and waged almost constant war. Rome even set its calendar by Mars, beginning each year on March first: "now the times are return'd upon thee" (9:19). Of course Rome learned from Greece, and especially Troy, to follow after "the detestable Gods of Priam" (*Milton* 14:15); Mars,

as Ares, took Priam's side in the Trojan War. In his first appearance in western literature, in fact, Ares arrives on the plain of Troy with three companions about him, Phobos, Deimos, and Eris, or Fear, Terror, and Strife (*Iliad* 4.439-41). Britain, founded by a son of a royal Trojan who founded Rome, became, in John of Gaunt's words, "this seat of Mars" (*Richard II*, II, i, 41), and Gaunt should know, having fought beside the Black Prince, whom Blake portrays in his *King Edward the Third* as insatiably battle-hungry: "It is my sin to love the noise of war" (3:232).

Whether the passage in *America* 5 can be brought into line with other astronomical passages in Blake I am not sure. In cancelled plate b of *America* itself there are some difficult lines about a comparable eruption, but they bring in the stars and the moon as well. The cancelled lines seem less susceptible of a political reading than the Mars section, and may be about the altering of perceptions when reason subjugates the stars and creates a theory of a heliocentric system governed by laws of gravity. Whatever the lines mean, Blake did cancel them.

I think Blake did not care very much about astronomy or astrology or cosmological speculations of the Swedenborgian sort. All of his astronomical passages seem to be functions of his phenomenology of consciousness or his political and historical myth. The Mars passage has an *ad hoc* character that tempts one to seek a source, but that character is due to its nonce role as a political allegory. Whatever the details of this allegory, the language of stars and planets has been the common vehicle since ancient times of discourse about political events, as the phrase "sphere of influence" should doubly remind us. In Blake's day "revolution" still had more to do with "revolving" than with "revolting," and the vast wheels of blood over the Atlantic (4:6) may alert us to the cyclical paradigm that governed most of Blake's thinking about political change. The American colonists themselves were happy to evoke ancient astronomical terms for their revolution. The "Novus Ordo Saeclorum" on the back of our dollar bill hearkens to the theory of the *apocatastasis* or cosmic renewal in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, and with each new state we add a new star to the blue firmament of our flag.