History

Meteor Beliefs Project: Meteoric imagery in the works of William Blake

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Meteoric images, which are sometimes not clearly distinguishable from cometary ones, in the poems and artworks of Englishman William Blake (1757–1827) are presented and discussed. Attention is drawn too to the turbulent events that occurred during Blake's lifetime, and which influenced his work. An annotated timeline, including major cometary, meteoric and meteoritic occurrences, covering 1757–1827, is also given.

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1 Introduction

According to old Chinese belief, William Blake (1757–1827) was cursed, since there is no question he lived in 'interesting times'. Blake was a visionary English poet and artist. He was fascinated by apocalyptic biblical beliefs and prophecies, and worked elements of these even into artworks commissioned of him to illustrate the texts of other poets. He studied widely in the literature and art of the past. His lifelong artistic heroes were Milton, Raphael and Michelangelo. As a result, his works are suffused with flowing forms and astronomical imagery, including meteors and comets.

Such a brief sketch could quite easily give the impression that Blake was an impractical dreamer, but not so. He was born and brought up in London, where he was trained as an engraver, a profession he continued for the rest of his life. He also painted watercolours, some of which he exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts. In his engraving career, he invented relief etching, a process allowing a copper engraving plate to be used, and repeatedly re-used, as if it were a woodcut block. This centred around using an acid, and an acid-resistant protective solution, to etch out the areas of copper not intended to print, giving the text and design in raised relief. With this process, Blake was able to write, illustrate and print his own works, what he called his 'Illuminated Books'. This and other comments in his writings show he was well-versed in the science of his day.

Blake's life and works cannot be viewed in isolation, so Table 1 (page 172) provides an annotated list of important events from his time, and which moulded the world he inhabited. Such events included the American War of Independence, the Napoleonic Wars, and, of especial relevance to IMO members, the period of denial and eventual acceptance regarding the extraterrestrial nature of meteorites (on which, see Chapters 1 and 2 of (Burke, 1986)). It would be impossible here to give more than this mini-biography of William Blake. For further details on his life, see the biographical references in (Bindman, 2000) and (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998).

In this article, the more obvious meteoric images in Blake's poems and artworks are discussed. Sometimes, the imagery is more cometary than meteoric, but for Blake and his contemporaries, meteors and comets not only looked similar, but were often considered synonymous. This mistaken nomenclature continues occasionally modernly, although not usually among the more astronomically-experienced.

The material discussed is presented in chronological order of composition or creation, as far as this is known. As usual, anyone interested is encouraged to read more fully in the texts extracted from here, or in this case, to view the artworks and any variants as well, since there is much to catch the imagination of those with a feeling for astronomy in Blake's *oeuvre*.

2 Poetical Sketches (1769–1778)

These are the earliest surviving of Blake's poems, and as such are not well-dated. They may have been influenced in part by his seeing the Great Comet of 1769, but the group as a whole was not published until 1783. Two miscellaneous poems and one play from the 'Poetical Sketches' provide items of meteoric interest.

Gwin, King of Norway (Keynes, 1966, pp. 11–14):

> The King is seen raging afar,
> With all his men of might,
> Like blazing comets, scattering death
> Thro' the red fev'rous night.

(lines 81–84.)

This cometary section needs to be seen in the light of a subsequent verse, which gives a more meteoric slant to this concept:

> Like blazing comets in the sky,
> That shake the stars of light,
> Which drop like fruit unto the earth
> Thro' the fierce burning night

(lines 101–104.)

Blake is not intending a link between comets and meteors here. Instead, he is suggesting that unpredictable, chaotic, comets might shake the stars free from their fixed positions, drawing on imagery in the biblical 'Revelation to John' 6:13, where the stars fall to earth like figs dropped from a tree in a high wind.

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In Imitation of Spenser (op.cit., pp. 14–15): In a section describing how Mercury, messenger of the gods, brings Jupiter's decisions to Earth, lines 24–26 run:

> Then, laden with eternal fate, dost go
> Down, like a falling star, from autumn sky,
> And o'er the surface of the silent deep dost fly

The Spenser being imitated is the late medieval English poet Edmund Spenser (circa 1552–1599), most famous modernly for his epic poem 'The Faerie Queene' (first published 1590–1596).

King Edward the Third (op. cit., pp. 17–33): Two passages from this play feature potentially meteoric elements. The first may equally refer to planets, which brighten and fade significantly over time, or may simply be Blake using poetic licence to imagine stars that might move nearer the Earth, and thus brighten for a while. A cometary aspect is possible too, although there is little obviously comet-like about Blake's description.

Scene 1; King Edward, his army and nobles are at the French coast. The King is addressing this assembly, just before knighting his son the Black Prince, and other young nobles:

> The world of men are like the num'rous stars,
> That beam and twinkle in the depth of night,
> Each clad in glory according to his sphere;—
> But we, that wander from our native seats,
> And beam forth lustre on a darkling world,
> Grow larger as we advance! and some perhaps
> The most obscure at home, that scarce were seen
> To twinkle in their sphere, may so advance,
> That the astonish'd world, with up-turn'd eyes,
> Regardless of the moon, and those that once were bright,
> Stand only for to gaze upon their splendour!

(lines 32–42, (op. cit., p. 18).)

The use of such a metaphor is understandable in its context, and is found elsewhere from ancient times in various forms, where stars are regarded as representing humans on Earth. This most commonly features in the idea that a falling star represents someone's death.

Scene 3, at Crecy in France, presents a more meteoric, or possibly cometary, trail. The Black Prince, Sir John Chandos and Lord Audley are holding a meeting. The Prince is speaking:

> ... but the pure soul
> Shall mount on native wings, disdaining
> Little sport, and cut a path into the heaven of glory,
> Leaving a track of light for men to wonder at

(lines 272–275, (op. cit., p. 27).)

3 The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (circa 1790)

One of the earlier relief-etched of Blake's Illuminated Books, this illustrated poem is known from nine copies. Bindman (2000, pp. 106–133) reproduces Copy F from circa 1794, made using Blake's own technique of colour printing, which gave especially deep colours and rich surfaces, in places added to by the artist with pen and watercolour. This is the copy cited from here.

The poem itself describes a journey of religious or philosophical discovery, and is a satire on Emanuel Swedenborg's (1689–1772) 'Heaven and Hell'. Showing elements of influence due to the on-going French Revolution, the book is also a rejection of the Swedenborgians' sect, to which Blake had once been attracted.

The final section of the text, entitled 'A Song of Liberty', presages Blake's 'Prophecy' texts from 1793 and after. It is where the meteoric quotes are found. In it, the anonymous archetypal character called only 'The Eternal Female', gives birth to a fiery child, a new terror, which causes shadows of fear and prophecy to spread through the world. Then, a gigantic deity-like figure appears, the starry king (though it is unclear if this term is his name, or simply describes his appearance):

> [Plate 25 (modern numbering)[1]]
>
> 8. On those infinite mountains of light
> now barr'd out by the atlantic sea, the new
> born fire stood before the starry king!
> 9. Flag'd with grey brow'd snows and thun-
> -derous visages the jealous wings wav'd
> over the deep.
> 10. The speary hand burned aloft, unbuck-
> -led was the shield, forth went the hand
> of jealousy among the flaming hair, and
>
> [Plate 26]
>
> hurl'd the new born wonder thro' the starry night.
> 11. The fire, the fire, is falling!
> 12. Look up! look up!...
>
> ...
> 13.The fiery limbs, the flaming hair, shot
> like the sinking sun into the western sea.
> 14. Wak'd from his eternal sleep, the hoary element roaring fled away;

Note that the line numbering is embedded as part of this section of text, and that the text is here given exactly as Blake set it down, from (op. cit., pp. 131–132). Further description of the starry king suggests he is intended as an ill-defined variant on the biblical Old Testament's god Yahweh, who uses fire and thunder against his enemies, as 'he promulgates his ten commands' (line 18 of the 'Song of Liberty').

[1] Annotations thus: [Plate 25] indicate where the plates were placed in Blake's original. Note that the plate numbering is not always constant between different copies of Blake's Illuminated Books. Those used here and below may apply only to the specific copy cited.

The fiery child hurled by its hair through the heavens, like a meteor, echoes similar descriptions in Greco-Roman myths. Some of these we have examined in earlier Meteor Beliefs Project articles, such as (McBeath & Gheorghe, 2004), regarding Ate being flung by her hair from heaven by Zeus, for instance.

4 The French Revolution (1791)

Although this poem was printed in 1791, it was never published, and may have been deliberately suppressed by Blake when the actual French Revolution turned out to be very different to what he had anticipated. Just a single copy survives, perhaps the proofs. The brief meteoric notes describe Aumont bringing disastrous news to the Revolutionary Council; lines 159–160 in (Keynes, 1966, p. 141):

> ... When Aumont, whose chaos-born soul
> Eternally wand'ring a Comet and swift-falling
> fire, pale enter'd the chamber.

The 'swift-falling fire' seems probably meteoric in this context, curiously linked to a comet, but any such connection is at least as likely because comets and bright to brilliant meteors are superficially similar in appearance.

5 The Approach of Doom (1792)

This is a relief and white-line etching, showing to the lower right a huddled, fearful group of around seven standing adults in long robes, with bare feet, near a stylized, step-like shore. They are gazing out over a dark sea, at night. The sky seems either very hazy, misty, or cloudy. One woman at the back of the group may be holding a young child. In the sky to the top left corner is a pale, smoke-like, irregularly curving trail, which seems to broaden as it passes off the centre-left edge of the etching. The group are staring intently to where this line should meet the horizon, and the front members of the group are lit up as by a bright light, suggesting this may be a brilliant fireball's trail in the sky.

On its own, this image would not draw our interest here. However, the design is an almost identical mirror image of a larger composition in ink and wash, also called 'The Approach of Doom', but dated to circa 1785, by William's beloved younger brother Robert, who died tragically early in 1787, aged 19. Robert's design has the huddled figures to the left side, on a lighter area, gazing out over a dark expanse to a slightly curved, fiery trail, which ends off the right-hand edge of the sketch. This trail seems more cometary or meteoric than in William's etching. Robert's image shares much in common with several paintings and etchings of the great bolide of 1783 August 18, such as those by the Sandby brothers, Paul and Thomas, Samuel Scott, and Henry Robinson, a meteor which is described in some contemporary reproductions as a *draco volans* or 'flying dragon'. As the meteor was widely-seen in a partly clear sky from southern England, it is quite possible both Blake brothers might have seen the meteor, and later used their recollections of it in their art. It is clear from the artworks and reports by observers still preserved today that this bolide had a distinctly cometary appearance, as it streaked across the sky, shedding a trail of glowing fragments. This may explain where some of William Blake's meteor-comet links derive.

A detailed discussion, complete with an excellent set of images of the great fireball, is given by (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998, pp. 63–83 and Plates III and IV). This includes various of the Sandby illustrations, and both Robert and William's respective 'Approach of Doom' artworks (conveniently on facing pages 82 and 83, Figures 40 and 41).

6 Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793)

Prepared by Blake in a relief-etched form, 17 copies of this Illuminated Book survive, of which (Bindman, 2000, pp. 141–152) presents Copy G, that Blake watercoloured by hand. This gives a bolder and clearer appearance to the images than the colour-printed 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell' ones, with which the effect of the illustrations, if not their content, has much in common in places.

The poem deals with themes of female sexuality and liberation, matters Blake was familiar with thanks to his connection to radical groups led by Mary Wollstonecraft (later Mary Shelley) and Joseph Johnson. In essence, the work is a tragedy of a free-spirited, mystic, archetypal heroine, and her relationship with two male archetypes who represent the heart and the head, emotion and reason.

'Albion' in Blake's works was an ancient man, who represented England, but also all of mankind. His daughters in this poem are the women of England, held in effective slavery by the dictates of society, and who yearn for America and freedom. Such a connection between freedom and America is derived from Blake's view of the American War of Independence, ended a decade before this work, as freeing the American people from British rule.

On Plate 8 (Blake's numbering) of the book is the meteoric quote, part of a depressing lament:

> ... & all the night
> To Turn the wheel of false desire: and longings that wake her womb
> To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
> That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more.

(op.cit., p 149.)

7 America A Prophecy (1793)

This Illuminated Book was carefully printed from the relief etchings in blue-grey ink originally. The style of design in the illustrations suggests the watercolouring of some later copies indicated a change of mind by Blake. Copy H in (Bindman, 2000, pp. 153–172) is one of the

first four printed, so shows the designs in monochrome to good effect. Thirteen later copies also survive.

The poem itself is the first of Blake's major 'prophecy' texts. It was his reaction to 'The Terror' in the French Revolution, and the especially violent events which led up to that phase. Three sections are particularly meteorically relevant, along with the illustrations on three pages.

Firstly, from Plates 5–6 (modern numbering), early in the section making up the bulk of the poem entitled 'A Prophecy', after George Washington has been speaking comes:

> [Plate 5]
>
> The strong voice ceas'd; for a terrible blast swept over the heaving sea;
> The eastern cloud rent; on his cliffs stood Albions wrathful Prince
> A dragon form clashing his scales at midnight he arose,
> And flam'd red meteors round the land of Albion beneath
> His Voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes,
>
> [Plate 6]
>
> Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night.

(op.cit., pp. 158–159.)

On Plate 5, midway down the page, is an illustration of a naked man with his back towards us, lying horizontally, holding an enormous blazing torch (which some commentators call a trumpet) also horizontally in both hands. A gout of flames from the torch longer than the outstretched man and the torch combined, gush out towards the left-hand side of the page, there mingling with other flames, and those scattered in a line above the first quoted text line here. Three naked figures, a man, a woman and a child, are fleeing the fires in the bottom left-hand corner of the plate, looking back in terror (?) towards the flames. The form of the torch-bearer, his long hair streaming from right to left, like the torch flames, implies he is flying in a strong wind blowing from right to left too. The torch looks very similar to a serpentine, maned, fire-breathing dragon at the bottom of Plate 16, which creature is also drawn moving from right to left, and seems deliberately created to mirror part of the illustration on Plate 5. Other illustrations in the work feature serpentine/draconic creatures, though not associated with fires, so this is all in keeping with the nature of the Book as a whole.

On Plate 6, two naked humans, one tightly clutching a naked, standing child, cower in fear at the bottom right of a low, sketchy landscape, with clouds above. In the sky, higher than the clouds, is a scaly, serpent-tailed, feather-winged dragon. It is flying from right to left, with its two, curiously human, paws and arms held before it, fingers extended in a fashion suggesting it is casting a spell. A zigzag line, like a lightning bolt, seems to emanate from near its left 'hand' and ends near the stomach of a naked flying man, positioned as if diving towards the ground. His long hair and beard flow back, impressing that the air is rushing past him in his descent. In his left hand he holds a slender staff, tipped with a tiny *fleur-de-lys*-style spear point. The man may be wearing a cloak, which curls out in a serpentine 'tail' behind him, ending near the dragon's paws. This may not be a cloak at all, but a draconic tail, as if he is changing into a dragon — or a dragon changing into a man. The idea the man and dragon may be the same is heightened as a zigzag lightning bolt descends from just below the man's left wrist. This is clearer on the coloured versions, where the line is often coloured differently to the nearby clouds. The lines of text below and beside these two beings include the following:

> Albion is sick. America faints! enrag'd the Zenith grew.
> As human blood shooting its veins all round the orbed heaven
> Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood
> And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea;
> Intense! naked! a Human fire fierce glowing, as the wedge
> Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire
> With myriads of cloudy terrors banners dark & towers
> Surrounded; heat but not light went thro' the murky atmosphere
> The King of England looking westward trembles at the vision
>
> [Plate 7]
>
> Albions Angel stood beside the Stone of night, and saw
> The terror like a comet, or more like the planet red
> That once inclos'd the terrible wandering comets in its sphere.
> Then Mars thou wast our center, & the planets three flew round
> Thy crimson disk; so e'er the Sun was rent from thy red sphere;
> The Spectre glowd his horrid length staining the temple long
> With beams of blood; & thus a voice came forth. and shook the temple

(op.cit., pp. 159–160.)

Coupled with the accompanying illustrations, there is a strong meteoric theme to all this, disastrously portentous, with a superbly evocative description of a personified fireball. As noted in Section 5 above, brilliant fireballs were still commonly known as 'flying dragons' in Blake's time. The lines about the enraged zenith, as if with blood-red veins pulsing across the sky, is suggestive of a great all-sky auroral storm as well.

Additional blazing humanoid meteor-like beings recur in Plate 14:

> In sight of Albions Guardian, and all the thirteen Angels
> Rent off their robes to the hungry wind, & threw their golden scepters
> Down on the land of America. indignant they descended
> Headlong from out their heavenly heights, descending swift as fires
> Over land; naked & flaming are their lineaments seen
> In the deep gloom, by Washington & Paine & Warren they stood
> And the flame folded roaring fierce within the pitchy night
> Before the Demon red, who burnt towards America

(op. cit., p. 167.)

The 13 fiery angels descending so meteorically are the personifications of the 13 States of America, the original 13 colonies which had risen in revolt against Britain in the American War of Independence.

8 Europe A Prophecy (1794)

Commonly bound with 'America A Prophecy' by Blake, among the 12 known copies, this is another of his relief-etched Illuminated Books, but this time, full colour printed, in some editions with additional watercolour and pen retouchings. The poem is a solemn, allegorical, and general, brief resumé of Europe's history — mostly wars, famines and plagues — between the birth of Christ and the revolutionary events of Blake's own time. Two short passages, and one illustration, are of especial interest to this investigation. All quotes are from Copy B in (Bindman, 2000, pp. 173–191).

From Plates 3–4 (Blake's numbering):

> And Urizen unloos'd from chains
> Glows like a meteor in the distant north
> Stretch forth your hands and strike the elemental strings!
> Awake the thunders of the deep,
> The shrill winds wake!

(op.cit., pp. 178–179.)

Urizen is one of a catalogue of invented beings Blake repeatedly used in his works. Here, he represents the reactionary powers of the world, and is sometimes called 'Albion's Angel'. In other poems, Urizen features as a personification of reason, a figure who imposes order on the world following the biblical Fall of Man.

Further down Plate 4 is another hint of meteoric substance:

> The horrent Demon rose. surrounded with red stars of fire,
> Whirling about in furious circles round the immortal fiend.

Lastly, on Plate 9 (op. cit., p. 184), is a great crested serpent in a spiral coil, running down the left-hand side of the page. Its scaled skin is mottled with many colours, an impressive display of Blake's colour-printing ability. The serpent's head is surrounded by a blazing, fiery nimbus, possibly indicative of a meteoric dragon again.

9 The Tyger (1794)

This is perhaps the best-known of Blake's short poems modernly. It was published as part of a collection in a relief-etched Illuminated Book called 'Songs of Experience', first published in 1794. It was generally sold combined with an earlier Illuminated Book, 'Songs of Innocence' (1789), and as such was the one Illuminated Book to achieve some commercial success in Blake's lifetime. Bindman (2000, pp. 42–96) shows the combined work, Copy W, Blake's own, which was added to by Blake using pen, watercolour, and in places gold. 'The Tyger' is on Plate 42 (Blake's numbering).

Leaving aside the 'burning bright' nature of Blake's 'Tyger', and the burning fire in ite eyes, the verse of potentially meteoric interest runs:

> When the stars threw down their spears
> And water'd heaven with their tears:
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

(op. cit., p. 84.)

Olson & Olson (1990) drew attention to a possible connection between heavenly tears, spears and meteors, including citing the supposed name for the Perseids as the fiery tears of St Lawrence. From Martin Beech's detailed examination (Beech, 1997), it is clear there is little evidence beyond a very scant note or two to support the Perseids being known by this pseudonym. The Perseid maximum would have fallen on August 10 (St Lawrence's Day) during Blake's lifetime at least, and his interest in, and use of, astronomical imagery is undoubted. Plus, the Perseids seem to have produced unusually notable activity in 1779, 1784 and 1789, some of which events Blake may have seen. If there was an association between the Perseids as the tears of St Lawrence, Blake would almost certainly have known of it. It may be the link came about because of the strong returns in the 1770s and 1780s. This is entirely conjectural, however. Fiery spears as meteors have a better-established pedigree, with our modern term 'bolide' deriving from the Greek 'bolis' or 'bolidos', meaning 'a dart' (a short military throwing spear) or 'a missile'.

Spear-armed stars disarming and weeping as an image is superficially reminiscent of events in the biblical 'Revelation to John', with its war in heaven between God's champion Michael and his angels, against the draconic Satan and his angel followers. However, 'Revelation' 12 contains no such imagery, although 'Revelation' as a whole does feature a lamb frequently. It is typical of Blake's thinking that he might take a biblical concept and rework it to better fit to his beliefs and experiences. It would be entertaining to believe that Blake knew of the St Lawrence's tears — meteor shower link, and then slipped that knowledge into a pair of rather cryptic lines

in one of his shorter poems. We may never know the truth, either way.

10 Vala or The Four Zoas (circa 1794–1803?)

This is an extremely long poem, written and revised repeatedly between about 1794, based on watermarks in part of the paper manuscript, until, or probably after, 1803. It remained unpublished on Blake's death, and no version was printed until 1893. The first complete manuscript, including all Blake's deletions, was published only in 1925.

Four sections are quoted here, which refer somewhat obliquely to meteoric effects. There are though several other passages scattered through the text which still more vaguely hint at meteoric imagery, or elements of mythology that are given in more distinctly meteoric terms elsewhere, but which are not here described specifically as meteors, falling stars, or the like.

'Vala' is Blake's term for Nature personified, or the worship of Nature, which worship in Blake's conception was delusional, leading only to despair. 'Zoas' in Greek is the name for the four beasts which feature in the biblical books of 'Revelation' and 'Ezekiel'. Blake uses the four Zoas to personify the four aspects of man — Reason (as Urizen, noted in Section 8 above), Imagination (Los; or sometimes Urthona, who represents Los's spiritual existence), Emotion (Luvah), and the Body or its senses (Tharmas). The four unified become Blake's Albion (see Section 6 on Albion). The biblical Fall of Man is expressed in Blakean terms by the splitting of Albion into these four beings, who then battle one another. Their reunification in Blake's works represents the Christian Redemption of Man.

From the section 'Night the Second', lines 41–44 (Keynes, 1966, p. 281)[2]:

> Albion gave his loud death groan. The Atlantic Mountains trembled.
> Aloft the Moon fled with a cry: the Sun with streams of blood.
> From Albion's loins fled all peoples and Nations of this Earth,
> Fled with the noise of Slaughter, & the stars of heaven fled.

Night the Third, lines 130–152 (op. cit., pp. 295–296):

> "And art though also become like Vala? thus I cast thee out!"
> So loud in thunders spoke the King, folded in dark despair,
> And threw Ahania from his bosom obdurate. She fell like lightning.
> Then fled the sons of Urizen from his thunderous throne petrific;
> They fled to East & West & left the North & South of Heaven.
> A crash ran thro' the immense. The bounds of Destiny were broken.
> The bounds of Destiny crash'd direful, & the swelling sea
> Burst from its bonds in whirlpools fierce, roaring with Human voice,
> Triumphing even to the stars at bright Ahania's fall.
> Down from the dismal North the prince in thunders & thick clouds —
> As when the thunderbolt down falleth on the appointed place —
> Fell down, down rushing, ruining, thundering, shuddering,
> Into the Caverns of the Grave & places of Human seed
> Where the impressions of Despair & Hope enroot for ever:
> A world of Darkness. Ahania fell far into Non Entity.
> She Continued falling. Loud the Crash continu'd, loud & Hoarse.
> From the Crash roared a flame of blue sulphureous fire, from the flame
> A dolorous groan that struck with dumbness all confusion,
> Swallowing up the horrible din in agony on agony.
> Thro' the Confusion, like a crack across from immense to immense,
> Loud, strong, a universal groan of death, louder
> Than all the wracking elements, deafen'd & rended worse
> Than Urizen & all his hosts in curst despair down rushing.

'Ahania' is the personified female aspect of Urizen in Blake's mythos. She represents pleasure, but also sin, because of her nature.

There is much in the above description to support a meteoritic view, coupled with the various earlier mythological events outside Blake's personal conception. Indeed, there are so many possible sources involved, it is difficult to single out specific threads. It is probably best not to try, but to simply enjoy the pattern of the weave as a whole.

The third quote comes from the probably earlier version of 'Night the Seventh'. Blake prepared two versions of this 'Night', but did not decide definitely on including either. Lines 25–26 run (op. cit., p. 320):

> Then bursting from his troubled head, with terrible visages & flaming hair,
> His swift wing'd daughters sweep across the vast black ocean.

The 'his' here probably refers to Orc, Blake's personification of the energy and spirit of revolution, most especially the American Revolution. Orc is a fiery being,

[2] In presenting the quotes from this poem here, a few potential alternative words crossed out in Blake's manuscript, but included marked as 'deleted' in Keynes's book, have been omitted here without comment.

whose fires burn up and cleanse away the hypocrisies of conventional morality.

Finally, from 'Night the Ninth Being the Last Judgement', lines 40–41 (op. cit., p. 358) comes:

> Or where the Comets of the night or stars
> of asterial day
> Have shot their arrows or long beamed spears
> in wrath & fury.

Comments like this recall the discussion regarding 'The Tyger' earlier, and to wonder what this work might have been like had Blake completed and illustrated it as one of his Illuminated Books, as he seems to have intended at one time.

11 The Book of Ahania (1795)

Having introduced Ahania, this short Illuminated Book particularly concerns her. The text covers elements of the biblical tale of Moses leading the Children of Israel, but Moses is here called 'Fuzon'. Blake draws on aspects and characters from his Urizen mythos in this work, in which Ahania starts out as representing pleasure, but becomes sin under Urizen's moral code. Only a single complete copy exists, as an intaglio etching, with three plates containing colour printed images, as given in (Bindman, 2000, pp. 233–237).

There are two main meteoric/meteoritic themes. The first begins with the very start of the poem, Chapter I.1, Plate 3 — modern numbering; (op. cit., p. 234):

> 1. Fuzon, on a chariot iron-wing'd
> On spiked flames rose; his hot visage
> Flam'd furious! sparkles his hair & beard
> Shot down his wide bosom and shoulders
> On clouds of smoke rages his chariot
> And his right hand burns red in its cloud
> Moulding into a vast globe, his wrath
> As the thunder-stone is moulded.

Chapter I.3, Plate 3:

> The Globe of wrath shaking on high
> Roaring with fury, he threw
> The howling Globe: burning it flew
> Lengthning into a hungry beam

Chapter I.9, Plate 3:

> But the fiery beam of Fuzon
> Was a pillar of fire to Egypt.

Urizen is the target of this wrathful meteoric Globe, and he prepares revenge. He slays a great serpent, then uses its venom to poison some rocks, forming its ribs and sinews into a great black bow. Chapter II.5–6, Plate 4 (op. cit., p. 235):

> . . . on this Bow.
> A poisoned rock plac'd in silence:
> He utter'd these words to the Bow.
> 6: O Bow of the clouds of secresy!
> O nerve of that lust form'd monster!
> Send this rock swift, invisible thro'
> The black clouds, on the bosom of Fuzon.

Chapter II.9–10, Plate 4:

> 9. Sudden sings the rock, swift and invisible
> On Fuzon flew, enter'd his bosom;
> His beautiful visage, his tresses,
> That gave light to the mornings of heaven
> Were smitten with darkness deform'd
> And outstretch'd on the edge of the forest
> 10: But the rock fell upon the Earth,
> Mount Sinai, in Arabia.

(Note two long 's's have been converted to the modern short form in this quote.)

The Earth shakes under the impact of the rock. The Wold Cottage meteorite fall in late 1795 is unlikely to have influenced Blake's thinking here, unless the work was finished later than generally thought. It seems intriguingly prescient regarding the fall, however.

12 Blake's illustrations to Edward Young's 'Night Thoughts' (1795–1797)

In 1795, Blake was commissioned to prepare illustrations for Young's long poetic work 'The Complaint, or, Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality'. This was a very popular poem in its day, concerning death and the consolation of Christianity, and the intention was for Blake's artwork to form the basis of an engraved edition. Blake completed 537 watercolours in two years (all of which survive), but only engraved 43 plates of a planned 200 as, after the first four of Young's nine 'Nights' were published in a single volume during the summer of 1797, the project was abandoned.

In the poem, Young mentions comets five times, indicating his grasp of the nature of periodic comets, as understood by the late 18th century (see (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998, pp. 86–95, including Figures 44–50) for further notes on comets in Young's poem). However, Blake used comets and meteors more liberally in his illustrations, and also added millennial features not found in Young's sometimes apocalyptic poetry. It is not always clear whether Blake's illustrations were meant to show comets or meteors. Sometimes the text from Young's poem, which occupies a block filling one-quarter of most of Blake's watercolours, assists in identification, but not always. Eight illustrations are discussed here, although many more have a strong astronomical content, especially in 'Night IX'. All the images can be found in (Grant et al., 1980), but only a fraction are given in colour, unfortunately. Some are also shown, in monochrome only, by Olson & Pasachoff (loc. cit.).

Night IV, page 40, watercolour 149 (Grant et al., 1980, Vol. I): Illustrating a section of text which poetically describes the thousand-year path of a comet in the Solar System, this is probably intended to show a personified comet. Blake's painting has a naked man in side view descending from top right to mid-lower left, his legs at right angles to one another, as if he were running or leaping. All-but his lower legs, upper torso, head and left arm are hidden by the text block. His head is surrounded by a glowing eight-pointed star, and his

hair blows in curls into a broad, fiery tail in which his left leg lies, streaming back to the top right corner. His left arm is extended, and holds a downward-pointing stake or wand, the tip of which has two faint, rounded, back-curving barbs (?) or decorations, rather like a *fleur de lys*. This figure is reminscent of the descending 'dragon-man' of Plate 6 in 'America A Prophecy' (Section 7 above), even to the extent that part of the fiery comet-tail is drawn as if it was a short cloak or cape reaching from the back of the figure's head.

Night V, title page, watercolour 158 (op. cit., Vols. I & II; in colour in Vol. II): The opening page of 'Night the Fifth' shows a simple landscape. It has a walled city on fire in the background, to the right of the text block. Reddened clouds drip tongues of yellow fire towards a spired dome in the city, while reddened fiery circles with flaming tails also fall from the sky over the city, and in front of its crenellated wall. In the foreground stands a pale woman, tears flowing down her face, looking back to the city being destroyed. Her very long hair passes into the contours of the filmy, ankle-length robe she is wearing. Her hands are raised by her chest, palms outward, in horror. Whether the tadpole-like fiery objects are really meteoric, or Blake's meteoric interpretation of biblical fire from heaven descending on the unfortunate city, is not explained.

Night VI, page 15, watercolour 236 (op. cit., Vol. I): The text block again hides most of a naked man, this time descending vertically, seen from behind. Only his lower legs, lower arms, upper torso and head can be seen. In each hand he grasps a large, glowing sphere with a fiery tail, while in the background, three smaller fiery-tailed spheres descend, each with a slightly curving tail. The text makes no comment that could help in identifying these objects, but it would seem very probable Blake intended them as meteors.

Night VII, page 41, watercolour 313 (op. cit., Vol. II): Blake's watercolour shows two bright, five-pointed stars with fiery tails, looking very meteoric, or possibly cometary, partly in dark clouds across the whole illustration. Their tails point back towards the upper right, and are roughly parallel to each other. To the right of the text block, a fiery human figure with a fearful face drops in a slight curve from top to bottom of the painting, trailing a roiling cloud of smoke. The figure's hair partly streams back into the flames surrounding and trailing back from its body. Although the accompanying part of Young's text does not refer specifically to meteors or comets, it is clear what Blake has drafted. Young is referring to the human soul's annihilation and death (lines 818–823); note the long 's's in all the quotes from Young's 'Night Thoughts' here have been replaced by the short modern ones:

> ... And this spirit,
> This all-pervading, this all-conscious Soul,
> This Particle of Energy divine,
> Which travels Nature, flies from Star to Star,
> And visits Gods, and emulates their Pow'rs,
> For ever is extinguisht. Horror! Death!

Blake may well be using the familiar folklore regarding shooting stars and death in this painting, while Young's lines seem also to hint at this perceived connection between human life and meteors.

Night VII, page 48, watercolour 320 (loc. cit.): A zigzag of light descends from the centre-top of the image, ending in a multi-pointed, large flare of light to the upper mid-left, beside the text block. Within the flare is a very young, smiling, naked child. Much of the background away from the right edge is a very dark, cloudy wash. Although seeming more lightning-like than meteoric, Young's text suggests otherwise (lines 964–968):

> ... Poor Man, a Spark,
> From Non-existence struck by Wrath divine,
> Glitt'ring a Moment, nor that Moment sure,
> 'Midst Upper, Nether, and Surrounding *Night*,
> His Sad, Sure, Sudden, and Eternal Tomb.

Night IX, page 25, watercolour 443 (loc. cit.): This depicts a distinctly cometary star in a starry sky, over water, the comet's tail broad, luxuriant, and spreading out towards the top centre to top right edge. A group of elderly, bearded men in long robes stand quiescently on the shore to the bottom right corner, gazing towards the comet's head. Thus the composition is almost identical to the Blake brothers' versions of 'The Approach of Doom' (Section 5 above), except that the group are not afraid, and the object of their interest is completely in view. Young's text explains why (line 195):

> *Comets* good Omens are, when duly scann'd.

Night IX, page 45, watercolour 463 (op. cit., Vols. I & II; in colour in Vol. II): A busy, swirling, complex design, with spirals and curves surrounding numerous naked human figures and several animals (an ox, two sheep, and a lion), fills the bulk of this composition. Scattered across it are eight stars, most with more or less fiery tails, as if falling in various, though chiefly downwards, directions, and a fiery circle with multiple rays extending from it — perhaps a star, a bright meteor, or a tailless comet. While the text does not suggest meteors, it does mention a manuscript of heaven, described as a parchment scroll. Blake seems to have interpreted this as the heavens rolling up like a scroll from 'Revelation' 6:14 (which has the stars falling in the immediately preceding line). The colour version shows red flames lick from parts of the scroll too, while the more obviously meteoric tailed stars are done in reds, yellows or oranges.

Night IX, page 86, watercolour 504 (op. cit., Vol. II): The text describes flying with a bold comet, and this is what Blake has shown. A huge, seven-pointed star to the top left, has a long, broad, fiery tail descending from it, curving off to the bottom right. Within the tail is a naked man, shown from the front in a pose as if swimming up towards the comet's starry head, while his hands cling to the tail, as if it were solid fabric, like a curtain or hanging.

13 Blake's illustrations to the Poems of Thomas Gray (1797–1798)

Immediately after the Edward Young project was stopped, Blake was commissioned to illustrate the poems of Thomas Gray. He prepared 116 watercolours for this in 1797–98, all of which remain intact, but regrettably, once more, the project was terminated before completion, and the illustrations were never published in Blake's lifetime.

One of these watercolours was to illustrate Gray's 'The Bard, A Pindaric Ode' of 1754–57, whose meteoric quote was mentioned earlier in these articles (McBeath & Gheorghe, 2003) — 'Loose his beard, and hoary hair / Stream'd like a meteor, to the troubled air' (lines 19–20). Blake's watercolour does not include these lines in its text block, but he has shown a mighty, naked, crowned king floating above a sketchy landscape, holding a fiery, three-pronged whip in his right hand, each prong of which ends in a multi-pointed star. Directly below him, and clearly the objects of his next blow with his starry flail, are two fleeing figures, a man and a woman, with a second woman standing behind them, stooping and hiding her face in her hands as if in tears. Both women wear long robes, while the man has only a loincloth. The fleeing woman looks back at the celestial figure in fear, her face round and her hair streaming back in three main locks, making her look very meteoric. This seems to be Blake's reinterpretation of Gray's lines regarding hair streaming to the wind like a meteor. (The watercolour is shown in black and white in (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998, p. 84, Fig. 42).)

One other of Blake's watercolours for this project shows a cometary or meteoric object, rising from the bottom left above a city roofscape into a starry sky: a four-pointed star, with a long, straight, faint tail. A large, star-crowned, female angel, with very long, flowing hair and huge feathered wings, holding a trumpet in each of her widespread hands, hovers in the air filling the right half of the picture. This illustrates the title page to Gray's 'Ode for Music'. Olson & Pasachoff (op. cit., p. 93 and p. 85, Fig. 43 for the image) suggest this meteor/comet may have been intended as a metaphor of fame, '— swift, brilliant, and perhaps fleeting.'

14 From a Letter to Thomas Butts, 1800 October 2

Thomas Butts was a purchaser of Blake's works over many years, beginning in 1799. He lived near Blake in London, so this letter is one of only a relatively few between the two, written while Blake and his wife were living at Felpham on the Sussex coast of south-east England, in a cottage provided by William Hayley, a significant patron of Blake at this time. The Blakes moved to the cottage in September 1800.

Most of this letter was actually a poem dedicated to Butts, lines 25–32 of which run (Keynes, 1966, pp. 804–805, Letter 16):

> ... Each grain of Sand,
> Every Stone on the Land,
> Each rock & each hill,
> Each fountain & rill,
> Each herb & each tree,
> Mountain, hill, earth & sea,
> Cloud, Meteor & Star,
> Are Men Seen Afar.

Blake commented it was his first vision inspired by his new seaside location. It also confirmed his earlier and subsequent poetic beliefs concerning how things can be seen as people, or personified as such, as we have found already.

15 Milton, A Poem in 12 Books (circa 1804–1810)

Part of the reason Blake went to Felpham was to be near his patron William Hayley, to assist with Hayley's biography of the great English poet John Milton (1608–1674). Blake was already fascinated by Milton, whom he viewed as the poetic redeemer of England as a nation, and with whose life Blake closely identified. This fascination manifested itself in this work, the preliminaries for which were probably begun around the time the Blakes left Felpham and returned permanently to London, in September 1803. Blake continued to work on the poem and its etchings for his Illuminated Book during the following years, and the first of the four surviving copies was likely not printed until 1810 or 1811. It was prepared using Blake's relief etching process, with the full page illustrated plates using a new technique of black- and white-line engraving, giving an especially bold style. The prints were then watercolour-washed by hand.

As for the poem itself, given Blake's intimate interest in Milton, it is unsurprising it is a complex and difficult work. The narrative often jumps from biblical events, to those in British history, Blake's own life, or to places and people from Blake's personal mythos, and back. Characters merge and separate, sometimes allegorically as concepts, but there is little here that is straightforward and stable. As some commentators have noted, this is similar to some kinds of insanity, and not all readers are able to deal with this. While the work is definitely worth reading, this latter is an important caveat.

From the perspective of modern physics, there are intriguing ideas in 'Milton' regarding time, more specifically non-linear time. Time-travel in this work is natural and inevitable, not merely possible, and Blake views events as simply variations on an underlying, continually-repeated, pattern. Time and space are commonly circumvented with an almost dream-like simplicity.

A complete version of Copy C is given by Bindman (2000, pp. 245–296), but those who may find further detailed discussion useful should also see Essick & Viscomi (1993), who reproduce Copy C too.

The illustration at the top of Plate 1 (Bindman, 2000, p. 247), sets up the central theme of the whole work - certainly of 'Book the First'. This has a lively, huge, fiery, five-pointed star as the head of a comet to the top right, with a broad, fan-like tail descending from

it across the width of the entire Plate, in which is the word 'MILTON'. Two naked humans, that to the right female, recline below this, their hands raised as if to reach up into the comet's tail, while tiny naked figures and birds mingle with the letters of Milton's name, or between and below them. The toes of the two main figures just touch, where a plant grows from the earth. Although distinctively cometary here, this close association of Milton with a cometary/meteoric body is quite deliberate, as are the two near-antithetical human figures.

Plate 10's poetic text provides a description of a flaming, celestial harrow, pulled by blazing horses, in a very cometary, or meteoric, form [(op. cit., p. 257); Plate 10, lines 16–30 of the transcript in (Essick & Viscomi, 1993, pp. 133–134)]:

> Satan astonishd, and with power above his own controll
> Compell'd the Gnomes to curb their horses, & to throw banks of sand
> Around the fiery flaming Harrow in labyrinthine forms.
> And brooks between to intersect the meadows in their course.
> The Harrow cast thick flames: Jehovah thunderd above:
> Chaos & ancient night fled from beneath the fiery Harrow:
> The Harrow cast thick flames & orb'd us round in concave fires
> A Hell of our own making, see, its flames still gird me round
> Jehovah thunder'd above: Satan in pride of heart
> Drove the fierce Harrow among the constellations of Jehovah
> Drawing a third part in the fires as stubble north & south
> To devour Albion and Jerusalem the Emanation of Albion
> Driving the Harrow in Pitys paths. 'twas then, with our dark fires
> Which now gird round us (O eternal torment) I form'd the Serpent
> Of precious stones & gold turn'd poisons on the sultry wastes.

Blake's mythos encompassed the idea that a character could physically divide into a female 'emanation' and a male 'spectre'. In the above segment, Albion's emanation, or female aspect, is Jerusalem, both a place — effectively in Blake's conception, part of England (= Albion) — and a person. The reference to 'Drawing a third part' calls to mind 'Revelation' 12:3–4, where Satan as the huge, red, multi-headed dragon, sweeps one-third of the stars from the sky with his tail, as well as 'Revelation' 8, which repeatedly refers to the destruction or damage of one-third of various items, including one-third of the stars.

Plate 14 reveals the crux of the meteoric matter in 'Milton', beginning with a first appearance of Milton's dead shadow, returning to Earth [(Bindman, 2000, p. 261); Plate 14, lines 17–20 of the transcript in (Essick & Viscomi, 1993, pp. 140–141)]:

> Onwards his Shadow kept its course among the Spectres; call'd
> Satan, but swift as lightning passing them. startled the shades
> Of Hell beheld him in a trail of light as of a comet
> That travels into Chaos: so Milton went guarded within.

[(ibid.); (loc. cit.), lines 45–50]:

> With thunders loud and terrible: so Miltons shadow fell,
> Precipitant loud thundring into the Sea of Time & Space.
> Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star.
> Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or the swift;
> And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there;
> But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe.

In the gap between the '...Sea of Time & Space' and the 'Then first I saw him...' lines is a small illustration of a naked man, left foot advanced, upper torso bent right back, and arms spread wide, as if falling from a shock. A six-pointed star with a fan-like, fiery tail is descending onto his left foot. Thus is Milton's soul and poetic spirit imparted into Blake.

Plates 29 and 33, though separated slightly in the Book, must be treated as a connected pair. Plate 29 is at the end of 'Book the First', or just at the start of 'Book the Second', depending on how one views it (Plate 30 is titled 'Book the Second'), while Plate 33 is the fifth page of the second Book (there are two Plates 32 in the finished work). Each Plate is a full page illustration of a man in a pose like that of the small figure described from Plate 14. Plate 29's figure is virtually identical in all respects - upper torso bent back, arms wide, left foot extended, with a glowing, five-pointed star and broad fiery tail set below his knee, above his left foot. In some copies, the figure is naked, but in others, Blake added a pair of trunks in pen and wash (as in Copy C, (Bindman, 2000, p. 276)). The figure stands on a flat, green area, with three stone steps rising off the left edge behind his right foot. A heavy, dark cloud hovers over the steps, while another cloud surrounds the falling star's tail, up to the top, left and right edges of the Plate. Above the figure, in a gap in the cloud mass, but spread over the burning tail of the star, is the name 'WILLIAM'. The background between the clouds is painted a daytime blue.

Plate 33 (op. cit., p. 281) is captioned 'ROBERT', and is a darker, less sharply-defined illustration. The figure stands in a near mirror image of that in Plate 29, so his right foot is advanced, with a five-pointed

star above it. The star's fiery tail is less well-developed than Plate 29's, as is the dark cloud near the top of the tail, which seems to have been partly erased to allow the caption to be added. The figure stands on a green ground surface, with four steps rising behind him (the number of steps is somewhat variable between copies; as few as 3, while Copy C has a hint of a fifth step in its painting). The sky background is a dark blue, perhaps as if a twilight, or very smoky, sky. Again, in some versions, including Copy C, trunks have been added to the man.

The two figures are in poses suggesting a mingling of shock and ecstasy, as they are overwhelmed by Milton's spirit entering into them, in the form of the burning falling stars, as described on Plate 14. The captions indicate the two represent William and his beloved younger brother Robert, whose death in 1787 so devastated William. The fact their toes would touch were the two Plates brought together shows a definite link, as discussed for the two main figures on Plate 1 above, while their slight separation in the text may refer to their bodily separation because of Robert's death. This may also be why the 'William' plate is more clearly drawn. It has been suggested that Plate 29 is a daytime scene, while Plate 33 is set at night.

The imagery of the foot, and the steps in the background of both Plates, indicates a journey, in a spiritual as much as a physical sense, the stairs especially inferring an ascending one, improving the powers of the conjoined Blake-Milton entity. It is interesting that Milton's spirit as the meteor must descend all the way to Earth to make this possible.

Robert's appearance is quite remarkable, as he occurs nowhere else in 'Milton'. The fact he features in this connection may be a remembrance of his 'Approach of Doom' sketch (Section 5 above), and its potential inspiration by the great bolide of 1783 August 18. William believed his brother was always with him in spirit too, and he maintained he was in constant communication with Robert, following Robert's death. Indeed, it was Robert's spirit that William said had told him the basics of his relief etching technique. It would be easy to scoff at this, but many artists believe they are inspired by something intangible, beyond themselves, what the ancient Greeks personified as the Muses. Many other people have encountered such a meteor-like flash of inspiration, some sudden new realization or understanding, which turns that person's world-view into something completely different. Blake understood this. His choice of a meteor bringing him the new inspiration, while implying his brother, though dead, enjoyed — or had enjoyed while alive — a similar electric moment, was no idle whim.

Further discussion regarding all this can be found in (Essick & Viscomi, 1993, pp. 27–28) and (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998, pp. 112–113, including Figs. 54 and 55).

16 Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion (circa 1804–1820?)

This is the last, and arguably greatest, of Blake's Illuminated Books, created using his relief etching and white-line engraving processes, added to by pen, watercolour, and in places, gold. His comments show he was thinking about 'Jerusalem' in July 1803, before he left Felpham, and while the title page is dated 1804, it is obvious that no complete copy (the work runs to 100 plates) was ready before 1820; some still later. Only one of the five surviving copies, Copy E, was watercoloured throughout, and this is reproduced in (Bindman, 2000, pp. 297–397).

As the culmination of his prophetic poetry in the form he invented to display it, it is superb and unparalleled, if overwhelming for anyone coming to it for the first time. For all this, there are surprisingly few clearly meteoric items within it.

Plate 20 (op. cit., p. 317) shows a number of five- and six-pointed stars in a dark, night-time sky, with three crescent Moons. Three of the five-pointed stars have fiery, sometimes swirling, tails. All the illustrations on this Plate are as small marginal interpolations, or interlinear to the text. The text on this page makes no reference to these celestial objects, however. In addition, there are two fiery, swirling, star-like shapes, leaving fiery trails, being drawn or pushed by groups of white-haired male figures in blue-grey robes. These call to mind the imagery of the fiery Harrow drawn across the constellations described in Plate 10 of 'Milton' (Section 15 above). The tailed stars certainly seem meteoric, while the rotating fiery 'harrows' could also be cometary.

Plate 83, lines 80–81 (op. cit., p. 380) include:

> . . . while Los all night watches
> The stars rising & setting, & the meteors
> and terrors of night.

Lastly, and shortly before the poem's end, the Night of Death is ending, as Eternal Day dawns. The four Zoas (on these, including Los, see Section 10 above), giant forms here, take up mighty bows, each facing a cardinal direction: Urizen — south — a breathing gold bow; Luvah — east — a shining silver bow; Tharmas — west — a flaming brass bow; Urthona — north — a thundering iron bow. Plate 98, lines 1–3 (op. cit., p. 395):

> Then each an Arrow flaming from his Quiver
> fitted carefully
> They drew fourfold the unreprovable String.
> bending thro the wide Heavens
> The horned Bow Fourfold, loud sounding
> flew the flaming Arrow fourfold.

17 Conclusion

Despite the length of this examination of the meteoric imagery in William Blake's poetry and art, it has done little more than scratch the surface of the totality of his surviving works. There remains much of wonder and

delight to be found elsewhere, as astronomical imagery abounds throughout his entire canon, and many of the Illuminated Books in particular contain so many tiny, intricate, marginal illustrations, it is possible to find something new at virtually each return to even well-known texts.

Having begun in the depths of a 'red fev'rous night', it seems appropriate we should end with four superb, blazing meteoric Arrows drawing the night to a close. If only real meteors and fireballs were so obliging at the end of a night's observing. Like Blake, we can always dream.

18 Note

Aside from the printed works referred to, at least one copy of most of Blake's Illuminated Books is available at `www.blakearchive.org`. However, the plate numbering used does not always conform to that used here. [*Editor's note* — The author had wanted to include several such illustrations as part of this paper. Although they are long out of copyright, the owners of copies tend to charge reproduction fees, and the cheapest we could find were around €75 per illustration. Readers are encouraged to look at this website — Blake's work is worth the effort.]

Table 1 – An annotated timeline of events influential on the life, times and works of William Blake. Details were extracted from: (Baldick, 1993, pp. xi–xxiii), (Beech, 1994a, b, c, 1995a, b), (Bindman, 2000), (Burne, 1989), (Knöfel & Rendtel, 1994), (Lovecraft, 1967, pp. 433–454), (McSween, 1987), (Olson, 1985), (Olson & Pasachoff, 1998), (Pearce, 1999), and (Ridpath, 1989).

Year	Events
1757	William Blake born, November 28.
1758	First predicted return of Comet 1P/Halley, 1758–59. John Wesley, the English founder of the Methodist Christian sect, claimed this return of Halley's Comet as a warning of the impending Apocalypse.
1760	Charles Messier began compiling his catalogue of deep-sky, comet-like objects. This was published in several parts from 1771–1784.
1763	Treaty of Paris ended the Seven Years' War in North America and Europe.
1764	Unrest against British rule in the North American colonies, leading to the American War of Independence, began. The beginning of Gothic literature with Horace Walpole's 'The Castle of Otranto'. (The peak of Gothic literature is generally considered to be the 1780s–1790s.)
1766	Hydrogen discovered by Henry Cavendish.
1767	Blake's brother Robert born.
1768	James Cook's first voyage to the southern Pacific Ocean began (ended 1771). Royal Academy of Arts founded.
1769	Great Comet, or 'Napoleon's Comet' (C/1769 P1), seen for much of the year, taken retrospectively by Napoleon Bonaparte's supporters as a portent of his glorious reign; by his enemies as foretelling the devastating wars his reign brought.
1772	Slavery declared illegal on English soil, June 22. James Cook's second voyage to the South Pacific began (ended 1775). Emanuel Swedenborg died.
1775	American War of Independence began.
1776	Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his monumental 'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'; subsequent volumes appeared at intervals until 1788.
1779	World's first iron bridge built at Coalbrookdale on the River Severn in England, the latest element in the on-going late 18th century Industrial Revolution. Strong Perseid return, August 10.
1780	Luigi Galvani's first experiments with the effects of electricity on dead frogs. Blake's first painting exhibited at the Royal Academy. Hugely destructive anti-Catholic riots in London; later tales have it that Blake took part.
1781	William Herschel discovered Uranus.
1782	Blake married Catherine Butcher or Boucher. John Goodricke first determnined the regular periodicity of Algol (β Persei).
1783	End of American War of Independence. First balloon ascent by the Montgolfier brothers. A brilliant, fragmenting bolide was widely-seen from southern England on August 18.
1784	Blake's father died. Strong Perseid return, August 10.
1785	William and Catherine Herschel's deep-sky catalogue published.
1787	Blake's brother Robert died. Blake was devastated by his untimely passing.
1788	George Gordon (later Lord) Byron born. Blake invented the relief etching process.
1789	The Bastille stormed in Paris on July 14, the start of the French Revolution. Strong Perseid return, August 10.
1791	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died.
1792	Blake's mother died. Percy Bysshe Shelley born.
1793	French king's execution led to France declaring war on England. This war continued on and off until 1815. 'The Terror' began in France in September.

Year	Events
1794	French 'Terror' ended with the execution of Maximilien Robespierre on July 28. Ernst Chladni published his treatise on meteorites, the beginning of scientific meteorite analysis. Erasmus Darwin published 'Zoonomia', positing the evolution of animals based on adaptability and competition.
1795	Large meteorite (about 25 kg) fell from a clear, daytime sky at Wold Cottage, north-east England on December 13. James Hutton, one of the founding fathers of geology, published his 'Theory of the Earth'. John Keats born.
1796	Rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, as army commander in Italy. France planned to invade Ireland, and incited rebellion against England there.
1798	Naval Battle of the Nile and ending of rebellion in Ireland forestalled French invasion plans. 'Philosophical Magazine' first published in Britain. The initial issue discussed meteors. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' published. Brandes and Benzenberg carried out their first simultaneous triangulated meteor observations.
1799	French Revolution ended. Napoleon's *coup d'état* in France. Leonid storm, November 11–12, seen from Europe westwards to the Americas, including in the British Isles.
1800	Alessandro Volta invented the electric battery.
1801	Giuseppe Piazzi discovered asteroid 1 Ceres, January 1. The first four asteroids were found between 1801 and 1807. Richard Trevithick invented the high-pressure steam engine, and his first steam locomotive ran in this year.
1803	Fall of around 2000–3000 stony meteorites at L'Aigle in France on April 26. An investigation by Jean-Baptiste Biot confirmed the extraterrestrial nature of these meteorites. Fresh French threats of invasion led to Blake being arrested on August 12 on the Sussex coast as a suspected spy.
1804	Napoleon became emperor. Blake acquitted of spying on January 11.
1805	Naval Battle of Trafalgar; British fleet defeated a combined French and Spanish one. On land, Napoleon's army defeated the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz.
1807	Bright comet, C/1807 R1.
1808	John Dalton published his first work on the chemical atomic theory, leading to the modern chemical Periodic Table.
1810	High point of Napoleon's power, as Holland and North Germany were annexed.
1811	Great Comet (C/1811 F1), also called 'Napoleon's Comet', was visible to the naked eye from 1811 April 11 to 1812 January 20, sometimes in daylight, a record visibility not broken until Hale-Bopp (C/1995 O1) in 1995. Its tail reached about 70° in length in 1811 December, and its coma was estimated as larger than the Sun's diameter in 1811 October. Napoleon claimed the comet was his guiding star, and foretold his victorious forthcoming campaign against Russia. (Leo Tolstoy used a fiery comet in his novel 'War and Peace', as a symbol of war and the renewing power of love, probably drawing on this Great Comet.)
1812	USA declared war on Britain. French armies were defeated in Spain and Russia. The French 'Grande Armée' was devastated during its retreat from Moscow in the Russian winter. Comet 12P/Pons-Brooks visible to the naked eye at its first recorded apparition. British caricaturists repeatedly used humorous renditions of a comet to satirise Napoleon, following his defeat in Russia.
1813	Karl Friedrich Gauss calculated the first accurate orbit for asteroid 1 Ceres. Napoleon's army defeated in the 'Battle of the Nations' at Leipzig.
1814	Napoleon defeated at Paris, and exiled to the island of Elba.
1815	Anglo-American War ended by the Treaty of Ghent. Napoleon returned to power in France for 100 days, until his army was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo by the Anglo-German army, on June 18. Napoleon was exiled to the island of St Helena. The Tambora volcano on Sumbawa in Indonesia erupted catastrophically on April 10, said to be the greatest volcanic eruption in recorded human history. In Europe, the event passed unnoticed, except for brief press reports in November.
1816	The 'Year Without a Summer' in Europe and North America; dismal, cold weather all year, plus crop failures in Europe, North America and the Far East, attributed modernly to the 1815 Tambora eruption. Beginning of a long period of often violent social unrest in Britain.
1818	Mary Shelley's Gothic novel 'Frankenstein' published.
1819	Ernst Chladni claimed most of his scientific contemporaries accepted his idea that meteorites could and did fall from the skies, by this year, an ending to the controversy about meteorites which had persisted from approximately the 1780s.
1820	Royal Astronomical Society founded. Charles Robert Maturin published 'Melmoth the Wanderer', considered by some the last true Gothic novel.

Year Events

1821 Napoleon died in exile. Michael Faraday built the first electric motor. English poet John Keats died.

1822 William Herschel died. English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley died.

1824 English poet Lord (George Gordon) Byron died.

1825 First steam locomotive railway opened between Stockton and Darlington in north-east England.

1827 Ludwig van Beethoven died. William Blake died, August 12.

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