

A Whiter Mars

A Socratic Dialogue Of Times_{To} Come

by **Brian W. Aldis**

SHE We want to present a history of the development of Mars, and how we have

progressed spiritually. It is a glorious and surprising story, a history of human society understanding and recreating itself. While I am speaking to you from Mars, my Earthbound avatar is speaking to you from our old parent planet. Let us cast our minds back before everything changed, to the Age of Estrangement, when nobody had ever set foot on Earth's neighbouring planet.

HE So. Back to the twenty-first century and a barren planet. The first

arrival on Mars found an empty world, free of all the imaginary creatures

which have been supposed to haunt the Earth: the ghosts and ghouls and

long-legged beasties, the vampires, the leprechauns, the elves and

fairies - all those fantasy creatures which beset human life, born of dark forests, old houses, and ancient brains.

SHE You've forgotten the gods and goddesses, the Greek gods who gave their

names to the constellations, the Baals and Isises and Roman soldier gods, the vengeful Almighty of the Old Testament, Allah - all imaginary super -beings which supposedly controlled mankind's behaviour before humanity could control itself.

HE You're right, I forgot them. They were all creaking floorboards in the

cellar of the brain, inheritances from eo-human days. Earth was over

populated with both real and imaginary persons. Mars was blessedly free of all that. On Mars, you could start anew. It's true the men and women who arrived on Mars had a lot of conflicting Mars legends in their heads...

SHE Oh, you mean that old stuff. Percival Lowell's Mars of the canals and the

dying culture. I still have a kind of nostalgia for that grand sunset vision - wrong in reality, right as imagery. And Edgar Rice Burroughs's Barsoom...

HE And all the horrors which earlier humanity invented to populate Mars - H.G.

Wells's invaders of Earth, rather than the gentle Hrossa and pfiQtriggi of

C.S. Lewis's Malacandra.

SHE Life, you see, always this bizarre preoccupation with life, however

fantastic. Tokens of the insufficiency of our own lives.

HE But the first men who went to Mars came from a technological age. They

harboured another idea in their heads. Certainly they were hoping to find

life of some sort, archebacteria being reckoned most likely. They nourished

the idea of terraforming the Red Planet and turning it into a sort of

inferior second Earth.

SHE Having at last managed to reach another planet, they desired to make it

like Earth! The idea seems strange to us now.

HE They had not acquired the habit of living away from Earth. 'Terraforming'

was an engineer's dream - a novelty. Their perceptions had to change. They

stood there, gaping - aware for the first time of the magnitude of the task

and of its aggressive nature. Every planet has its own sanctity.

SHE Even at the most impressive moments in life, a voice seems to speak within

us, the mind communing with itself. Percy Bysshe Shelley was the first to recognise this duality. In a poem on Mont Blanc, he speaks of standing watching a waterfall and says:

Dizzy Ravine! - and when I gaze on thee

I seem as in a trance sublime and strange

To muse on my own separate phantasy,

My own, my human mind, which passively

Now renders and receives fast influencings, Holding an unremitting interchange With the clear universe of things around...

HE Yes, the words strike to the very essence of human perceptions. As

phenomenology declares, our inner discourse shapes our outward perception.

I'll remind you that the great Martian expedition was not the first

scientific excursion which set out to discover a new world. It too had trouble with its perceptions.

SHE You're speaking of the way the West was won in the case of North America?

The slaughter of the Indian nations, the killing of buffalo? Wasn't all that a primitive kind of terraforming?

HE I was referring to the expedition of Captain James Cook in H.M.S. Endeavour

to the South Seas. In his three hundred and sixty-six ton wooden ship

Cook eventually circumnavigated the globe. The Endeavour was commissioned

to observe the 1769 transit of Venus across the face of the Sun, among

other objectives. The choice of Joseph Banks, then only twenty-three, as scientific observer was a good one. Banks had a trained connoisseur's eye.

It was regarded by the enlightened Royal Society as vital that accurate drawings should accompany written descriptions of all new discoveries. Banks's artists had their problems. Scientific diagrams of landscapes and plants and animals were made, but artistry also crept in. Drawing faithful records of the native peoples of the Pacific was beggared by the preconceptions of the time. Alexander Buchan took an ethnographic view, drawing groups of natives free from the conventions of neo-classical style; whereas Sydney Parkinson disposed of them according to the dictates of composition. In Johann Zoffany's

famous canvas, The Death of Cook, many of the participants in that picture assume classical postures, presumably to increase the air of Greek tragedy.

Thus the unfamiliar was made palatable for the folks back home, was made to bend to their preconceptions.

SHE Mmm. I see what you're getting at. Behind the difficulties of coming to

terms with the unknown lay a philosophical problem, typical of that century. Were the misfortunes attendant on mankind owed to a departure from, a defiance of, natural law - or was it that mankind could raise itself above the brute beasts only by improving on and distancing himself from nature? The city-dweller or the Noble Savage?

HE Exactly. The discovery of the Society Islands favoured the former idea, that of New Zealand and Australia the latter.

Australia and New Zealand, when their barren shores were first sighted, fostered the concept of improvement and progress. When Captain Arthur Phillip founded the first penal colony in Australia, at Port Jackson in 1788, here joined in an eighteenth-century version of terraforming. Down went the trees, away went the wild life - including the natives - the area was flattened, and Phillip declared, "By degrees large spaces are opened, plans are formed, lines marked, and a prospect at least of future regularity is clearly discerned, and is made the more striking by the recollection of former confusion." Ah, the straight line! - the marker of civilisation, of capitalism!

The overwhelming belief in conquering nature - in somehow distancing ourselves from nature, from something of which we are an inescapable part prevailed for at least two centuries.

SHE Possibly this dichotomy of perception was reinforced by Cartesian dualism,

which made a sharp distinction between mind and body - the sort of thing Shelley spoke against. A metaphorical beheading...

HE I'm unsure about that. It may be as you say.

SHE What we need to bear in mind is that a belief can take rather firm hold

once it circulates among the population. No matter if it's totally erroneous. Even in these days of interplanetary travel, half the population of Earth still believes that the Sun orbits the Earth, rather than vice versa. What conclusions do you draw from that - other than that ignorance has more gravitational weight than wisdom?

HE Or that we are more hive-minded than we care to believe?

SHE Well, let's get back to Mars and those first arrivals here. 5,

HE Try to recall what the situation was in those days. With the growth in

economic power of the Pacrim countries in the twenty-first

century, the International Dateline had been removed to the centre of

the Atlantic, and American trade was locked into that of its Asian

neighbours. The cost of all Martian expeditions was met by a consortium,

formed by US, Pacrim and EU space agencies. That was EUPACUS, a long

forgotten acronym. However, the UN, then under a powerful and far

sighted General Secretary, George Bligh, brought Mars under its own jurisdiction. Once you were on Mars, you came under Martian law, not under the laws of your own country.

SHE It was a sensible provision. A lesson had been learnt from the days when

Antarctica had been a continent set aside for science. Just occasionally we manage to learn from history! We wanted the Red Planet to be a White Mars - a planet set aside for science.

HE That's an ancient battlecry!

SHE Old battlecries still retain their power. In the mid-twenty-first century,

there was a movement on Earth called APIUM - the Association for the

Protection and Integrity of an Unspoilt Mars. It was regarded as a rag

-taggle of eccentrics and Greens at first. APIUM wanted to preserve Mars

as it had been for millions of years, as a kind of memorial to early

man's early dreams. Their claim was that every environment has its sanctity, and sufficient environments had been ruined on Earth without starting out at once to monkey with another planet - an entire planet.

However, the people who landed on Mars in that first expedition had to justify costs. They were going to prepare to terraform it. It was a foregone conclusion for them. They were bound by the pressures of their rather primitive societies.

HE Ah, yes, terraforming. That word and concept coined by a SF writer, by

name Jack Williamson. How alluring and advanced it was when first coined.

It was another of those ideas which took root easily in the fertile soil

of the human mind.

SHE Yes. There was nothing sinister about it. The astronauts simply took the

idea for granted. It was a part of their mythology - meaning an old way of thought. They imagined they'd improve the planet and make it like Earth. They had glowing computer designs to seduce them, showing all of Mars looking like the Cotswolds on a sunny day.

HE But they also carried in their minds opposed preconceptions. Mars as a

rubbish dump of rock, 'suitable for development', like something from a

diagram of 'Nuclear Winter' - that old guilt-myth - or Mars as a

heavenly body, formidable, aloof, enduring. Similar to the two opposed

ideas that Captain Cook had held three centuries earlier. And-

SHE They left their ships and stood there, like stout Cortez, silent upon a

peak in Darien in Keats's poem, with the whole vista of the planet

confronting them, and-

HE And?

SHE And they knew - it was that discourse of Shelley's between the outer and

inner world - they knew that terraforming was just a dream, a terrestrial city-dweller's computer phobia. It was undesirable. To use an old term, it was blasphemous, against nature. You know how city-dwellers fear nature. In a kind of vision, they saw that this environment must not be destroyed. That it carried a

message, an austere message: Rethink! You have achieved much -achieve more ! Rethink!

HE Rethink - and re-feel - because it was experience which brought a revolution in their understanding. They knew as they stood there they were at a turning point in history. Yet, you see, some people claim this vital decision not to terraform sprang from a powerful speech by UN

Secretary George Bligh, who argued against it. His words were often quoted:

‘Terraforming is a clever idea which may or may not work. But cleverness is a lesser thing than reverence. We must have reverence for Mars as it has always existed. We cannot destroy the millions of years of its solitude merely for cleverness. Stay your hand!’

SHE You believe those words of Bligh’s were in the astronauts’ minds when they landed?

HE I partly believe so. I wish to believe so because staying the hand is often a better, if a less popular, way to proceed than conquest. Anyhow, they did stay their hands. It proved the beginning of a tide in the affairs of men. Fortunately, you couldn’t exploit Mars: there were no

natural resources to exploit - no oil or fossil fuels, because there had never been forests. Limited underground reservoirs of water. Just - just that amazing empty world, so long the target of mankind’s dreams and speculations, a desert rolling ever onward through space.

SHE The old-fashioned word ‘space’, had by then been relegated to the etymological museum, by the way. That highway of teeming particles was now known as ‘matrix’.

HE Okay. Thousands on thousands of young folk desired to visit Mars, just as, two centuries earlier, they had walked, rolled or ridden westwards across the face of North America. The UN had to formulate rules

for visitors. Two categories of people were permitted to go, travelling uncomfortably in EUPACUS ships: the YEAs and the DOPs. (Laughs]

SHE It was a sensible arrangement. Or at least it worked, given the

difficulties of the journey. The YEAs were Young Educated Adults. They had to pass an examination to qualify. The DOPs were Distinguished Older Persons. They were selected by their communities. The cost of an Earth -Mars round trip was high. DOPs were paid for by their communities. The YEAs paid in work, doing a year’s community service before their journey.

HE So the giant fish farms off Galapagos and Scapa Flow , and the bird ranches
of the Canadian north, and the vineyards of the Gobi were developed...
all by voluntary labour.

SHE And the afforestation of most of the Outback in Australia .

HE And of the great flow of people who went to Mars, that wonderful new Ayers
Rock in the sky, to meditate, to explore, to honeymoon, to realize
themselves - all found themselves up against the reality of the cosmos. All
stood therein awe, breathing in the laws of the universe.

SHE And one of them said, marvelling, 'And that I have come here to experience
all this means I am the most extraordinary thing in the entire galaxy.'

HE Then came the crash!

SHE Oh yes, just when minds were changing everywhere! And the crash marked the
end of a certain exploitive chain of thought. Pundits in 2085 called it the end of the Twentieth Century
Nightmare. The consortium EUPACUS collapsed . It was a case of internal corruption. Billions of dollars
had been embezzled and, when the figures were examined, the whole company fell apart.

EUPACUS had a monopoly on interplanetary travel, and on all travel arrangements. All that traffic
stopped. Five thousand visitors were on Mars at the time , together with two thousand administrators,
technicians and scientists - Mars of course makes an excellent observatory for studying Jupiter and its
moons.

Seven thousand people - all stranded here!

HE But Mars is a big desert island. By this time, it was a complex community ,
lacking Wild West atmosphere, with serious business to do. There were no
guns on Mars; no mind-destroying drugs; there was no currency, only limited
credit.

SHE Another important thing. No animals. For there was no grazing or fodder to

behad, no animals lived on Mars, except for a few cats. Vegetarianism became a positive thing rather than a negative. The habit was emulated by terrestrials. In fact, renewed concern for animals by demonstrations and lobbying, induced many governments to bring in Animal Rights laws. A revulsion to rearing animals for slaughter and human consumption was widespread. The human conscience was getting up off the couch!

HE You must be mistaken about the animals. I remember seeing documentaries showing your Martian domes full of bright birds. And there were fish, too.

SHE Oh, birds and fish, yes, but no animals. The birds were genetically manipulated macaws and parrots. Instead of squawking, they sang sweetly. They were allowed to fly free in limited areas of the main domes, the 'tourist' domes. They were prized. No one attempted to kill and eat them during the period when Mars was isolated.

HE So the Martians remained cut off, luckily under wise leaders. During the period of isolation, water - the fossil water from underground reservoirs

was strictly rationed. It was needed for agriculture and went through electrolysis to provide necessary oxygen. The isolated community had reason to cohere. Without coherence there was no chance of survival.

SHE The multi-billion collapse of EUPACUS brought financial crisis to the

business centres of Earth, to LA, Seoul, Beijing, London, Paris, Frankfurt. The disillusion with laissez-faire capitalism was complete. So much so that 'Stay your hand!' became a popular phrase. Stay your hand from grasping another ice-cream, another beer, another car, another house! You stayed your hand out of pride.

It was five years before a limited flight schedule with Mars was re-established. By then the idea of community service had sunk in, reinforcing the concept of the world's population as a unit, and as part of Earth's necessary biota. Discovering that the Mars community had achieved a frugal Utopia, that all there were lean but fit, was a cause for great rejoicing - most nationalities had one or more representative members on White Mars.

HE The Martian example hastened the swing away from exploitive capitalism

towards the managerialism that had already begun. Laissez-faire passed

away into sleep, as communism had done before it. The epoch of peaceful

Earth opened, with leadership concentrating on integrating its component

parts, and a general tendency to behave more like park-keepers than robber

barons.

SHE Ah, but with the increase in YEA and DOP pilgrims to the heroic White Mars, the planet ran out of water. The underground reservoirs, such as they were, had been drained dry. It looked like the end of a civilisation on Mars.

HE I'm not sure it was as bad as that, because already manned probes were forging further out into the system and the realm of the gas giants, mighty Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. Unexplained activity had been sighted between Neptune and its large satellite, Triton. So a base was established on Jupiter's moon, Ganymede-

SHE I have visited Ganymede City. It's a pretty swinging place. People live for the day. I fear Mars gets bypassed now, because views of Jupiter from Ganymede and the other moons are so inexhaustibly wonder-making.

HE From Ganymede, it was just a hop to the neighbouring moon, Oceania- the rechristened Europa - where views of Jupiter are even more stunning.

There's a floating base on Oceania, built on top of a kilometre-deep ice Hoe. Under the ice crust, remarkably, is a fresh water ocean - pure fresh water, without life, or without life until we seeded some there.

That water gets despatched in bladders to Mars. Mars now has a large lake slowly turning into a sea of fresh water. Its main problem is solved.

SHE And so of course Mars is being terraformed, at last. The human race has moved on and no longer needs a monument to old dreams and illusions.

HE Mars's period of frugal Utopia did not last. But the blackness of the

twentieth century, with all its wars, genocides, killings, injustice and greed had faded away. Somehow, we found the strength, in Bligh's words, to stay your hand. The human race is happier - less tormented - as it launches out towards the stars.

SHE To meet with all those other species we don't yet know of... Maybe with God?

HE Unlikely. God was one of those creaking floorboards in the brain we left behind when we got to Mars.

SHE I cannot accept that. What would become of the human race if there was no god?

HE What became of it during the twentieth century when supposedly there was a god? You believers might say, 'He saved us from destroying ourselves with our nuclear weapons. That was his will.' Equally, if we had destroyed

ourselves, that would have been God's will too, according to you. There's no God - yet I hate him. I hate the way religious belief has caused us to waste our energies looking away from our own intractable problems. He stood in our way of enlightenment, like Jung's Shadow, barring us from accepting that we are made of the ashes fallen from the flanks of extinct suns. That we are universe-stuff. The universe is where we belong.

SHE You must allow me strongly to disagree. God has been our inspiration, lifting us from the material. Have you never listened to all the beautiful sacred music composed in his name, or seen all the great paintings faith has inspired?

HE The paintings were painted by men. God didn't have half the musical genius of Johann Sebastian Bach, I can tell you. You must give up this illusion, comforting although it is. Giving it up is part of the process of becoming adult.

SHE I don't understand you.

HE You mean you don't understand evolution.

SHE Don't be silly. Science and religion are not in conflict.

HE No - it's experience and religion which are in conflict.

SHE And what will we do without God?

HE We must learn - as we are slowly learning - to judge ourselves, and our own actions.

SHE You won't shake my faith. I'm sorry you don't have it.

HE Faith? Being unmoved by facts? Come, you must not pride yourself on such blindness. Think how the concept of God separated us from the rest of

nature, set us above the animals, gave us the example of puissance and abasement. Made us self-preoccupied idiots.

SHE That's blasphemous rubbish. You sound almost inhuman when you speak like that.

HE We are almost becoming another species, we space-goers. Physical and mental change is rapid now. We have developed from the gifts of that

tormented twentieth century, from the discovery of the DNA code and the subsequent advance of genetic engineering. The blades shuttling to and fro across matrix between Oceania and Mars are living entities developed by bio-engineering skills from the modest bladder-wort.

SHE You remember the excitement when Ganymede was made habitable by new plant insect stock. The plantsects were despatched in unmanned probes. They

soft-landed on Ganymede, dispersed, reproduced rapidly, and prepared the

satellite for us when we arrived there. By that time, the plantsects

had culminated, consuming themselves, leaving their bodies for compost. Such advances would have been impossible in the early days of Mars landings, with their mechanistic approach.

HE And did God walk on Ganymede? No, he stood in our way! Was he not Carl

Jung's monstrous Shadow, cutting ourselves off from a realisation of

ourselves as being intrinsically a part of the whole cosmos - ashes from extinct suns?

SHE Try to love God, whether or not you think he exists. Hatred is harmful to

you. God was necessary - essential, perhaps - for some ages past, and the Saviour represented a

condition for us to aspire to in the long period of darkness.

HE [Laughs] You're saying we have saved ourselves?

SHE I'm saying only that the concept of a loving Saviour helped us, once upon a

time. But certainly we've done away with hatred on the outer satellites, along with most forms of illness; genetic revision and improved immune systems have altogether clarified our minds.

HE It was the understanding that we are an intrinsic part of nature which

transformed our perceptions when we arrived on Mars. Much has followed. The bleak Martian globe cleared our minds. A prompting of our

symbiotic relationship with plant life speeded the development of warm

-blooded plants. It has radically changed our being and appearance. That

epiphyte growing on your head, much resembling an orchid, is now

women's crowning glory! It permits you to carry with you a micro

atmosphere, a temperature-gauge and other perceptions, wherever you go.

SHE As do the ferns sprouting round your venerable cranium. You are right

there. We're now true terrestrials, half-human, half-plant, creatures of nature, well-equipped to venture throughout a waiting universe.

HE Well, it's been pleasant to talk with you. You must go on your way. I have

to retire; I'm growing too old to travel. We shall not meet again.

Farewell, dear spirit!