

Davidson, John. *Fleet Street and Other Poems*.  
London: E. Grant Richards, 1909.  
<https://archive.org/details/fleetstreetother00davi>

## FLEET STREET

WISPS and rags of cloud in a withered sky,  
A strip of pallid azure, at either end,  
Above the Ludgate obelisk, above  
The Temple griffin, widening with the width  
Below, and parallel with the street that counts  
Seven hundred paces of tessellated road  
From Ludgate Circus west to Chancery Lane :  
By concrete pavement flanked and precipice  
Of windowed fronts on this side and on that,  
A thoroughfare of everything that hastes,  
The sullen tavern-loafers notwithstanding  
And hawkers in the channel hunger-bit.

Interfluent night and day the tides of trade,  
Labour and pleasure, law and crime, are sucked  
From every urban quarter : through this strait  
All business London pours. Amidst the boom

## FLEET STREET

And thud of wheel and hoof the myriad feet  
Are silent save to him who stands a while  
And hearkens till his passive ear, attuned  
To new discernment like an erudite  
Musician's, which can follow note by note  
The part of any player even in the din  
And thrashing fury of the noisiest close  
Orchestral, hears chromatic footsteps throb,  
And tense susurrant speech of multitudes  
That stride in pairs discussing ways and means,  
Or reason with themselves, in single file  
Advancing hardily on ruinous  
Events ; and should he listen long there comes  
A second-hearing like the second-sight  
Diviners knew, or as the runner gains  
His second-breath ; then phantom footsteps fall,  
And muffled voices travel out of time :  
Alsations pass and Templars ; stareabouts  
For the new motion of Nineveh ; morose  
Or jolly tipplers of the Bolt-in-Tun,  
The Devil Tavern ; Johnson's heavy tread  
And rolling laughter ; Drayton trampling out  
The thunder of Agincourt as up and down  
He paces by St. Dunstan's ; Chaucer, wroth,

## FLEET STREET

Beating the friar that traduced the state ;  
And more remote, from centuries unknown,  
Rumour of battle, noises of the swamp,  
The gride of glacial rock, the rush of wings,  
The roar of beasts that breathed a fiery air  
Where fog envelops now electric light,  
The music of the spheres, the humming speed  
Centrifugal of molten planets loosed  
From pregnant suns to find their orbits out,  
The whirling spindles of the nebulae,  
The rapture of ethereal darkness strung  
Illimitable in eternal space.

Fleet Street was once a silence in the ether.  
The carbon, iron, copper, silicon,  
Zinc, aluminium vapours, metalloids,  
Constituents of the skeleton and shell  
Of Fleet Street—of the woodwork, metalwork,  
Brickwork, electric apparatus, drains  
And printing-presses, conduits, pavement, road—  
Were at the first unelemented space,  
Imponderable tension in the dark  
Consummate matter of eternity.  
And so the flesh and blood of Fleet Street, nerve

## FLEET STREET

And brain infusing life and soul, the men,  
The women, woven, built and kneaded up  
Of hydrogen, of azote, oxygen,  
Of carbon, phosphorus, chlorine, sulphur, iron,  
Of calcium, kalium, natrum, manganese,  
The warm humanities that day and night  
Inhabit and employ it and inspire,  
Were in the ether mingled with it, there  
Distinguished nothing from the road, the shops,  
The drainpipes, sewage, sweepings of the street :  
Matter of infinite beauty and delight  
Atoning offal, filth and all offence  
With soul and intellect, with love and thought ;  
Matter whereof the furthest stars consist,  
And every interstellar wilderness  
From galaxy to galaxy, the thin  
Imponderable ether, matter's ghost,  
But matter still, substance demonstrable  
Being the icy vehicle of light.

Flung off in teardrops spirally, or cast  
In annular fission forth like Saturn's hoops,  
Earth and the planets girdled solar space,  
The offspring and the suburbs of the sun.

## FLEET STREET

In rings or drops—the learned are unresolved  
How planets and their satellites arrive ;  
But vision, vouching both, is more obsessed  
By Saturn's way of circles here at hand.  
Saturn has uttered many moons ; his rings  
May be the last abortive birth of powers  
Luniparous unmatched in heaven ; or else  
These still-born undeveloped satellites  
Denote an overweening confidence  
Determined, risking all, on something new.  
Having outstreated spirally and well  
A brilliant series of customary moons,  
The hazardous and genial orb began  
A segregation annular instead,  
Attempting boldly the impossible,  
Thus to become the wonder of the skies  
For ever hampered with the rings we see.  
Stupendous error still eclipses net  
Achievement ; as in art the Sistine roof  
Sublimely figured, or hardihood in war  
That wastes a troop for glory, or as earth  
In sheer terrestrial wantonness flung up  
The Maripesan Vale, so in the skies  
The most enchanting vision of the night,

## FLEET STREET

Our belted Saturn shines, extravagance  
Celestial jewelled with its dazzling fault.

Now, in the ether with all the universe,  
And in the nebula of our solar scheme,  
Fleet Street and Saturn's rings were interfused,  
One mass of molecules being set apart  
For the high theme of wonder and the butt  
Of speculation, and the other doomed,  
Although the most renowned throughout the  
world,

To be a little noisy London street.

How think we then? The metal, stone and lime,  
Brick, asphalt, wood, the matter that renews  
The shell of Fleet Street, does it still begrudge  
The luminous zones with which it once was blent  
Their lofty glory? Or must the carapace  
Of Fleet Street, welded of the selfsame stuff  
As man, be utterly oblivious? Thought  
And passion, envy, joy—are these unfelt  
By carbon, iron, azote, oxygen,  
And other liberal substances that know  
Rejoice and suffer in mankind, when power  
Selective turns them into street? Things wrought

## FLEET STREET

By us, are they, too, psychophysical?  
Do these piled storeys and purlieus quaint of  
square  
And alley envy Saturn's belts—a brief,  
Not outwardly distinguished urban street  
Upon a planet only remarkable  
Among the spheres for insignificance,  
And they so lovely and unparagoned  
A thousand million of mundane miles away?  
Are able editors, leader-writers, apt  
Telegraphists and printers, the only soul  
In Fleet Street, they, its only consciousness?  
Perhaps the bricks remember. Who can tell  
When filthy fog comes down and lights are out,  
Machinery still, and traffic at the ebb,  
If idle streets with time to meditate  
Resent enforced passivity? I think  
The admirable patience of the bricks  
May fail them of a Sunday. Imagine it:  
To be for ages unalterable brick,  
Sans speech or motion, nameless in a wall  
Among a million bricks alike unknown!  
I think the splendid patience of the bricks  
Gives out in darkness and foul weather, even

## FLEET STREET

To the length of envying the wonderful  
Exalted destiny of Saturn's belts ;  
And then I long to tell them, if I could,  
How much more happy their condition is  
Than that of rubbish revolving endlessly  
In agonies of impotent remorse  
About the planet it deserted. Thus  
Should I exhort them :—" Bricks, beloved bricks,  
My brethren of the selfsame ether bred,  
I hold it very beautiful of you  
To think so handsomely of Saturn's rings,  
Your old companions in the nebula ;  
But I can tell you and I'll make you know,  
Your fate is not inferior to theirs.  
These seeming jewelled zones that shine so bright  
Are the mere wreck of matter, broken bits,  
Detached and grinding beaches of barren rock  
Hung up there as a menace and a sign ;  
Circular strips of chaos unredeemed,  
Whirling in madness of oppugnant powers.  
Whether his rings are Saturn's own attempt,  
Abnormal and abortive, a brilliant ninth  
Consummate moon to utter, or likelier still,  
A leash of runaway material tides



## FLEET STREET

That mutinously left their native orb  
In molten youth to show all other stars  
The real and only way to shine, and failed  
Inevitably, being immature,  
They are, beyond all doubt, unhappy zones,  
Forlorn, remorseful, useless and ashamed.  
Most beautiful, I grant you ; beautiful  
And useless, like all art : their fate it is  
To be an agony of beauty, art  
Inutile, unavailing, misconceived.  
But you, most genial, intellectual bricks,  
Most dutiful and most important, you  
Are indispensable, an integral  
Component of the world's most famous street.  
Within your wholesome and convenient field  
The truest miracle is daily done.  
Never forget that men have tamed and taught  
The lightning ; clad it in a livery known  
As news ; and that without your constant aid  
Our modern, actual magic, black and white,  
Momentous mystery of telegraphy,  
Resounding press, accomplished intellects  
And pens expert would be impossible.  
Take down the walls your myrmidons compose,

## FLEET STREET

And Fleet Street, soul and body, ceases—fog  
Unoccupied, wind, city sunshine sparse  
And pallid claiming all the room that now,  
Enclosed, accoutred, functioned, named and known,  
Serves as the Dionysius' ear of the world.  
Honour and excellence and praise are yours ;  
Be satisfied ; be glad ”.

But all the bricks,  
O'erburdened and begrimed, in chorus sighed,  
And as one brick, “ Upon my cubical  
Content, and by our common mother, I  
Had rather shine, a shard of chaos, set  
In Saturn's glistening rings, the exquisite  
Enigma of the night, than be the unnamed,  
Unthought-of copestone or foundation-stone  
Of any merely world-distinguished street ”.

Applauding the ambition of the bricks,  
I felt, I also, I would rather share  
Dazzling perdition with material wreck  
Suspended in majestic agony  
About the withered loins of some undone  
Wide-circling planet for the universe

## FLEET STREET

To see, than live the dull life of a baked  
Oblength of tempered clay, year in year out  
Unnoticed in a murky mundane street ;  
But recollecting that the bricks were bricks  
And not a planetary wonder, what  
Event soe'er awaits the world and time,  
I reassured them : " Gallant souls ", I cried,  
" Noble and faithful bricks, be not dismayed !  
I hear the shapeless fragments that make up  
Æsthetic marvel in Saturn's girdles sigh  
Disconsolately, as they chafe and grind  
Each other,—*Such an enviable fate*  
*As that of any single solid brick*  
*In Fleet Street, London, well and truly laid,*  
*A moulded, tempered, necessary brick*  
*In that most famous faubourg of the world,*  
*Exceeds our merits ! Could we but attain*  
*The crude integrity of commonplace*  
*Cohesion even in the most exhausted, most*  
*Decrepit, ruinous, forgotten orb*  
*In some back alley of the Milky Way*  
*How happy we should be ! Remember, bricks,*  
Neither success nor failure envy spares ;  
Use envies art ; art envies use. These moods

## FLEET STREET

Will come ; but regular bricks like you transcend  
Them always. Be courageous ; be yourselves,  
Be proud of your telluric destiny ”.

With that the bricks took heart. “ Why, so we  
are ”,

They said, “ the ear of England ! Let us be  
Old England’s ear ! ” And revolution beat  
In smothered cries and muffled fusillades  
Upon the trembling tympanal ; empires  
At war thridded the sounding labyrinth  
With cannon ; loyal peoples through the sea  
And through the air by auditory nerves  
Electric from the quarters of the earth  
And from a hundred isles, their homage sent  
With whispered news of aspirations, deeds,  
Achievements to the Mother of Nations, she  
Whose ever vigilant, clairaudent ear  
Is Fleet Street.