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 tesselated 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
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:
Alsatians 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, belovêd 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
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 glistering 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
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 thriddled 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, clairaudient ear
Is Fleet Street.