Eliot, Blake, Unpleasantness

The Waste Land is full of different voices, as handsomely established by a long tradition of criticism, latterly crowned by the magnificent edition of Ricks and McCue (on which I draw extensively here). In the poem you can find Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Joyce; and, I am going to say, Blake. He is an incongruous participant in the chorus in various ways, not least in that while Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, and even Joyce, continued to sound in Eliot's work, Blake seems to have faded away as Eliot moved on; but for a short time in the early 1920s, I am suggesting, Blake played an important role in the drama of Eliot's imagination, and, in particular, helped him toward the distinctive, metropolitan poetry of *The Waste Land*.

Blake is Eliot's greatest precursor in writing about London as a spectacle of imprisoning hell, one of the main organizing ideas of the poem.

> London, the swarming life you kill and breed,
> Huddled between the concrete and the sky,
> Responsive to the momentary need,
> Vibrates unconscious to its formal destiny,
>
> Knowing neither how to think, nor how to feel,
> But lives in the awareness of the observing eye.[1]

Of course Blake was not the only precursor in thinking about London in an infernal and claustrophobic way.[2] Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight" movingly lamented growing up "pent 'mid cloisters dim," when he should have grown up in the countryside;[3] but he was only taking up an expressive line of disapproval you find in many later eighteenth century poets, such as Cowper: is not the country air better, he

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[1] 'The Waste Land: An Editorial Composite', ll.334-9; in Ricks and McCue, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot,* volume 1, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber, 2015), 335. Further references, made to *Poems,* are incorporated in the text.
[2] See Lucy Newlyn, '"In City Pent': Echo and Allusion in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lamb, 1797–1801," *Review of English Studies* 32 (1981), 408–28.
[3] "Frost at Midnight," *Poems,* ed. John Beer (London: Everyman, 1999), 210.

. . . the eclipse
That Metropolitan volcanos make,
Whose Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long,
And to the stir of commerce, driving slow,
And thund'ring loud, with his ten thousand wheels?[4]

In "Peter Bell the Third" Shelley characteristically put things the other way round, turning the simile on its head:[5]

Hell is a city much like London—
A populous and a smoky city;
There are all sorts of people undone,
And there is little or no fun done;
Small justice shown, and still less pity.[6]

The tone here is quite unlike Eliot's: for a start, there is some sardonic and sprightly fun done with "fun done" as a rhyme; but, translated into a different key, Shelley's lines anticipate the portrayal of London in *The Waste Land* as a pitiless place inhabited by an undone many (as Ricks and McCue point out: *Poems*, 615).

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
(ll.62-68)

Blake contributes a distinctive strand to the Romantic vision that Eliot took up. For one thing, his London is more topographically specific than the generically hellish urban spaces of his contemporaries, something I shall come back to; and, for another, he is typically more interested than they are in the way that hell, like beauty, can lie in the eye of the perceiver,

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[4] *The Task*, iii. *The Task and Selected Other Poems*, ed. James Sambrook (Harlow: Longman, 1994), 135.
[5] S. Viswanathan, *Ariel* 2 (1971): cited in *Poems*, 615.
[6] "Peter Bell the Third." *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 423.

"in the awareness of the observing eye" in Eliot's phrase, as much as in the plight of the people being perceived. ("For the Eye altering alters all.")[7]

When Eliot himself annotated his London Bridge lines (*Poems*, 73; 614) he adduced Dante; but Blake provides another element in their literary ancestry, in lines that put in the foreground an act of appalled apprehension:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street,
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
>
> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice: in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.
>
> How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
> Every black'ning Church appalls,
> And the hapless Soldier's sigh,
> Runs in blood down Palace walls.
>
> But most thro' midnight streets I hear
> How the youthful Harlot's curse
> Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
> And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.[8]

The lines depict the contemplation, by a wandering solitary, of a crowd in commercial—"charter'd"—London: a crowd characterised by its multiple voices (cries, sighs, curses), and associated with what sounds like political violence ("Palace walls"), recent military action ("the hapless Soldier"), and the morbid corruption of marital life. The case for the presence of this poem behind *The Waste Land* feels intuitive, and indeed I am not the first to note it. Ricks and McCue (*Poems*, 696) refer us to an essay of 1955 by Helen Watson-Williams: both poets, as she rightly says, describe the "anonymous crowds of a big city," enchained in un-

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[7] "The Mental Traveller." *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1957; revised edition. London: Oxford UP, 1966), 426.
[8] "London" from *Complete Writings*, 216.

freedom by “mind-forg’d manacles”; and, more specifically, Blake’s dark little lyric seems to leave its imprint on later lines in Eliot’s poem:

> And bats with baby faces in the violet light
> Whistled, and beat their wings
> And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
>
> (*The Waste Land*, ll.379-81)

— a wall which must have, somewhere in its ancestry, “Every black’ning Church appalls, / And the hapless Soldier’s sigh, / Runs in blood down Palace walls.” “The bells of a church tower might remember their former duty and power as Blake’s church might have harkened to or confessed the crying chimney sweeper,” said Watson-Williams, very well: “In both cases power no longer exists in the present, either to summon or to solace.”[9]

Eliot was thinking about Blake as *The Waste Land* started to take shape. Around the turn of the year 1920 he was meditating a new poem and would continue to mull over its possibility for the following year. In November 1919 Eliot wrote to John Quinn that he was keen to get on with “a poem that I have in mind”; and still, the following September, to his mother: “I want a period of tranquillity to do a poem that I have in mind” (*Poems*, 547–48). He did not make real progress until early 1921. (The poem was then recast completely during Eliot’s leave of absence from Lloyds bank later that year, and he had a complete version to show to Pound at the beginning of 1922.) Through 1920, as the poem went through its protracted first stirrings, Eliot wrote, as he usually did, a good deal of prose: pieces about Donne, Webster, “Swinburne as Poet,” mostly for the *Athenaeum*, which was where appeared, in February 1920, the great essay about Blake, which was shortly afterward collected in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). The essay was a review of an enthusiastic and amateurish account of Blake, titled *William Blake: the Man* (1919), by Charles Gardner; and it was one of those Eliot reviews that quickly soars off under its own compulsions, leaving

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[9] “The Blackened Wall: Notes on Blake’s *London* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,” *English* 10 (1955), 184.

behind the business of merely noticing a book, and occupied by what he called in a piece also collected in *The Sacred Wood* "the present problems of art" (*Complete Prose 2*, 179). He singled out the last stanza of "I wander thro' each charter'd street" for particular praise as "the naked vision"; and there is evidence that he had admired the lines already. Ricks and McCue adduce the last stanza of Blake's poem (*Poems*, 420) in their commentary on these lines from "Rhapsody on a Windy Night":

> Every street lamp that I pass
> Beats like a fatalistic drum,
> And through the spaces of the dark
> Midnight shakes the memory
> As a madman shakes a dead geranium.
>
> (ll.8-12)

The Blake essay evokes an imagination that is both greatly admired and yet less than completely accomplished. The admiration comes across in the opening sentences of the review:

> If one follows Blake's mind through the several stages of his poetic development it is impossible to regard him as a naïf, a wild man, a wild pet for the supercultivated. The strangeness is evaporated, the peculiarity is seen to be the peculiarity of all great poetry: something which is found (not everywhere) in Homer and Aeschylus and Dante and Villon, and profound and concealed in the work of Shakespeare—and also in another form in Montaigne and in Spinoza. It is merely a peculiar honesty, which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying. It is an honesty against which the whole world conspires, because it is unpleasant. Blake's poetry has the unpleasantness of great poetry. Nothing that can be called morbid or abnormal or perverse, none of the things which exemplify the sickness of an epoch or a fashion, have this quality; only those things which, by some extraordinary labour of simplification, exhibit the essential sickness or strength of the human soul. And this honesty never exists without great technical accomplishment. (*Complete Prose 2*, 187).

"The unpleasantness of great poetry": Eliot brings into consideration the idea of the *pleasant* in a way that isn't really raised by the book under review. Gardner speaks innocuously about Blake's love for England's green and pleasant land and finds Swedenborg's influence "pleasantly at work"; but the closest he comes to considering *un*pleasantness is an odd passage that discusses Blake's friendship with the poisoner Wainewright, of whom he says,

whimsically enough: "Wainewright was born out of due season. He might have avoided the unpleasant and ugly things that befell him if he had been a contemporary of the Borgias. He was an artist. . . ."[10] That was hardly connected with Eliot's interest, but the ways in which Blake was shaped by being "born out of due season" certainly do feature in his review: in an approximately Arnoldian argument, Blake is found to be limited by an incorrigible provincialism, his mind lying outwith the central European tradition (something that perhaps might encompass even the roguery of the Borgias). Anticipating things he will say in more famous essays over the next few years, Eliot finds Blake a kind of extreme case of the marginalized northern imagination, lacking the central values of the Latin mind and what he calls "the more Mediterranean gift of form" (*Complete Prose 2*, 190). In pursuing this line of argument, Eliot is picking up and making intelligent something said by Gardner, who brings his book toward a close with the less than inspiring remark:

> The truth is that Blake was not a great thinker, still less a system-builder. He ought to have found the best Christian system while young and kept to it. Then he could have lived his life of vision within coherent bounds. Clear, sharp dogma, like outline in art, would have given rest to his mind, substance to his visions, and saved him from the waste of pouring out a torrent of incoherent sayings containing scraps of gnosticism, theosophy, rosicrucianism, and almost every heresy under the sun.[11]

Gardner thought Blake could have done with a good dose of Dr. Johnson, which is ponderously damning, but something about the general observation evidently spoke to the more sophisticated mind of Eliot: one of the things that Blake was terrifyingly honest about was precisely the chaos of rival spiritualities that marked the age. Eliot's sense of his own version of such a predicament gets into *The Waste Land* as the bogus clairvoyance of Madame Sosostris, and the fraught ecumenical polyvocality of the poem's religious terms of reference, as though evoking a mock-civilization that lacks the centrality of a true culture.

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[10] Gardner, 35; 69; 177.
[11] Gardner, 192.

"Blake's poetry has the unpleasantness of great poetry": which is not to say that all great poetry is unpleasant; just that great poetry has its own distinctive kind of unpleasantness; and it is something that takes its nature from an awareness of the proprieties that you are offending. "Pleasantness" is a social more than an aesthetic or literary criterion: an aesthetic or literary criterion might be "pleasure" or even the "pleasing," and Eliot had been thinking about those things in some of the other essays of this period. One of the problems that Ben Jonson faced, for instance, was that "No critic has succeeded in making him appear pleasurable or even interesting," which should have been the task in hand. (*Complete Prose 2*, 150). He says, in a sparky piece called "A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry," which he contributed to *The Chapbook* in March 1920:

> . . . it cannot too often be insisted that the purpose—not of writing poetry, but of publishing it—should be primarily to give pleasure; and that the purpose for which we suppose reviewing was divinely intended was primarily to indicate such works as can give the best pleasure to the people who otherwise may fail to hear of their existence. (*Complete Prose 2*, 206)

That is feline, though the criterion of "pleasure" remains largely unscathed by its ironies. But "pleasantness" has a very different sort of resonance: somewhere close to "pleasantry," or "the agreeable." It is the sort of word that Henry James dances with delightfully, as in *Portrait of a Lady*, when Isabel Archer has just encountered Lord Warbuton: "She retired to rest with a sense of good fortune", says James, "with a quickened consciousness of the pleasantness of life."[12] Eliot's early poems are full of Jamesian feeling, as commentators have frequently observed, and, like James, he is fascinated by the sheerly compelling power of the polite—the world of "tea and cakes and ices" in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (l.79). Much later, in the Choruses to *The Rock*, Eliot would return to the theme with that note of prickly Christian judgmentalism that distinguishes the Choruses to *The Rock*:

> We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor
> To Hindhead, or Maidenhead . . .

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[12] *Novels 1881–1886*, ed. William T. Stafford (New York: Library of America, 1985), 257.

> In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed
> That the country now is only fit for picnics.
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> (I, ll.28-9; 33-4)

There is some ironic play here with Blake's visionary "green and pleasant land": the sardonic edge lies in the degradation of the valency of the eighteenth-century word. The lines capture Eliot's habit of imagining the thin crust of pleasantness as imperilled and undermined by darker, possibly ruinous energies that were always at work—though it is not as good as the versions in "Prufrock" or "Portrait of a Lady," where those forces for uncivilization are brilliantly imagined as animalistic: "dance / Like a dancing bear, / Cry like a parrot, chatter like an ape" (ll.27-9). Blake's version of unpleasantness is a kind of speaking out—an overcoming of the extremely successful self-stifling enacted by Prufrock, whose precariously maintained social accomplishment is entirely the product of his gift for suppression. He is a clothed man (we learn a lot about his clothes) and Blake is a naked man. "He was naked," says Eliot, "and saw man naked, and from the centre of his own crystal" (*Complete Prose 2*, 189).That does not make for comfortable reading, needless to say, but then, Eliot might say, there are more important things than being comfortable. In another piece on the function of criticism, which he published in *The Tyro* in April 1921, his thoughts returned briefly to Ben Jonson, and the failure of English criticism to accord him his proper value: "Neither could they appreciate the compliment, or swallow the criticism, implied by the unpleasant persons whom Jonson put upon the stage." (*Complete Prose 2*, 303) And his own reaction against contemporary modes in English verse occurred within a stifling literary climate in which, he thought, pleasantness was held the principal aesthetic virtue. Eliot tendentiously maintained as much in his review of the 1916–17 volume of *Georgian Poetry* for *The Egoist*:

> What nearly all the writers have in common is the quality of pleasantness. There are two varieties of pleasantness: (1) The insidiously didactic, or Wordsworthian (a rainbow and a cuckoo's song); (2) the decorative, playful or solemn, minor-Keatsian, too happy, happy brook, or lucent *sirops*. . . . Another variety of the pleasant, by the way, is the unpleasant (*sc*. Rupert Brooke on sea-sickness, and Masefield on various subjects). (*Complete Prose 1*, 679)

Pleasantness appears to be a product of Romanticism, no doubt exemplifying the point Eliot made elsewhere: "because we have never learned to criticize Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth (poets of assured though modest merit), Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth punish us from their graves with the annual scourge of the Georgian Anthology." (*Complete Prose 1*, 711)

His interest in unpleasantness as a legitimate effect of great literature was no doubt sharpened by an awareness of his own reputation among the critics for writing unpleasantly. May Sinclair, for instance, of whom Eliot thought well enough to publish her later in *The Criterion*, offered this fairly representative account of the *Prufrock* volume:

> His poignancy is as unpleasant as his ugliness, disturbing to comfort. . . .
> We are to observe that Mr Eliot's "Observations" are ugly and unpleasant and obscure.
> Now there is no earthly reason why Mr Eliot should not be ugly and unpleasant if he pleases. . . .[13]

But he was also, perhaps, sensitized to the whole question of poems pleasant and unpleasant by a strong conviction of his own personal unpleasantness—not on the heroic scale of moral integrity represented by Blake's unpleasantness, but more like Prufrock's struggle to maintain an acceptable face to meet the faces that you meet:

> How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
> With his features of clerical cut,
> And his brow so grim
> And his mouth so prim …
> How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!
> (Whether his mouth be open or shut).
>
> ("Lines for Cuscuscaraway and Mirza Murad Ali Beg": *Poems*, ll.1-4; 13-14)

"How pleasant to know Mr.Lear! / Who has written such volumes of stuff! / Some think him ill-tempered and queer, / But a few think him pleasant enough":[14] Eliot keeps Edward Lear's

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[13] May Sinclair, in *Little Review* (December 1917) in *T. S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Michael Grant (2 vols.; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), i.86.

genial self-deprecating original in mind, while twisting the note toward something more wholly self-disliking. The final parenthetic line suggests someone who might fail in the basics of polite social encounter by saying the wrong thing or not being able to think of anything to say at all, a kind of failure to be pleasant when required that he was convinced he had sometimes committed. "Looking back he said he realised how clumsily he had behaved in certain situations, and indeed what an 'unpleasant' person (that was the adjective he used) he knew he had sometimes been," recalled his friend E. W. F. Tomlin.[15] And he marked in his copy of *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman* the following passage: "We all have one unpleasant person to live with, whom we can't get away from—ourself."[16] So, when Eliot says "Sometimes my poems turn out to be much more unpleasant than I thought they were," it is as though some aspect of the self were getting itself out into the light that would normally be kept under wraps.[17] "He is not, my poet, altogether a pleasant character," Eliot once said, describing the figure of the mature poet, and adding with a note of over-insistence: "I must say for myself lest I should be misunderstood, that I am not talking about myself."[18]

How might Eliot's poetry be unpleasant? The unpleasantness of its subject matter would be the most obvious: "A rat crept softly through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank" (ll.187-8), say. More complicatedly, a lack of social pleasantness, in the sense of propriety or nicety, lies beneath the advocacy of imprudence that comes into *The Waste Land*, and, by implication, into the earlier verse too. In the later poetry the idea of a saving spiritual recklessness has come under suspicion precisely for its Blakean assumption of the innocence of desire, replaced by (as he puts it in "The Dry Salvages") "prayer,

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[14] *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: Faber, 1947), vii. I am much indebted to the expert gathering of material on pleasantness and unpleasantness done by Ricks and McCue (*Poems*, 844–45).
[15] E. W. F. Tomlin, *T. S. Eliot: A Friendship* (1988): *Poems*, 844.
[16] Marked by Eliot in *The Spiritual Letters of Dom John Chapman* (1935): *Poems*, 844.
[17] 'T. S. Eliot talks about his poetry," *Columbia University Forum* (1958): *Poems*, 845.
[18] 'Modern Tendencies in Poetry': *Poems*, 845.

observance, discipline, thought and action" (V, l.31). But the closing bars of *The Waste Land* have a great statement of the merits of rejecting a life led according to "prudence":

> My friend, blood shaking my heart
> The awful daring of a moment's surrender
> Which an age of prudence can never retract
> By this, and this only, we have existed
> (ll.402-405)

— an audacious claim that has a Blakean lineage: "Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity."[19] And elsewhere:

> their children wept, & built
> Tombs in the desolate places,
> And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them
> The eternal laws of God.[20]

Weeping in desolate places has an Eliotic ring, but a more precise parallel with Blake comes with the imagery of imprisonment: "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison" (ll.413-14). Eliot points us to Dante in his own note, to the episode of Ugolino in the *Inferno*; but one of the most appalling things about the Ugolino story is that he is not actually alone at all, but incarcerated with his sons. Eliot has a second note, citing Bradley, and here the note really is about solitary experience, but the metaphor of incarceration is only implicit in Bradley, who speaks not of walls and doors but in a more abstractly geometric way of "a circle closed on the outside." Pater has very plausibly been drawn into the genealogy of these extraordinary lines, invoking "the thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us."[21] But another strand in this must be Blake, for whom the ultimately "unpleasant" experience is life in a self-created imprisonment ruled by a theology of death: "For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."[22] Blake is the laureate of such dreadful

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[19] Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 7: *Complete Writings*, 151.
[20] *The First Book of Urizen*, Plate 28: *Complete Writings*, 236.
[21] *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; London: Cape, 1928), 219.
[22] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Plate 14: *Complete Writings*, 154.

imprisonments, statements of a plight at once solitary and common, such as that of Los in *The First Book of Urizen*:

> In chains of the mind locked up,
> Like fetters of ice shrinking together,
> Disorganiz'd, rent from Eternity,
> Los beat on his fetters of iron[.][23]

How else might Blakean unpleasantness have got to work in Eliot's thoughts about his growing poem? One answer might be to do with rhyme: poetry is traditionally duty-bound to be pleasant to the ear, as Milton says in *Paradise Regained*: "Smooth on the tongue discoursed, pleasing to the ear, / And tunable as sylvan pipe or song."[24] As it happens, Milton did not always consider rhyme part of such a duty, but once rhyme is contracted its tunefulness is part of the deal of pleasantness, and to write a poetry that declines this obligation is like breaking an unwritten but properly binding rule of social engagement. Pound got at aspects of this is his annotations to the typescript: encountering the bad rhyme in the couplet

> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the time,
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

Pound writes in the margin, at an upward angle:"*Blake*. Too often used."[25]

As far as I know, Eliot did not talk about Blake's misrhymes; but he talked memorably about misrhyming lines of a poet whom Blake especially influenced: Yeats.

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attendance upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into song?[26]

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[23] *The First Book of Urizen*, plate 10: *Complete Writings*, 228.
[24] John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, II, ll.479-80: *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (second edition; London: Routledge, 2013), 442.
[25] *The Waste Land. A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 8.
[26] W. B. Yeats, "The Spur": *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent, 1990), 359.

Eliot: "These lines are very impressive and not very pleasant":[27] their unpleasantness is due partly to their paraphraseable subject matter, no doubt, but also partly to their failure to attune their rhyme pleasantly. Yeats was dazzling at rhyming badly, and this is a great instance of a failure to rhyme drawing attention to its own perverse ingenuity by the way it occurs within lines that describe a failure properly to sing: "They were not such a plague when I was young: / What else have I to spur me into song?" Yeats learned the unpleasant art that Eliot admired from several sources, including the performative philistinism of the later Byron, but Blake meant more to him than Byron did.

> And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
> And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
> Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
> So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.[28]

That is a great instance of Blake using a duff rhyme to insinuate something seriously off-key within what might have otherwise appeared an innocent kind of moralism: the queasiness of it articulates a covert participation in the troubled world of "experience." "The *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and the poems from the Rossetti manuscript, are the poems of a man with a profound interest in human emotions, and a profound knowledge of them," wrote Eliot in the Blake essay;[29] and the mis-chimes are part of what testifies to that interest. "*Blake*. Too often used" might suggest that the technique was recognized and could become a tic; but, still, how well Eliot used it in the lines Pound annotated:

> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the time,
> With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.
>
> ('The Waste Land: An Editorial Composite', ll.121-2).

The line fails its rhyme while describing something that fails to sound right: so it was a shame, in my view, that Eliot adopted Pound's guidance here, and changed the second line to

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[27] *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The War Years, 1940–1946*, ed. David E. Chinitz and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2017), 83.
[28] "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*, ll.20–4: *Complete Writings*, 118.
[29] *Complete Prose 1919–1926*, 188.

> To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
> With a dead sound on the final strike of nine.
>
> (ll.67-8)

But to attribute this change to the influence of Pound's remark might involve a misinterpretation (mine, or Eliot's) of what Pound said, which could actually be two different things: "Too often used" might refer to the sort of off-rhyme achieved by "stroke of nine"; and "*Blake*", separately, to the first line of the couplet ("To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the time") and possibly the line before it as well – "Flowed up the hill and down King William Street." (The line under "Blake", separating it from "Too often used", which I am transcribing as italics would not then be a mark of emphasis but rather a separating line struck by Pound between two separate critical comments.) Used that way, "*Blake*" need not be a warning note: in the same way that Pound writes 'J. J.' in the margin a little higher up on the same page when he wants to flag a Joycean inflexion without necessarily suggesting that Eliot change it. What speaks "Blake" about the line "Flowed up the hill and down King William Street"—besides its manifest resemblance to the marked strangers of *Experience*—would be the deliberate, charged mis-match of register between the subject-less, visionary, counter-intuitive eeriness of "Flowed up the hill," and the abrupt mundanity of a real street name. Such an ostentatious failure of rhetorical proportion was something that we know Eliot himself associated with Blake. In a copy of his own poems presented to a friend he annotated the lines

> The red-eyed scavengers are creeping
> From Kentish Town and Golder's Green;
>
> (ll.27-8)

from "A Cooking Egg" with these words:

> Blake. *What are the golden builders doing / In melancholy, ever weeping Paddington?*[30]

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[30] Eliot's marginal note in Scofield Thayer's copy of *Ara Vos Prec*: *Poems*, 514.

He has imperfectly in mind lines from *Jerusalem*, a fairly remote part of the Blakean universe, which itself suggests the extent of Eliot's interest; and the misquotation implies something that has naturalized itself within the depths of Eliot's imagination, in the same way that Tourneur's (as Eliot thought) "bewitching minute" stayed with him as a "bewildering minute" (see *Poems*, 701):

> The fields from Islington to Marybone,
> To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood:
> Were builded over with pillars of gold,
> And there Jerusalems pillars stood. [. . .]
>
> Pancras & Kentish-town repose
> Among her golden pillars high,
> Among her golden arches which
> Shine upon the starry sky. [. . .]
>
> What are those golden Builders doing
> Near mournful ever-weeping Paddington,
> Standing above that mighty Ruin
> Where Satan the first victory won.[31]

(The lines are not quoted in Gardner's book; but Yeats included them in his selection from Blake, which is where Eliot may have read them.[32]) The lines work thanks to the scarcely subterranean hilarity of the interplay between visionary afflatus and sturdy topography: in that respect, at least, they are not so far from the sort of joke-but-not-a-joke you find in Betjeman. The brilliance of the effect lies in its being so precarious; you might say that it was unpleasant; that is, it is anything but "pleasant" in the sense that the *Georgian Anthology* sponsored "pleasant" verse of wholly settled idiomatic assurance. Part of the point is an assertion of modernity, the refusal to honor old contracts that time has rendered defunct; but it is also, more positively, a way of escaping the narrowness of aesthetic attitude that Eliot thought of as "Romantic" and re-acquiring the more encompassing kind of consciousness that

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[31] Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of The Giant Albion*. Plate 27: *Complete Writings*, 649–50.
[32] *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W. B. Yeats (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893).

he associated with an earlier age. Eliot was always drawn to writing that involved the splicing of diverse voices, as in his description of what Joyce was up to in *Ulysses*, which was simultaneously an approximate description of his own method in *The Waste Land*: "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."[33] As with Joyce, the technique is not mock-heroic, but it has some relationship with mock-heroic; and if Joyce was one model for such practice, Blake was another:[34]

> Blake is I think in one aspect like Chapman, and rather like Mr. Yeats, in being a poet of juxtaposition of two worlds, rather than a metaphysical:
>
> > What are these golden builders doing
> > In melancholy, ever-weeping Paddington?[35]

He put the point strikingly in a piece contributed to the *Chapbook* in April 1921:

> . . . verse is always struggling, while remaining verse, to take up to itself more and more of what is prose, to take something from life and turn it into "play." . . . the real failure of the mass of contemporary verse is its failure to draw anything new from life into art.[36]

It is not hard to see how Blake might have offered one way of drawing the prosaic up into art:

> With dismal torment sick, hanging upon the wind, he fled
> Groveling along Great George Street thro' the Park gate . . . [37]

or

> "Trouble me no more, thou canst not have Eternal Life."
> So Los spoke. Satan trembling obey'd, weeping along the way.
> Mark well my words! they are of your eternal Salvation.
>
> Between South Molton Street & Stratford Place, Calvary's foot,
> Where the Victims were preparing for Sacrifice their Cherubim. . . .[38]

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[33] "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" in *Complete Prose 1919-1926*, 478.
[34] Joyce's own relationship with Blake has been discussed by a number of critics: see, e.g., Robert F. Gleckner, "Joyce and Blake: Notes Toward Defining a Literary Relationship," in *A James Joyce Miscellany* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), 188–205.
[35] *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926 and the Turnbull Lectures at The Johns Hopkins University, 1933*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber, 1993), 205.
[36] "Prose and Verse" in *Complete Prose 1919-26*, 329; 300.
[37] Blake, *Europe*. Plate 12: *Complete Writings*, 242.
[38] Blake, *Milton*, I, Plate 4: *Complete Writings*, 483-4.

— which is evidently related to the kind of effect that Eliot worked to achieve in lines such as

> "This music crept by me upon the waters"
> And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.
> O City city, I can sometimes hear
> Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,
> The pleasant whining of a mandoline
> And a clatter and a chatter from within. . . .
>
> (ll.257-62)

The lines possess their own clatter, and a self-reflexive wit, as a Shakespearean world of "waters" connects punningly to a different kind of "Strand." Blake's "peculiar honesty" expresses itself stylistically as a kind of impropriety, which is a kind of candour, an unsettling openness to names from London street signs that don't properly belong to poetry, or at least not poetry of this kind: the refusal to defer to the conventions that normally police such things is Blake's way of displeasing purposefully. Neither his politics nor his metaphysics were Eliot's, as it goes without saying; but for them both the point at issue was much more than merely stylistic:

> . . . the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. . . .[39]

That is not Blake's language, and probably not much would be gained by attempting to translate it into a Blakean idiomof, say, "the double vision"; but it does describe, in its own terms, a feature of his poetry that Eliot valued; and for a short time he found in Blake a fellow labourer in the discharge of that unpleasant obligation.

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[39] *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (London: Faber, 1964), 147–48.