2.2.1 (b) Critical—creative interpretation of Blake’s ‘London’

Here we extend all the above analyses, insights and information into some sustained critical and creative responses to Blake’s ‘London’. For convenience, these are distinguished as critical interpretation leading towards an essay or analytical commentary and creative interpretation leading to a rewrite or performance. But, as usual, these processes and activities are best seen as naturally complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The one may support or turn into the other, and the dynamic of that relationship is recognised here.

A critical interpretation of Blake’s ‘London’ (taking the form of an essay or analytical commentary) might begin with the pervasive contrast between the light, lyrical form of the poem and its stark and distressing content: sounds that chime and sense that jars. In fact, distress and disease (including ‘dis-ease’, lack of ease) and a sense of isolation and fragmentation are key issues to build around. Everywhere in the poem we see and hear, not whole and healthy humanity but parts of people in anguish, pain, fear and anger (‘in every face . . . Marks of weakness, marks of woe’, ‘cry of fear’, ‘ban’, ‘Soldier’s sigh’, ‘Harlot’s curse’, ‘Infant’s tear’). These are, so to speak, the ‘street cries’ of London in a mean and pained rather than cheerily commercial vein. Meanwhile, the fact that the distress is seemingly universal (‘In every cry of every Man’; ‘every’ is used six times) only serves to underscore the fact that this is the suffering yet far from silent majority: the menial, dependent and vulnerable here giving vent to their pains. Conversely, by strong implication, there are others, a powerful minority, who are physically absent yet whose influence pervades the whole scene: those protected by charters, those whose chimneys are swept, those who can afford to use prostitutes. In this respect, there is a deep social divide at the heart of the poem’s political vision; and though it may not be expressly ‘class-conscious’ in a later nineteenth-century sense, it is latently, grumblingly ‘revolutionary’ in a late eighteenth-century sense. It burns with the barely extinguished rage of the French Revolution and hints darkly at the palpable, painful conditions for just such another revolution on the other side of the Channel, at the heart of the British metropolis. Another fifty-odd years would see such feelings concentrated in the rallying call of The Communist Manifesto (1848): ‘Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains’. 
Taking another line, we may expressly recall that the ‘I’ of the poem, as introduced at the beginning of *Songs of Experience*, is ‘the Bard / Who all things Past, Present & Future sees’. This is therefore a prophetic vision of things as they will or might be as well as a poetic version of things as they are and seem. It carries a sense of threat as well as warning. Seeing and saying the Bard’s future – including our present – this way, the modern reader may well be led to reflect upon the relation between Blake’s moment ‘there and then’ and our own various moments ‘here and now’. This relation may be grasped in terms of continuities as well as distinctions. Depending upon one’s particular social situations and political orientations, this could be a good point to stress the continuing relevance of a more or less local and immediate vision of urban decay and deprivation (somewhere you personally know or know of); or, alternatively, to broaden focus and extend the frame to the global imbalances and iniquities of ‘rich’, ‘developed’ nations and ‘poor’, ‘under-developed / developing’ nations (rich ‘Northern’ and poor ‘Southern hemispheres’, for instance). Either way, locally or globally, the distressing spectacles and haunting spectres of the displaced and dispossessed, child labour, prostitution and death by war and disease are still not far to seek nowadays – and if not with one’s own eyes and ears then with those of the modern multi-media, news and documentary, in film fiction as well as photojournalistic fact. In short, there is a counterpart to Blake’s ‘London’ near you. (Such perspectives could be projected along a variety of lines – New Historicist, Cultural Materialist, Sexual Political, Postmodern and Postcolonial – depending on the particular materials identified and arguments made; see 2.6—9.)

What’s more, to press that vision further in Blake’s own times and terms, this is a good point at which to turn to other poems on similar themes in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*: to ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ with its disquietingly ‘innocent’ celebration of a child chimney-sweep’s death; to ‘The Chapel of Love’ which is anything but, with “Thou shalt not” writ over the door and the constraining effect of ‘binding with briars my joys and desires’ recalling the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’; and so on to ‘The Sick Rose’ where, like the venereal disease that ‘blights with plagues the Marriage Hearse’, its sickness is caused – and life destroyed – by the ‘dark secret love’ of an ‘invisible worm that flies in the night’. All these and other poems from the *Songs* – as well as larger narrative and dramatic poems such as Blake’s *America: A Prophecy* and *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* – might be invoked to extend and deepen the sense of Blake’s revolutionary politics, sexual as
well as social. They might also be used as case studies to focus the very different ways in which Blake’s radical vision has been ignored, marginalised, slyly patronised or rapturously celebrated before and since the late 1960s, when he and his illustrations were introduced to a modern mass readership courtesy of contemporary print technology as well as changes in aesthetic sensibility and political sympathy. This is also, therefore, a point at which a substantially critical interpretation might turn into – or grow out of – an expressly creative one.

A creative interpretation (realised as a performance, adaptation or rewriting) could also begin with any aspect of Blake’s ‘London’ that sticks in the mind (on the lips, in the throat): ‘the charter’d Thames’, ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ ‘the youthful Harlot’s curse’, ‘the Marriage Hearse’. All offer ways into the who, what, when, where, how and why of the poem. So do the many texts and contexts, products and processes, that the poem has been realised through and implicated in. Each is accessible as sight or sound, and perhaps touch, taste and smell too. Most immediately ‘there and then’, is Blake’s poem as initially etched, ornamented and pressed by hand on paper in various versions, each of them unique (see Blake ed. Keynes 1974 and the Blake Archive at http://www.blakearchive.org/blake). Most immediately ‘here and now’, there is the poem as electro-reprographically mass-produced in black on white in the present book, either with or without notes and line-references but in any case unadorned. More remotely, in the mind’s ear, there are the ‘cries’ (and ‘sigh’ and ‘curse’) of Blake’s ‘London’, made more audible if read out loud; though these are voices that in any case call out to be filled with the cries and sighs and curses of a city street or other place you know. But wherever you begin in imagination or go by way of research, the first and most crucial thing is to get to know the poem well, inside-out and outside-in. ‘Ex- the text’: express, experience, experiment, explore, ex/change its words and worlds – for yourself and with others. For only you can:

- **Try ‘London’ out loud**, on tongue and ear. It is a ‘song’ so get the feel of its chiming sounds and jarring sense.
- **type or write it out a few times** – **differently**. Gauge for yourself how it is punctuated and laid-out. Notice, for instance, where you might expect a comma (end of l.2); the use of the colon (l.8); and the lack of a full stop before the final verse break (l.12). Why? Then experiment with alternative lay-outs and fonts for playful and pedagogic reasons (cf. above p. 000).
o learn it by heart (lung, stomach) walking around, sitting or lying down, ‘wandering streets’ – ‘charter’d’ and otherwise.

o whisper it silently to yourself in your mind’s ear, in odd moments, before going to sleep, on waking. See if you’ll dream about it. It is a vision.

o pick up words and phrases that have stuck with you, perhaps ‘mind-forg’d manacles’, ‘Marriage Hearse’, ‘mark . . . marks . . . marks’; ‘cry . . . cry’; ‘tear . . . tear . . .’. Turn them over. Grow voices, situations, other words and worlds from them. See where they take you – what you make of them.

o picture it as it might have been done by Blake then (it’s a poem that doesn’t have an illustration of its own) or how it might be done by someone else now (a painter, photographer, film-maker). Yourself with a camera-phone and recorder perhaps.

o smell it, taste it, feel it . . .! How might Blake’s late eighteenth-century ‘London’ smell? And what of the touch of soot, walls, flesh . . .?

o adapt it into modern street-art (for midday as well as ‘midnight streets’) or a text-message (sent at midnight or while wandering) – as well as of course prose or play or other poem – documentary realist, phantasmagoric symbolist . . .

o adopt it as a cry (sigh, curse) from, for, about or against your own world. What are the ‘Marks of weakness, marks of woe’ – or strength or joy – in the faces you meet every day or night?

o Make it ‘Yourspace’, whether an actual place you know or virtual space you grow. Model it closely or freely on Blake’s ‘London’, so as to make ‘Londons’ otherwise, ‘Other-than-Londons’ – yet still influenced and perhaps inspired by his version-vision.

In all these ways, and others barely touched upon, critical and creative interpretations intertwine and interanimate one another. Critically close reading can take the form of creatively intensive speaking and listening, and critically wide reading can inform extensive writing and rewriting. (For further ways of opening up and running back lines of enquiry, see 4.3.)

A critical commentary accompanying any of the above activities would therefore need to do two things: (i) compare Blake’s ‘London’ as you found it with whatever you made of it; (ii) reflect on the processes (knowledges, technologies, modes and moments of communication, composition, revision, reproduction) that went into the one and came out of the other. Going through the steps of the expressly critical
interpretation above will help in this. Critical and creative approaches can feed — need not fight — one another.

Overall, then, in theory, it is possible to think of Blake’s and other people’s ‘Londons’ (your own included) as points of departure and arrival on an openly ongoing continuum: a vastly mobile and multiple mass-mess of critical-creative-(re-)readings-(re-)writings-in-contexts-across-intertexts . . . In practice, however, just when and where you cut into and out of this process, precisely how and why, is what makes the crucial difference. For while the play of differences and references is potentially infinite, whatever you come up with in the end will always be both single and singular, and hopefully informed by your own considered and informed preferences.

_______________________________________________________________

‘Infinity in the palm of your hand’
Around the same time he was composing ‘London’, Blake also wrote and etched The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. In this (on plate 14) he famously proclaimed ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite’. Aldous Huxley was moved to write a book of that title The Doors of Perception (1954) and that in turn prompted the name ‘The Doors’ for the late 1960s rock band that included Jim Morrison. In a more homely yet still sublime vein, Blake also enjoined people, most immediately his readers, ‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour’ (‘Auguries of Innocence’, from the fair copy in the Pickering Manuscript, c. 1803). In the present context, all these lines of Blake can be taken as a founding principle — and informing perception — for reading and writing that is, simultaneously or by turns, close and wide, delicate and deep, finite and infinite. By strong implication, they are also open invitations to study and live life, accordingly — in the present terms, creatively as well as critically. It’s as complex — and simple — as that.
Postlude

Using the above activity with William Blake’s ‘London’ as a guide, perform the same kind of work and play with any children’s nursery rhyme you can recall or find.

(For examples, see Opie and Opie 1996; and compare Petrucci 5.1.4 and ‘There was an old man’ @ 2.4.1).

Also see: 5.2.2 for Beck’s (1931) map of the London Underground and Bryson’s (1995) response to it; and see @ Prologue for an example of a city street as a focus for activities in reading, re-writing and research, including web-based anthologies.

READING: Blake (1979); the Blake Archive at (Ackroyd 2001 for London: A Biography; Süskind 1985 for Perfume, a grotesque thriller told through the smells of eighteenth-century France (film 2006). For textually sensitive and contextually alert readings of a range of poems – with attention to the politics as well as the poetics – see Eagleton 2007.