

Greek Necropolis



West Norwood's City of the Dead
the "*world's first gothic cemetery...
monuments on par with Westminster...*"

A diaspora quite keen,
in life, out-Britishing the British
in death, reposing grandly.

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Hellenic liminality
a granite cross-topped pediment
full-figured statues greet the living
pedestalled female allegories—

Religion, Hope and Faith still stand,
Charity lies toppled, headless,
vandalized by grave-wreckers
frenzy-whipped by the macabre,
eternity's conspicuous consumption.

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"Warning, Dangerous site"

"Children must not play in this area"

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Crowded mausolea flaunting
Anglo-Greek mercantile might
family names embossing
plinths
carved sarcophagi
baldachins
stelae
Celtic crosses.

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Nobility from Chios
Constantinopolitan aristocrats:
Ralli, Spartali, Schillizzi,
Rodochanachi,
Cassavetti,
Ionides, Vagliano,
the Palaeologan Princess Eugenie—
a Byzantine revival
now rivaling the Gothic.

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Italianate El-Grecoed names

musical terms almost—

mute symphony in stone

cacophonous graves

untended, derelict.

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Funereal hierarchies.

“Ἐνθάδε κείται” — “herein lies”

Eustratios Ralli. His domed temple

designed by E.M. Barry

(builder of the Royal Opera House)

eclectic friezes

stone-carved symbols

talismanic hexagrams

Christian and Pagan

vying for ascendancy.

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Right next to it, a simpler shrine

domeless, Doric

Spartali and kin—

another Eustratios

(“Ἐυστράτιος” — “he who keeps a righteous path”).

The Importance of Being Eustratios . . .

Entombed beside him

Countess Christina Cahen

model for Whistler’s study

Princess from the Land of Porcelain

now exiled in the Peacock Room
regal in shades of silver and rose.

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Two grave-sites down
a second Pre-Raphaelite stunner
Maria Terpsithea Cassavetti
Edward Burne-Jones' mistress-model—
Zambaco—a sculptor to herself
("Τερψιθέα"—"she who pleases with her looks")
and please she did.

The crypt exudes her chastened infamy
(her period-perfect laudanum overdose—
the scorned lover's suicide attempt).

A life-sized grieving woman
turned to stone by some
Medusa glance
sprawls atop this white sarcophagus
adorned with paganizing bas reliefs:
Christ amidst ten virgin nymphs
five foolish, five wise.

Bohemian Maria, no virgin
to pleasure, art, or life—
herself both wise and foolish—
rests beneath this cold marble rebuke
her melancholy captured in the
anguished figure who
bestrides her bier.

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Salvific in Bath limestone
trumpeting the dead to rise
Saint Stephen's mortuary chapel
built by Stephen Ralli for his son
Augustus
(who died, rheumatically, at Eton).
A honey-colored mini Parthenon
erected by John Oldrid Scott
who later gave the Greeks
their wise cathedral,
Bayswater's Saint Sophia.

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A dynasty of Scotts
legacies in granite, brick and stone
a trinity of architects—
father, son, and nephew—
shared and shuffled family names
on plaque-splayed cenotaphs.
George Gilbert Scott (John's father)
bequeathed a grieving queen
her grandiose Memorial for Albert.
(His, too, Saint Pancras Railway's
Midland Grand Hotel.)
Emboldened, John's nephew,
Giles Gilbert Scott,
designed gothic-revival's great finale—

Liverpool's Saint James Cathedral

(the world's longest church,

the world's highest arches,

the U.K.'s largest organ ...)

As Wilde's once quipped,

"Moderation is a fatal thing.

Nothing impresses like excess."

-III-

Cosmopolitan commerce

a century's achievement

global vision, empire

well-networked family businesses

savvy Greeks, post-Massacre-of-Chios

trauma-hardened, wiser

eager and primed, excessively impressive:

shipping, banking, trading

merchant kingdoms spanning

as far as India.

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As far as India. . .

Incantatory words arouse

a poet's apparition

whose name shares epitymbic rank.

Mourning at West Norwood's tombs

the adolescent Constantine Cavafy.

Families of his three best mates

lie buried here.

Names like elegiac leitmotifs:

Mikes Ralli,

Stephen Schillizzi,

(departed in their youth)

and John Rodocanachi.

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Scion of fleeting wealth

poet of the epitaph

draftsman of deft word-tombs

lamenting handsome men

who, like his friends, died young:

Lanis, Lysias, Iasis,

Evrion Ammonis, Ignatios,

Lefkios, Kleitos, Myris—

a euphuistic fetish for fine names.

§§§

Conjured by a gravestone marked

Mavrogordato—

surname of his English translator—

(“Μαυρογορδάτο— “a heart shrouded by darkness”)

Cavafy’s verse reverberates

among these ravaged vaults.

In “Greek from Ancient Times”

he gives us Antioch, a city

“proud of her artisans and sages,

her very rich yet prudent merchants.”

“In the Year 200 B.C.”

his Hellenistic speaker boasts of
spreading Greek "as far as India."

-IV-

West Norwood's Greek Necropolis
now gothic *in extremis*—
ruined, desolate, overgrown
a low point for high gothic
a danger to the living and the dead
disturbed aesthetic slumber
(Saint Stephen's church
satanically profaned).

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Thorned ivy
tomb-invading, creeping
riotously clinging
pricking callers
halting our advance.

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Uncanny graveyard
sodden landscape
spoilt pampered corpses
still dying for Britannia's esteem
unwittingly Victorian
quite beyond design:
Victoria and Albert's Mausoleum
the Burial Ground at Frogmore
"structurally unsound"

*flooded, sublimely unmaintained
closed for its belated restoration.*

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“Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!”

A lesson never heeded

by Browning’s own tomb-ordering Bishop

nor by his highbrow readers

back in Bayswater.

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But let’s not burden the dead

with unfair expectations.

Better to let them bury their own.

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Maria Terpsithea Cassavetti Zambacco's Sarcophagus



Saint Stephen's Mortuary Chapel