

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.**

§ § §

**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.**

§ § §

***“Warning, Dangerous site”
“Children must not play in this area”***

§ § §

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

§ § §

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

§ § §

**Italianate El-Grecoed names
musical terms almost—
mute symphony in stone
cacophonous graves
untended, derelict.**

-II-

**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.**

§ § §

Right next to it, a simpler shrine
domeless, Doric
Spartali and kin—
another Eustratios
("Εὐστράτιος"—"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.

§ § §

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.

§ § §

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.

§ § §

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.

§ § §

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.

§ § §

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—
("Μαυροκορδάτο— "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).**

§ § §

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

§ § §

**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.**

§ § §

**“Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!”
A lesson never heeded
by Browning’s own tomb-ordering Bishop
nor by his highbrow readers
back in Bayswater.**

§ § §

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