

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## The Cemeteries of London

Guy Vaes

Translated from the French by Philip Mosley

### Foreword

The text that follows this foreword is Guy Vaes's preface to his photo-essay, *The Cemeteries of London* (1978), a book dedicated to his widow Lydie and in memory of Stephen Geary (1779-1854), creator of the old Highgate Cemetery.

When the author visited London's Victorian cemeteries in the years preceding the publication of his book, most of these sites were in a sorry state of neglect and disrepair. The tide, however, was about to turn. In 1975 the Friends of Highgate Cemetery was formed, an association that Vaes mentions in his Preface and one that prompted others to follow in later years. In 1981 the architectural historian Hugh Meller published *London Cemeteries: An Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*. Invoking the title of the celebrated 1960 Western film, Meller called the group of seven large private cemeteries 'The Magnificent Seven' [Abney Park, Brompton, Highgate, Kensal Green, Nunhead, Tower Hamlets, West Norwood].

All seven now belong to the National Federation of Cemetery Friends, though only Highgate and Kensal Green remain open for burials. Lying within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Brompton is run by the Royal Park Service. Abney Park, Nunhead, and Tower Hamlets are now natural woodland nature reserves. Despite restoration work—for instance, by 2001, of the Anglican chapel and fifty monuments at Nunhead—and the efforts of the friends' associations, all of these sites remain in need of further care and funding.

Highgate West is open only for guided tours; Highgate East is open to all. The Highgate Friends' website reports that 'The Eastern Avenue, Circle of Lebanon and the Terrace Catacomb, along with over seventy other monuments, have now been listed by English Heritage, with over double that number having had expert attention and maintenance. During 2011 the chapel interior was restored to its 1880s colour scheme and reopened for funerals.'

Philip Mosley

Epigraph to *The Cemeteries of London*

The cemeteries of London . . . . Those four words have always had the effect on me that Christopher Columbus's crew must have felt, at the end of an anxious voyage, when the look-out shouted 'Land!'

Preface to *The Cemeteries of London*

The dead are gypsies. Suburban commuters struck by a quarantine whose extent escapes our measuring instruments, they stick to that margin where the city peters out and the countryside recoils. At Kensal Green, their granite and marble bivouac erects—beyond the ghetto wall that assembles them—pyramidal tents corroded by rains and by abrasive winds, arms of judiciary angels, and urns where the brand of the firefly never deposited ash. At Nunhead, on a stretch of land backed by faced-off tomcats, steles and monuments, aslant, their plaster stripped, fix the image of the spasm that almost topples them. But at Highgate Hill, the most inspired of all these entrenchments, the osmosis between the tombs and the vegetation is that of the Amazonian tribe and its branchy site. As opposed to the strategist who established his bridgeheads on solid ground, the dead, having become prior to the Creation, find their feet only on the sloping parts of our consciousness. That's to say, in the flaccid, in the marshy, and in that abyssal which has, however, less thickness than a reflection and whose nerves transmit the shock waves. In winter, the toothy bow of a boxwood violin attacks the upright branches, equidistant like the strings of a harp, of the Abney Park willows. In the October puddles, beneath the fenced foliage of Tower Hamlets, a puffy sun gives rise to camp fires less rigid than the flame that the gravediggers formerly lit above an overly bulging coffin. They had probably earlier pierced its wood, so that the accumulated gases would escape and burn off. That, in parenthesis, is one of the small preventive ruses revealed by the 1842 *Report from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns*.

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Just as prehistory has left an iguanodon skeleton to the Natural History Museum of Kensington, there remain of the Victorian masses only specimens, precipitates of non-being, the splinters, piercing the ground, of an immeasurable national carcass. If we may say the deceased merge with their resting places.

The privileged ones thus affirm themselves, they who, by right or by chance, remain well established. Such as William Blake, cigar-brown penitent in the stone map collection of Bunhill Fields, the Dissenters' cemetery fallen into disuse in 1852; or else, quattroceto sarcophagus on a pedestal, Princess Sophia, daughter of George III, with sister Anne horizontally dominating the torpor of Kensal Green. But the legion of the humble ones echoes on dais and obelisk. Stones rounded at the edges, set straight, cowls on portmanteaus in their beds of umbellifers and couch-grass. These stones, reminiscent at dusk of decapitated rulers, are spread out across London. A number of them are

deteriorating, attacked by dirt, between the walls of plots that Dickens judged 'so narrow, so fetid, so silent, so neglected.' And whether it be on the central strip of St. Bartholomew-the-Great, the oldest church with its Tower Chapel; or against the low walls that separate, around St. Anne's in Limehouse, the ecclesiastical turf from the small gardens where a horizon of laundry bends in the wind; or even in St. Pancras Gardens, which offers masses tighter than the scales of a pinecone—all preserve the autonomy of the gypsy crouched beneath a carriage-gate.

But the scandals of the nineteenth century sterilized their flowerbeds. No engraved offspring, decorated with two clasped hands, could add to the space of St. Olave's in Hart Street. None, in the effervescence of a class returned to freedom, pushed open the iron lancet gates that, like a pirate ship, bore skull and crossbones.

Already straight-faced, Victoria rooted herself to her throne in 1837. The putrid efflorescence of the intra-mural cemeteries, a phenomenon of which the eighteenth century had already endured the stirrings, now made official in gazettes and public debates, replied to this event. In that respect, in 1721, in a memorandum supported by 'notable historical and philosophical observations,' the Reverend Thomas Lewis condemned burials in churches and their surroundings, as well as the associated lure of monetary gain. But now the stopper had blown out. Some dedicated plot of land, some poorly disguised mass grave—one pushing up against its church, another adjacent today to an apartment block—vomited the chime of its entrails, threw back up—in Southwark as in Soho, in Westminster as in the City—skulls and femurs of a fraternity whose supplement was encouraged by speculators. In the face of this frenzy, opinion balked. If only that clean cut to separate the rot pit from the church could at last be made! Moreover, wouldn't it hasten the birth of those extra-mural necropoles to which newly created business ventures drew architects and garden designers? Death would henceforth be Victorian; and never again would so many minds let imagination run riot in all that concerns burial and cremation, with the minimum of indispensable pomp and all for the aesthetics of the tomb.

Let's open a parenthesis. Without wishing to give oneself over to false connections between fiction and reality, it is pleasurable to remind ourselves that one century earlier, around 1722, the 'Graveyard School' of English poetry was born, a phenomenon to which Paul Van Tieghem [see Bibliography] went on partly to devote his thesis. The products of this school bore in filigree the silhouette of a country parson who, beneath a starry sky, meditates among the tombs. What he drew together in his industrious mind could range from the laws of Copernicus and Newton (on this point the eclecticism of Edward Young is unparalleled in the period) to the most staggering truisms on worldly vanities. Responding to that image, one underpinned by a preoccupation with salvation and one that Young will deflect onto a nocturnal background, is the young woman kneeling by a tombstone in H.A. Bowler's 1856 painting *Can These Dry Bones Live?* She is questioning the Resurrection, as if asking herself if her make-up will stay put. From the gravity of the rhetorician we have plunged into bourgeois sentimentality. The warning ends up in a sense of security.

In 1722, an Irish priest, Thomas Parnell, thus inaugurates the filigreed silhouette in the ninety octosyllabic lines of his *Nocturnal Fragment on Death*. If, a few years later,

Richard Blair claims to introduce 'the black horrors of the tomb,' it is that this Presbyterian minister thinks that all morality entails a stage setting. But the seven hundred and thirty blank verses full of ricocheting anathemas against the bon viveur, the impious astronomer, or the miser, do not release a genius comparable to that of Sir Thomas Browne, who, in the mid-seventeenth century, stressed the funereal customs of the Ancients in his stormy prose. For this doctor from Norwich, as for the sermonizers who overworked their treadles, the grave was a burden of non-being, the ballast with which to fasten, in a time given over to oratory, the great awning of eternity flapping above our heads. The Victorian would cut out a piece of this awning and place his mausoleum there. He would put his trust in the perseverance of the mineral element, so that the radiance of titles or the weight of a name, passing the accumulated days, would become a kind of scaled down eternity for the credulous visitor.

Taking refuge in his parsonage at Welwyn, Edward Young proceeded in 1742 to become heavily involved in the salons of London and the Continent thanks to a folio brochure: *The Complaint, or Night-Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality*. Narrow in his borrowed morals, this late convert, supported by a sinecure, formerly a man of the theater, an occasionally inspired satirist and of wavering conduct, had nonetheless his flashes of insight: he dismissed the spring as shabby, sent the moon into literary orbit, and then, in an apologia weighing its hundredweight, laid down the conditions for the nocturnal element. But, contrary to his epigones, he spared the sepulchral. For another minister, James Harvey—the clergy had never versified so wildly—the cemetery remained the place where the fragility of our conquests is best imagined. And as we see in his *Contemplations*, nature becomes an agent of security when viewed in this light. The atmosphere is henceforth favorable to the appearance of H.A. Bowler's young lady. You had to be seventeen years old in 1745 to compose, as did Thomas Warton, *The Pleasures of Melancholy* and to present in it the abbeys and ruins that Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe would go on to conjure up. For the first time, the cemetery and a love of the Gothic would come together, that Gothic jig sawed to excess, industrialized by the funerary business and the dark novel, and which would prove incomparable in its dialogue with nature, taken up even further in our day, at a time when the elite Victorian cemeteries lie dying amid wildly exuberant vegetation.

Refusing to cram his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* (1751) with religious ideas, Thomas Gray breathes some air into the rural literary landscape. He matches his innocent timbre to the sound of a life that the clay drinks up. To the epitaph transformed into runes, he associates a fate as discreet as that of a mole. Here melancholy becomes almost a reason for living. In fact, Gray gave the graveyard its health. This wholesome axis draws its youthful fountain from a crystallized oblivion. The Victorians, with a fine aptness, will rationalize the pastoral nature of the site but will insert in it an idea of caste: the hierarchies courted by ivy and whose isolation will slowly grow into incongruity—a fascinating incongruity. As for the sickly and putrid plots, cut in the valley where Ezekiel had his vision, spitting out leg-bones and denounced by editorial writers, they were stirring already in the complaints of Shenstone.

For it was the epigones, applied consumers of skulls and specters, who foreshadowed the Dance of Death caused by the enclosures of the City. In his twenty-

second elegy, Shenstone reveals the full horror of a sudden exhumation. Thus arose, spade over shoulder, hemp bag rolled underarm, the grave-robber paid by the medic and whose every shovelful of earth, spilling from his tool, opens up concentric circles in the great sleep of the countryside.

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From 1830 to 1840 it is pandemonium, the mort, the equinox of indignation. The sloppiness of the old intra-mural repositories inflames public opinion. At the same time we witness the multiplication of extra-mural necropolises, the fruit of a timely calculation. It is the second wind of the cemeteries. Death, forcing the architect to rethink them, encourages the creative impulse. Nobody doubts any longer that it is 'an unhealthy and unwise custom to bury the dead among the living.' Even as the utterer of that advice, George Alfred Walker, nostril attuned to any suspicious smell, delivers in 1839 the statement of an inquiry as revolting as the atrocities of Goya, on Highgate Hill where the aster rivals the Coptic carpet in taste, at the end of September, the London Cemetery Company opens the curvilinear maze of St. James, one of the Western world's most delightful cultural phenomena. And while the Aldgate ditches swallow their ration of seventeen or eighteen coffins of indigents—the gaps are filled with the help of children's coffins—cholera, lacking any class distinction, attacks the populace still above ground.

It is not to its germ, still unidentified, that we attribute the fatal attacks of fever, but to the noxious coughing-fits at St. Margaret's, denounced by Mr. Atkinson, surgeon at Westminster; to Enon Chapel (Soho) where, during the service, parishioners pass out because corpses are rotting beneath the floorboards; to the sacred grounds of Southwark, whose stink serves as a financial barometer to the Bishop of London; to Spa Fields which, in its improvised crematorium, providing a final avatar to its guests, mingles its traditional smoke with the household smoke of the neighborhood. According to university professors, the density of Londoners (living and buried) could well be the source of the foul atmosphere. So they would attribute the cholera, at least one of its causes, to the chemical exhalations of the old graveyards. The General Council on Hygiene, also charged with advising the queen, will ratify this opinion in 1850. And during the following decade Victoria will sign the act of sudden death to four thousand of these parcels of land of which only a few will find sanctuary in the prose of Dickens.

We may regret the decision that deprived London of those unseemly nests. How can we not dream of the look they would have had if we had listened to Sir James Murray? According to this Dublin doctor, an energetic fluid galvanizes the atmosphere, while the human organism owes its dynamic state to this volatile plankton; the only problem being that the fermentation of the graveyards developed a negative electrical field that neutralized the positive current on contact with the air. A single remedy: to equip the burial places with pipes of considerable height so as to channel a portion of the fluid into the contaminated zones. Had the good doctor proposed quite simply that we set a flame to their edge, with what magic each of these silent forums would be haloed! We could have envisioned the equipment in the form of street lamps. As the multi-branched Viennese type, as oil lamps, as crowned, as Gallic helmets, as frosted globes at

a pinch. And beneath these will o' the wisp clusters teased by the currents of air, what atmosphere of plotting, what to-and-fro of shadows projected by a restless crowd! But above all, what theater of dread in which each passer-by would have been given notice to improvise some intrigue or other.... Perhaps the middle-class citizens of Highgate Hill would also have this dream, captivated as they were by the charms of their new cemetery. Would they not demand the keys from the London Cemetery Company so as to wander there after hours, at nightfall?

We hardly dare, for fear that the stretched imagination will boil over, to picture London as dreamed up by Jeremy Bentham, that Oxonian whose embalmed body, clothed as an eighteenth-century squire, is preserved in a cabinet at the University of London. His big idea was embalming. Bury the stiff? What sacrilege! He wished to see Londoners mummified so as to render them as decorative objects. One would thus have kept mother and father in the drawing-room, installed grandfather in the bedroom, seated grandmother on the balcony, and grouped the ancestors beneath the foliage of a square. Bentham elaborated on it in *Auto-Icon, or Further Uses of the Dead to the Living*. Thanks to him, London would have become the huge appendix of Madame Tussaud. We would have mingled—at the Café Royal or in a box at the Palladium, beneath an awning in Covent Garden or in the corridors of the Underground—with people in moth-eaten ruffles and with extremely creased cheeks. We would have been seated beside them in a first-class train car or on the upper deck of an omnibus; and the equinoctial winds would have dispersed that threatening dust, unless a refuse collector's shovel .... But just as Paxton, architect of the Crystal Palace, was stopped from covering parts of Kensington with glass roofs; just as in 1962 Columbia Market, that flamboyant folly of Bethnal Green, was demolished, we rejected those projects that would have made London into a naked city of the unconscious.

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These are also the years of peddling, from the drawing-room to the tavern, those various harsh items of news that like a somewhat rough wine paralyze the imagination even though they would have contributed to the flowering of Poe, Lovecraft, and Jean Ray—for all that emanates from the sinister promotes the invention of stories and puts mankind in direct touch with the seam of archetypal obsessions. The most spectacular of them refers to that covered charnel-house Enon Chapel, a building conceived by its minister with speculative aim. We presume that it welcomed around twelve thousand bodies. Servants immersed them in quicklime, just as they burned the coffins in order to make room for new arrivals. When they happened to get overcrowded—all right, then!—they tossed the bodies into the sewer to which the cellar gave access. On Our Lord's Day, Enon transformed itself into a Sunday school, and in 1847 the 'Terpsichore Lovers' organized balls there. To judge by the engravings of the time, one stamped one's feet above an inferno that strangely recalls the prostrate figures in the London Underground drawn by Henry Moore during the Blitz.

In short, it was quite an industrious lower order—a whispering guild, living in sympathy with death, always waiting for a good opportunity as soon as night fell, not

recoiling from any contemptible task—that emerges on the horizon of those newsworthy items and also from the official reports of the period. And first of all, a place for the cream of the rejects, for the creature dug in to his clay-pit, waterfront of a Styx fed by the gutters of the City; a place for the gravedigger, drunk on doctored rum without which, says G.A. Walker, he wouldn't be able to engage in his practice. Threatened like a miner by fire-damp, he takes the precaution, having noticed the swelling that affects a disinterred coffin, of drilling a hole in it, of inserting in it a pipe and then putting a lighter to it. For twenty minutes at least a flame will quiver at the tip of this periscope. More than one has the habit, the remains of the deceased being burned up in the pavilion designed for that use, of chopping the coffin into small pieces and selling it back to the poor for firewood. The majority complains of bad throats and back pain, and their faces are ravaged by pimples. It happens too that bodies are palmed off to surgeons, as a gravedigger admits in 1842.

Then the grave-robber arises. This hulking fellow works riskily, spits on his palms now and then, swigs rotgut to make himself feel good, and curses the moon as soon as she breaks the clouds. His work rate must be fierce, a strain on the heart. I picture him, I don't quite know why, on a billboard. His shoulders and the iron of his shovel emerge from a ground bristling with crosses. The earth spills around him in clumsy showers. In the foreground, emitting a charred brightness is a huge, dull lantern similar to those 1930's chrome-faced stoves on which the brand is plain to see. The punishment (or reward) of this child of London is to have Scottish bosses, Mr. Burke and Mr. Hare, both seen in full action in the very Borgesian *Imaginary Lives* (1896) by Marcel Schwob.

We could further sketch silhouettes of surgeons and churchmen alike. Let's stop there, while highlighting a few names: Fox, caretaker of the graveyard of St. Anne's (Soho), who, with a view to boosting his wages, ran a racket in the lead, nails, and screws of coffins. Mr. Hawse, minister of Enon Chapel, and his wife, accused of having burned corpses in their hearth. We may imagine the scene: he, a stickler for the task, the nervous poker; she, giving her all so that the sparks and the grease do not mess up her floor. And all of it, that mercantile feverishness, those tightrope acrobatics, you have to envisage it in a London that is driving onward, changing, and getting as excited as a connecting rod. Each to his own, each grafts, each sweats: the aristocrat talks to his tenants, betraying the worry that a production line brings with it; the nouveau riche faces up to the wild extent of his leisure; the clerk of the India Company adds up, divides, subtracts, and has only a week and a half off each year; the lady in her eight-sprunged landau is prone to allergies that no one doubts; the grave-robber thinks he hears the rooster crowing and despite his back giving out doubles his pace. And all of it pulls in opposite directions at once so that England, a cake seasoned by pride and enriched by fine horrors, whets our appetite for discovery, that appetite which neither shame nor the strictures of ideologues can cut.

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The slogan of the promoters of the extra-mural necropolis could have been captured in a line of verse that today would be pondered profitably by a West made restless by its longevity and, on that point, similar to the ill-mannered guest who stays at the banquet

table long after each has gone to his bed. It is the line that ends the plea of the brochure *The Cemetery* (1848):

*Let Cemeteries win the people's heart*

But the enthusiasm of a minority had already outstripped this wish. In it the creative project and the studied taste in sites came together in a sentimental calculation ending in the grooming of an over expansive death. Bustling like a caged armadillo, George Frederick Carden, attorney and inspired propagandist of Kensal Green, passionately extolled the Père-Lachaise, at the same time dwelling on Italian, Spanish, and German achievements. Right behind him, Thomas Miller, author of *Picturesque Sketches of London Past and Present*, focused his attention on the fate of the tenants. The dead, worn out by a life of labor, fully deserved some fresh air. A good ten miles were marked out between the vat of speculators and the pack of those laid to rest. Especially as the necropolis was not about to reproduce the Asiatic overcrowding of the City! Let the enlarged countrified cemetery at least foreshadow Paradise Regained. And why not set up a network of funeral buses for the use of families? There was much talk of transporting the coffins by waterway and by train. Hadn't S. Smirke come up with plans for a Gothic station at Brookwood Cemetery, whose entrance, imitating an ogival arch, was flanked by two angels, one ready to put its lips to a Theban trumpet? As for the silver-plated classes, for the business upstarts, those granite windbags, they would deliver to the visitor a sermon on the leathery permanence of success. Death, finally purified and spruced up, would lend a helping hand to its owners, guaranteeing them a prolonged career: survival. And the poor one, whose feet might have wandered in these places, would perceive in this image of rest, foreshadowing his own, God's very special attention.

These were views in accord with John Claudius Loudon. This autodidact had stormed the social ladder with the zeal of a crusader, and having reached the top, enjoying the prestige of his magazine devoted to gardens and architecture, had realized that the future smiled on the cemeteries; that burial, in the London clay he judged too firm for a natural exhalation of gases, was worth both reflection and enthusiasm; that the necropolis, envisaged as a herbarium and a report on taste, could become the subject of solemn and lasting satisfaction. Yes, the cemeteries would improve 'the morality and the taste of the social classes.' For the masses, they would replace the library of the British Museum. There each would be immersed in architectural ideas, in landscape art, in botany, in arboriculture, and even in sculpture. At heart, it was the advance democratization of education, or at least its outline; here the beginning and the end of all life would form a perfect circle.

We owe to Loudon a catalogue of five hundred tree and plant species destined for the necropolis. However, so that their assemblage should not compete with the Vauxhall or Cremorne Gardens, those 'pleasure gardens' aired by the Thames and where the night gave rise to lanterns and gas lamps by the thousand, the choice was limited; preference was given, among others, to cedar of Lebanon, vine, fig, Scots pine, yew, and Canadian fir.

We may perhaps be surprised that Loudon reacted not one bit when the neo-gothic began to proliferate at a pace faster than that of ivy. In truth, his attitude resembled that of the Surrealists to painting: the style was less important than the message delivered. But may we here speak of a style? Wasn't it a matter of the by-product, if not the fantasy, of an expression that, without having the roots of a style, offers nonetheless some rootlets that are sufficiently vital and numerous to triumph over seasonal fashion and to charm several generations? Let's retrace our steps.

A century earlier, during a picnic beneath the arcades of Netley Abbey submerged by waves of ivy, Alexander Pope, bottle of brandy in one hand, slice of pâté in the other, was one of those writers who, with the aid of an osmosis among the moment of day, the penchant for the solemn, and the reign of the strange, believed he had rediscovered a gothic hitherto blindly taxed with barbarism. I say *believed*, for their vision, ordered by a delight in ruins, concerned less a style than an atmospheric setting suited to the future fantasies of Walpole and Beckford. Even architects would succumb to that irrationalism conveyed by writers. On the other hand, to the very Catholic mind of Pugin, all fantastic use of the Gothic came under dilettantism; arrowed and pinnacled turrets, even the Gothic inkwells claimed by Sir James Barry, would furnish him with an arsenal of *quotations* destined to break with the vulgarity of a mercantile society. Yes, from the Georgian age to the reign of Victoria, the 'taste for the Gothic' was far from being a linear phenomenon obeying a single criterion. But there's some space between that believing that this literary avatar necessarily had to obliterate the architectonic sense. That would be to cheapen the ambivalence of the human personality, which otherwise would offer no more consistency than a paper hoop.

In short, thanks to those petrified vegetal forms, the neo-Gothic went on to show man working in the bedrock of the landscape. Those cottages for affluent alchemists, those tombs in lace, those follies crumbling beside a mirror of water, don't they seem thrown up from the ground rather than set upon it? Far from offering a counterpoint, that mannerism will prolong, contest, or consolidate in its accents and its organic mass that which the gardener had known how to influence from the outside, by the measurement, the lopping, and the allotment of species. At the time I write these lines, the defunct Victorian cemetery closes the loop, not without having enriched with an unprecedented optic the delight in ruins. Note that this delight is all the more fascinating and characterized in its aspects for being urban rather than rural. It is the metaphysical catatonia of Harrow Road, of those thousands of facades resisting all external contact—tombs guarding tombs—that highlights the suburban morbidity of Kensal Green.

Doesn't the best of architecture, if not the most dreamlike in its history, turn grey in archives? However successful the Victorian necropolises—of which now only the fine point is freed up: expressivity and bouquet, thanks to the boost given by an all-conquering nature—that success would have been even greater if the projects of Pugin, Goodwin, H. E. Kendall, or Thomas Willson had been accepted. Did many of the middle-classes in tails and full-fall trousers stop before the study for a monumental cemetery gate that zealous Pugin exhibited in 1827 at the Royal Academy? And even if one was satisfied with the maritime space opened up by the summit of Primrose Hill,

south of Regent's Park whence one could see the pinnacles of Marylebone, how thrilled one would have been to see Francis Goodwin's project materialize on those heights! Hundreds of tombs would have sloped down toward the zoo and beyond, toward the huge park tightly circled by the enclave of Nash's neoclassical buildings. From there, as from the edge of St. James's cemetery at Highgate, one would have been able to contemplate, but with a deeper clarity, the capital from among the tombs, thus effecting a metaphysical fine-tuning from an absolutely natural state.

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It's said that the northwest African desert grows larger by the year. Wouldn't it be delightfully agonizing to observe, at unpredictable yet closely-spaced intervals, the sudden appearance of a cenotaph in the middle of an Islington square, the arrival of a cluster of tombstones on a Marble Arch center strip, the growth of an obelisk in a small Hackney garden or even a truncated column in a Bethnal Green car park? It has always seemed to me that from those funerary emblems irradiated a certain quality of silence, at first perceptible by look alone; a look that compromises the acuity of the heard because it finds it suddenly has a center of gravity of a type so special that the other senses are as if stupefied by it. And before this irresistible flowering, that it pleases me to think slow, implacable, and somnambulistic; before this *visible* silence that will again fortify our habituation to noise, putting a brake—oh! most deliciously—on all our enterprises and loading our gestures with a seriousness that only habit will make tolerable, before all this we would live with the sense of a limit, in an eschatological perspective, strangely freed from oneself, aware at last of the relativity of all initiative. Catastrophe for some—the majority, surely—for others intimate and liberating elation.

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Should we deplore the promoters of Kensal Green for refusing the pyramidal project of Thomas Willson? I don't know, not having found any reproduction; on the other hand, the General Cemetery Company made a major mistake in turning away from the Gothic romanticism of H. E. Kendall in order to go for the neoclassical suggestions of Sir John Dean Paul, its president. Kendall had come up with winding alleys—suited to multiplying the viewpoints, to enhancing the discovery of a monument and to arousing, in misty weather, a delicious uneasiness—as well as two monumental gates. The first opened onto Harrow Road and bore crenellated turrets; the second, with ornate, lanceolate doors redoubled in the mirror of the Grand Union Canal, could have welcomed funerals in Venetian style.

Ah! What an effect would have been produced by a catafalque of smoky shell and emblazoned with tibias, first running along the porticos of Paddington, meeting phaetons and shafted tumbrils only then to slip between the unusual houses of Harrow Road! An effect that would have made the progressive urbanization of London even more captivating. The funeral bark, reaching the spot where the canal, today a total gutter, washes what resemble hovels, would have ended up in the stagnant waters, rich in

garbage, that marry the enclosure of the cemetery. It would then have been moored between the gate, sadly nonexistent for whoever saw it in the project, and the gas-holders occupying the land across from it, and in the incongruous silhouette of which stand out the tombs at risk of toppling over. Parenthetically, there would have been censors, such as Pugin, to reprove the pagan symbolism of the necropolis: urn, sarcophagus, obelisk, pyramid—the entire battery of cultural references that the funerary enterprises will industrialize.

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When he was wintering beneath a Clarendon Road roof, in 1883, Arthur Machen, who had not yet written *The Great God Pan* and remained spiritually rooted in the woods of his native Wales, experienced one of the great emotions of his life. He had the habit, as evening fell, of exploring the areas that surrounded his lodgings with an infinite maze of brick and stucco: 'I see myself still grappling with a canal that cut my path according to laws alien to reason. I turn a corner of the street and there I am confronted by a horrible cemetery of white stones, of overpowering marble pillars and granite urns, the whole an awful pagan bric-a-brac. This, I suppose, had to be Kensal Green; it enriched death with a new kind of terror. On each of my outings, my strolls landed me at Kensal Green; and, like the Malay, it became my enemy during the months that followed. I tried to escape it via Portobello Road; I got bogged down in Notting Hill, and all of a sudden I came out into this city of gnomes. I could be gently minding my own business in Harrow Road, but in the end the ghostly stones plunged me into dread. Maida Vale was a traitor, Paddington, perfidious, since my itinerary had, it seemed, to end inevitably at the detestable abode of the dead.' As bizarre as it may seem to a city-dweller, Machen added that his horror of Kensal Green came from his having never before seen a necropolis. Between the slabs scattered on a hill in Caerleon-on-Usk, as natural as bouquets of hollyhock roses, and the tightly packed tombs within the boundary of Kensal, the eyes of the provincial rediscovered the opposition between the hamlet, that microcosm being part of the site, and the 'great cyst' that London already represented for Daniel Defoe in 1725. Certainly, the fascination of London, to which Machen had willingly submitted himself in his Welsh youth, had allowed him to face up to its monolithism; but he rediscovered it intact, experienced as never before in the form of Kensal Green.

It is in the early days of November, in a watery and finely sharpened light, when the mist still holds the tenuousness of a breath, that you will cross the triumphal gate of the cemetery. The curtain-raiser is the commotion that the trumpets of the Resurrection set off, their three blasts captured by sight. With a backdrop of gas-holders and a blurred outline of factories, the tombs rise up, pushed by shoulders that the flesh swells for a second time. And what was, in 1833, a solemn park where top hats and sweeping dresses met, has become this absolutely melancholic dump, this post-apocalyptic museum, where the memory of Victorian death expires among bouquets in their plastic sheaths.

In order to taste this morbid plasticity at your leisure, it is helpful to unite with bodily health a marked deficiency of the neuro-vegetative function. An ideal receptivity is formed when you start with a robustness that curbs the black humors, that gives room to

them without, however, succumbing to them, and with a nervous weakness that tends to upset the balance without completely overthrowing it. You are finally in a position to savor the poisonous charm and to live it as an astonished connoisseur. That which was straight down the line, pruned, now takes after the evasive, the messy, the collapsed, and above all a tearful gigantism. How then can you not imagine that, in order to embody its potentiality, become that catalyst of fantasies that basically it has never ceased to be, the necropolis must respond to an aesthetic of dread—latent or declared? How such signs lay claim to that which from the outset assails the spirit! In that place, you feel more of an intruder than a visitor; there you are tolerated rather than welcomed. You speak in hushed tones as if crouching beneath a vault, and the silence, which the slightest sound scratches, reaffirms it. The style of the tombs there has the authority of great organs, however excessive that may be.

Aesthetic of terror, art of traumatizing—you think indirectly of George Dance designing the facades of Newgate Prison—of which the founder remains John Forster. It's he who had St. James's Cemetery in Liverpool built, from 1825 to 1829, in a rough scenic style. In an open-cast quarry he ordered the laying out of ramps, earmarked for funeral processions, descending into the earth where later the mists would have to rise. And the feeling that the dead one pulls you in after him must have gripped more than one member of the corteges that went down into this panorama. After which, catacombs were hewn from the rock, as well as passageways at the entrance from which the ivy sketched a tousled lock on their blank orbit.

If, at Kensal, you take the shadows of paths that run alongside the canal, you willingly believe that the graves there are the product of neglect, like the plants growing from the debris; yet, what unexpected things spring up! A canopy chiseled by termites, a stone cherub in grass that eats its knees, a smooth-talking archangel for Sunday-school children, and a satanic cross resulting from roots that bind it and rig it with horns . . . . If you take the Central Avenue with its nave of heaped-up foliage, which leads to the Anglican Chapel flanked on both sides by rows of columns, the clash between nature and the monolithic tombs reinvents Poe's Virginia. It's the gothic novel minus the help of writers.

Pricked by bindweed, guarded by alder shoots, and nagged by ivy, the drive toward the void that is the tomb of Andrew Ducrow has everything of an Egyptian folly with classical echoes. For this former equerry and circus master, Dawson's exemplary bad taste set up here, among the blue bloods and the parvenus of business, a big top watched over by a sphinx, a production whose permanence has maintained itself since 1837. None of his chestnut mares, his beautiful acrobats, and his striking white-faced clowns could have devised a more fascinating spectacle than the assault of roots and foliage conjuring up a name: his own. If it is the quality of *presence* that gives the basic impression of life, and not the motion that stirs the gun-terrace of the Tower of London, the Rue de Rivoli or Fifth Avenue, then the Ducrow tomb can rival the tomb of Sir William Casement (1844), that bed of columns whose caryatids, four turbaned sepoy, break through the chestnut trees like genies of an evil lamp. From base to top, it seems to have undergone the baptism of the Indian army's cannon fire. Its blackness of calcified wood, its porous darkness, its bombastic hideousness all serve to accentuate its dramatic

effect. If perfection can give rise to an archetype, to the point of eclipsing what precedes it, the tomb of Sir William imposes one of the unwritten laws of the necropolis: the promotion of terror. Only the Columbarium at Highgate, if one excludes the sites to limit oneself to monuments, corroborates that law with equal authority. All the more natural in that the Victorian creators were unaware of it. The effect produced by the monument to Sir William comes from what seems suspect in the hieratism of the sepoy. Here, because of the stormy darkness of the whole, of the threat that it seems to make weigh upon the visitor, the very immobility is a matter of movement. Likewise, some prophet by Michelangelo or some evil-staring creature by Blake is about to burst out with curses or irreparable gestures.

Let us give ourselves up to anecdote. One of the charms of Kensal Green—does it still exist today?—lies in its personnel. One of the caretakers, stirred into action by the presence of vandals who wreck the catacombs (as at St. James and at Nunhead), has the habit of springing from the end of an alley, out of the bushes and shoots of maples, in a rattling cube-shaped taxi. The strangeness of his appearance, his haggard air, and the unexpectedness of his maneuvers, all this fictional material changes you momentarily into big game. It all has a disturbing tastiness.

But whether you venture between the trees that ramble, pull back the leathery thickets, or else let yourself be swallowed up by a wooded path, illustrious names call for our attention. At first by their stone silhouette; then, when you approach, by engraved letters sometimes canalizing raindrops, sometimes hoarding the seeds the wind disperses. And each of us to pin the name speaking to us, like an entomologist with a butterfly: William Makepeace Thackeray, the novelist of *Vanity Fair*, sunk in the vanity of a sepulchral fair; Anthony Trollope, post office official, author of the six *Barsetshire Novels*, who wrote wherever he was, 250 words in fifteen minutes; William Wilkie Collins, friend of and collaborator with Dickens, ancestor of the police procedural novel with *The Moonstone*; John Forster, historian and first Dickens biographer; the poet Francis Thompson, hounded and flushed from his hole by God, and whose *The Hound of Heaven* lights up in its turns of phrase an existence yet more troubling than his place of rest; Decimus Burton, the architect of the Athenaeum, one of the most exclusive clubs in London; John Claudius Loudon, given over to his ultimate passion, and Mary Scott Hogarth, whose death at eighteen almost drove her brother-in-law, Charles Dickens, mad with grief . . . .

Did I mention that, barely opened in 1833, Kensal Green was stormed by its clientele?

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Access to the masterpiece demands a ceremonial note, an initiatory phase. At Highgate, one of the highest sites in Greater London, it is Swain's Lane that gets the visitor in shape. Or, more exactly, got him, for the old part of St. James has closed its gates. Because of acts of vandalism: vaults broken open, stained glass windows of the neo-Tudor chapel smashed to pieces. Because of vampire hunters! One was caught there in 1969, armed with a stake, brandishing a crucifix, and at nightfall watching for the

apparition; on the other hand, one never caught those who, one year later, having exhumed a female corpse, burned it and carried off the head. Because also of black masses celebrated there—the place is admirably suited to it—and because the value of the cemetery had fallen to zero. For a few hundred admirers and enthusiasts, that closing matches that of St. Peter's in Rome for a Catholic. If, in Spengler's eyes, the liberation of the colonies would be one of the factors announcing the decline of the West, then for the author of this text the end of Highgate marks our fall into the age of Great Catatonia—whatever may be the massacres and upheavals to come.

Swain's Lane . . . from the Georgian Pond Square where the gaiety of the Flask Inn crackles inside that pub as reassuring as the inside of a nut, to the grille of the old cemetery, two walls—one of wood, the other of brick and very high—escort a downward sloping alley where dusk grows old at the bottom. You get there between embankments that an unfinished swell overflows; on the one hand, the foliage of Waterloo Park, on the other hand, foliage that the dead will enrich. The mechanism of fascination is under way. Nothing will put a brake on the curvilinear momentum that ends at old St. James.

The threshold once crossed, it is an assault. Poorly moored to the graves, somewhat bulky armfuls of cork-oaks, tapestries of ferns in bowl-like forms, chestnuts encased in ivy and brambles less sharp, however, than the piercing tendrils of the grasshopper's cry—all dash from a collapsed weir. Fifteen years ago, cries of newly-borns competed there with what June daylight has of shrillness. Did they burst out from a broken slab? You placed them close to White Eagle steps, among those thousands of shoots, so tall and so fine that the graves were taken by them as if between the lined-up strings of lyres. If it was . . .? You barely dared to believe it. Fear and symbol panic you in an exquisite manner. A few more steps, and, at the end of a hollow path: 'There they are!' Not the dead, freshly sent to this spot, but a fan-rustling, pre-Raphaelite palette: a peacock! And behind him, on the branch of a cross, a second one, throat shining like the mails on a coat of armor. When they caught sight of us, they let out a final complaint; the first one folded his tail and swept epitaphs and plinths in his lurching retreat; the second one swayed for an instant then in a gliding momentum began his flight among the oceans of grass. Who therefore had suggested the upkeep of these birds to those who run the place? Some esoteric enthusiast?

Fifteen years later, opening the *Dictionary of Symbols* (Paris, 1969), I read: 'the peacock is a symbol of totality, in that he brings together every color on the fan of his unfurled tail. He indicates the identity by nature of the sums of manifestations and their fragility, since they appear and disappear, as quickly as the peacock unfurls and folds up again.'

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Similar to the Flemish Primitive who, having portrayed himself at the feet of the Virgin Mary, vanished in an ecstatic crowd, Stephen Geary of Hamilton Place, creator of St. James, drowned in his masterpiece. His grave, formerly refreshed by mint, powdered mauve thanks to the sorrel, has disappeared, faithful, one may believe, to the viewpoint

of R.L. Stevenson and of Henry James, who extolled the effacement of the artist. Before rising to the ranks of the notable eccentrics, Stephen Geary, architect and civil engineer, launched very prosaically a set of patents for artificial fuel, busied himself with the supply of water and the paving of streets. In 1830 he had the first London gin palace built, and eight years later, seized by who knows what morbid and speculative grace, he founded the London Cemetery Company to which certain of us owe the most stimulating perceptions of our lives. It is he who came up with the general plan of St. James, of which the truly inspired part, the old part, covers twenty or so acres; the more recent part, running along the other side of Swain's Lane, only became accessible seventeen years later; though still operational, it has suffered from the swelling of the vegetal flood, so that most of the graves are ruined; so that an area too flat, of a pastoral nature without a gravitational center, has been worked on by influx, and so that the line of paths has been changed into wave-like hollows.

But it is in the mastery of David Ramsay, the company gardener, that the vegetal decor finds its true root. A winding and progressive dynamic—the land is laid out in terraces that the eye cannot contain—is slowed down there by the screens of greenery, hastened by the widening of the paths, diversified by the crows-foot intersections. This treatment of space, revised by a now all powerful nature, has made St. James expandable. It has given it an infinite plasticity that its registered surface ignores, and which, by analogy, will recall the cave that the echo of a voice makes seem vaster than it is. Each, according to how he gives himself up to the bend of an alley or takes a footpath, will create his own labyrinth there, multiplying the facets of this gem to the point of euphoria. As for the upward surge commanded by the terraces, it procures for the visitor the feeling of launching an attack on the cemetery, of being promised some revelation, of *burning* on account of a proximate secret.

Up to where the Columbarium, anticipated and called for by the presentiment of a focal point, announces itself. With its rounded pillars of gangrened drums, the leprous obelisks that solemnize its gap, the Egyptian gate, at least its image on the retina, has the power of a geyser's source. It surges forth, tremendous in its peculiarity, stormy in its mass, from that which has reclad the view of a valley and was formerly a bare path. Beyond the grilles, with the freshness of a subterranean river, the Egyptian avenue and its tombs present themselves. Each verdigris door, stuck fast to a frame that has split, is equipped with a metal handle that the arm can no longer succeed in lifting. And, at the end of this funeral opening, a cedar, divinity with fan of arms blackened by blowtorch, besets a triangle of sky above a fresh succession of tombs. Beneath the spreading branches of this tree out of a sculptor's studio, an alley whispers in the form of a ring, the Circle of Lebanon. There the Egyptian Avenue ends. Metal doors, marked by rust-filled craters, oscillated by an inventive dampness, have confined their occupiers to cells in the thickness of those concentric walls. And everywhere, from top to bottom, on the two flights of steps leading to the next to last terrace, holly, umbellifers, horsetails by the thousand, the pale mauve of the columbine, and a number of other plants whose names escape me. If Geary is responsible for the Egyptian style of the inner circle, the outer circle, neoclassical, only built in 1842, is by James Bunstone Bunning, company architect. We owe to him also the Coal Exchange and Holloway Gaol, and above all, that other

ephemeral marvel, destined for closure and to the genocide of graves: Nunhead Cemetery, which must have opened ten years after Highgate.

At the peak of the rear section of the Columbarium, the mausoleum of diamond magnate Julius Beer leaps out, its pyramidal roof pierced by bull's-eyes. And, beyond, punctuating with its petrified pause the upper terrace, is the spire of St. Michael whose building rises up in South Grove. Similar to the Indians, who breathlessly prepare to race down the hillside to attack the stagecoach, the graves of old St. James prepare the attack on London of the living which, standing on the furthest terrace, we see illustrated with spires and towers on a horizon sprayed on glass. Producer of cultural objects, man, who without that quality would be no more than an industrious animal, has here known how to renew, by the power of incarnation, one of those oppositions that have nourished Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, John Cowper Powys, or Baudelaire. The impact of this vision is due precisely to the revival of a cliché—and by no means the least!—in its fullness, one that dismisses the intellect and, the moment it breathes out to the level of the banal, rids itself of all reticence. The mind is no longer more than a screen on which the phenomenon leaves its mark.

It barely matters to know that here and in the new cemetery rest Michael Faraday, George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, or Karl Marx. On the other hand, one will remember the scenario this way. On an October evening in 1869, a fire was lit close to the Rossetti tomb, and the body of Elizabeth Siddal, the wife of the poet and painter Dante Gabriel, was exhumed. It happened at the husband's request; he wished to retrieve the manuscript of unpublished poems that he had consigned to the grave. When the lid was opened and the manuscript was ransacked, a long strand of hair, an interminable golden banner waved in the evening breeze just beyond an inexpressible face. That hair covered the remains from head to foot.

Even more incredible are the avatars of Mr. T. C. Druce. He ran a commercial venture and, shortly after his decease, his wife asked for him to be exhumed. She was convinced that the coffin would be empty, for, she maintained, her husband was really the Duke of Portman, he who, to spice up his off-duty hours, was leading a double life. Some said he would have even been at the inhumation of his second personality; after which he would have returned to his home in Portman Square by way of a passage that led to his shop. To be alternately a nobleman and a shopkeeper! To spit on the aristo for whom all commerce is a vile thing, and, in the evenings, to spit on the pleb who prefers prostration to revolt. To gaze daily upon low life from his basement kitchen then from the top of his balcony calligraphed in wrought iron, isn't that offering himself the spectacle that, pen in hand, the novelist unfolds? It is to be no matter who and to cancel oneself out in the social kaleidoscope. Or almost; for the duke would have needed to multiply himself still further. . . . How close, though, to the oriental non-being, to the abolition of the self, this way of identifying oneself with others, to let oneself more or less disappear! What profound happiness, necessarily amoral, of the man who dares to assume his ambivalence and thus reveal that the idea of justice remains constitutionally foreign to him. Must one add that the opening of the coffin put paid to that tale?

The career of old Highgate comes to a close. It will be extended through five generations, as in the case too of Nunhead, Abney Park, and Tower Hamlets. Beheaded

statues, coffins broken open, graffiti insulting the walls of the Columbarium: the Victorians following the Romans will have endured the shock of the barbarians. But, at a bookshop-publisher in Hampstead, a young living person told me: 'Let's not despair. The Victorian Society is busy raising funds. The old cemetery will not be abandoned.' This wish has been granted, since a new society, 'The Friends of Highgate Cemetery,' is busy restoring the site, preserving its fauna and flora, and giving it back its beauty and historical interest. Thanks to this initiative, access to the cemetery is once more permitted at certain times of the year. It's possible therefore that Highgate may share the fate of St. Pancras Garden, at once a public garden and a cemetery—to cite just one example.

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Even more radical is the negative transformation undergone, since 1969, by Nunhead, Bunning's masterpiece shining on the south bank of the Thames. Yews, oaks, and tulip trees have been transformed there into cones of ivy. The Dissidents' Chapel has been destroyed. A few steps from the Anglican Chapel, that exquisite Gothic paraphrase by Thomas Little, who designed St. Saviour at Paddington, a stone angel, felled by leather-jacketed goliaths of Peckham, lies in the grass like a peasant-girl after an act of love. She imitates the pose and shares the fate of a fascinating statue of a woman, removed from its plinth, in the modern section of Highgate. It happens occasionally—the sound has stayed in my ears—that a huge branch of a tree breaks off with the crack of a hull ramming a reef. And there's the explosion of a mausoleum. But nothing equals in beauty the lyricism of a ground which, swelling like a wave, goes forth on its own conquest, falls back, subsides and, reforming its tidal wave of clover and horsetail, raises crosses and statues higher than the adjacent chimney stacks.

Winged figures, granite obelisks, and poplars carry toward a suburban sky, that of Stoke Newington, the thirty-five acres of Abney Park Cemetery reputed for the correct distribution of its species. The company is in liquidation. Nature there, freed from the pruning shears, consolidates leafy ramparts where the monuments are overtaken like sea-horse skeletons in glass cubes. The obelisk topped by a hand whose index finger is pointed, similar to that which points to the lavatories or the director's office in a company, is one of the architectural eccentricities of the place. Disneyland reject, the neo-Gothic chapel by William Hosking, engineer and professor at King's College (London), responsible also for the assertive entrance to the cemetery, is losing its tiles like a calendar loses its pages. As for the couples one meets—always more numerous in the suburbs—they have the same measured breathing, the same quiet gestures as the couples at Tower Hamlets, the overcrowded cemetery at Mile End where elders and willow herb tremble as soon as a train is heard coming along the Southend line. The author of this Cockney atoll would be a certain Mr. Brandon, of the firm Wyatt and Brandon.

Let's skip the overly neat Norwood (1837), Nunhead's neighbor as the crow flies, a work of the airy design of Sir William Tite. Its general plan, right from the entrance, decodes itself as a score of which every note would be a white. Crawling up the mown hillside, the graves, lassoed by the signature of the paths, transpose the hubbub of a

North African market. If one chooses to enter here in bright light, what a unanimous welcome, what an impression of anticipated reunions!

Let's move on at last, even if it is to disappoint the devotees, to the 130 acres (and 40 in reserve) of the City of London Cemetery in Little Ilford. These Elysian fields, in which William Haywood knew how to express the Victorian Eden, rival the flowered borders of Regent's Park. It is an American type of security. The grave here becomes decorative, no longer disturbing; deprived of the influx of unbridled nature that reveals it while concealing it, its materiality takes the place of its presence. It is the final efflorescence of a funerary golden age that ended in 1856, opening date of this cemetery that dares not speak its name. The industrialization of undertaking will henceforth neglect the delicate Portland stone and the care taken to vary the species. Granite and marble, straight as a die, will enthrone lifelessness, and it will be made of sensible architectonics.

Far from promoting the boldness of William J. Baud, that pupil of Francis Goodwin, who dreamed of covering Primrose Hill with graves, those responsible for Brompton Cemetery (1840) prompted him to give up his profession by dint of legal and financial conflicts. But the Octagon Chapel, the flight of colonnades that might have thrilled Chirico, the rigor of the axes that on both sides are delimited by Fulham Road and Old Brompton, testify to his majestic vision. Should one wish to sample the original charm of it, one may refer to a wash drawing by William Cowen. In it the necropolis takes on the appearance of a city with miniaturized boundary walls. It's a Western Cairo, located on the edge of a canal, dried up since then for the laying of a railway line, and frozen in a Kensington of butterfly hunters.

Keep in mind that idea of a city. Kensal Green, surrounded by meadows in 1833, had to impose itself too. If London could have, following Cairo, enveloped itself in huge necropoles engineered by Geary and Bunning, with, in each of its districts, multiple funerary islands, its luminescence might have definitively been confused with 'the wrong side of the Channel' and hallowed each Londoner with the aura that marks certain of Dostoyevsky's characters.

Of sixty cemeteries predating the Victorian era, still visible in the City before 1940, less than half remain. Here as in Westminster, in Hackney as in Chelsea, in Finsbury as in St. Pancras, the majority have been converted into small parks or playgrounds. Thus was the case of St. James in Piccadilly, of St. Botolph in Aldergate, of Holy Trinity Church in Brompton Road, not to forget the exquisite St. Pancras Gardens which stand out, among others, for the tomb that Sir John Soane, the visionary eighteenth-century architect, thought up for himself. For all funerary vestige has not been eliminated from these turfs; on the contrary. It so happens that the epitaph and the swing get on well together there. Among these overly unassuming parcels of land one may still choose St. Anne in Limehouse. The church, one of the three largest and most accomplished by Hawksmoor, faces a pyramidal tomb of Portland stone. After which you make your way toward St. Nicholas Cemetery in Chiswick. Beneath a plinth topped by an urn, the painter William Hogarth has there become the neighbor of those well-off of the promenade running alongside the Thames. But what madness in Bunhill Fields to have built a wall between the glass tower that adjoins it and its whitewashed graves!

Hitherto there had been as if a free circulation between the ground-floor offices and those admirable stones.

Let's end here. To the Zen garden I prefer the old Victorian cemetery. As a place for meditation, the former, because of the subtle rigor of its ridges and its planes, accords with that view of the mind that it purports to deny, whereas the latter almost escapes its creator and ignores an oriental serenity that risks dulling the fine point of experience. It is useless to state that its romanticism is no more than a veil thrown over its multiple facets. Finally, renewed by its vegetal excitement, condemned to a brief maturity, the Victorian cemetery offers its visitors that rarest of spectacles: a creative death throes.

March – June 1975

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