

Two Poems

by [James Stevens Curl](#) (March 2019)



Promenade aux Cimetières de Paris: Père-Lachaise

aux mânes de nos concitoyens

Basking felines elegantly draped
on sun-warmed polished marble;
lugubrious angels; sad *immortelles*,
encased in glazed funereal Gothic frames,
add Camp absurdities
to what was Neo-Classic dignity.
Yet these Elysian Fields are truer to the name
than exhaust-filled, cacophonous,
once monumental avenues . . .
chestnuts, here, begin to shade the tombs
of Chopin, Marshal Ney, Bellini, Oscar Wilde,
while rusty ironwork provides no shelter
for erstwhile living blooms . . . *einst O Wunder!*[\[1\]](#)
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?[\[2\]](#)
Soon this necropolis acquires anew,
less melancholy scents
than those of faded *immortelles*:
plastic roses, lilacs, violets, when heated by the sun,
exude uneasy odours, offensive reeks,
like concentrated tomcat.
Cemeteries, disfigured by plastic flowers
(hideous both to sight and smell),
are home to cats: sleek dark thousands,
fed by black-clad pale-faced widows:
mourning cats and desiccated women,
the sheen of marble,
crape-enshrouded urns, black-and silver ribbons,
seem apposite, somehow . . .
Yet mass-produced *regrets*
and plastic ornament offend the senses,
cancelling the still respectability
of *bourgeois* Death.

Paris, Easter 1976

[\[1\]](#) Friedrich von Matthisson (1761-1831): *Adelaide*.

[2] François Villon (c.1431-after 1463): 'Ballade des dames du temps jadis' in *Le Grand Testament* (1461).



Outside the King's Arms, Francis Hamel, 2002

Stout

I shrieked one boozy, hot mid-day,
the frightful Truth that is denied

perennially: that's to say
that drunken man is deified.
If with this Statement you agree,
then I suggest the Farewell State
dispenses *Guinni*[\[1\]](#) always free,
to calm the soul expatriate.

Back Bar of The King's Arms, Oxford, 1965

[\[1\]](#) Agreed (in convivial circles in Oxford and London) plural
of *Guinness*: a famous Dublin Stout.

[Table of Contents](#)

James Stevens Curl is a leading architectural historian, and read for his Doctorate at University College London. He was twice Visiting Fellow at Peterhouse, University of Cambridge, and is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Fellow of the Societies of Antiquaries of London and of Scotland, and a Fellow of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. His most recent books are *Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* (with contributions on landscape from Susan Wilson), 2015, and *Making Dystopia*, 2018, both published by Oxford University Press.

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