

The Beauty and Education Offered by Cemeteries

by Theodore Dalrymple



Since my adolescence I have loved churchyards and cemeteries. I still find entry to them as irresistibly tempting as to bookshops.

Cemeteries are a spur to the imagination; they are an education in the tragic dimension of life and hence are a consolation.

They instill gratitude and a sense of proportion. They are often beautiful; they are peaceful havens in even the busiest or most frantic of towns or cities.

They are reserves of wildlife and, in spring and summer at least, they echo with birdsong.

The French writer, André Gide, once said that, when he went to a town that was new to him, he always visited the cemetery, along with the market, the courthouse, and the park.

Many people would probably consider this taste of Gide's to have been morbid; I think they are mistaken. The nineteenth century Scottish writer on the practical aspects of architecture, horticulture, agriculture, and cemeteries, J.C. Loudon, wrote in his book, "On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries" (1843):

A garden cemetery and monumental decoration are not only beneficial to public morals, to the improvement of manners, but are likewise calculated to extend virtuous and generous feelings. Affliction, brightened by hope, ever renders man more anxious to love his neighbour. At the brink of the grave we are made most feelingly alive to the danger of procrastinating towards God and man whatever it is our bounden duty to perform. There, too, conscience is taught the value of mercy ... There, the man whose heart the riches, titles, and dignities of the world have swollen with pride, best experiences the vanity of all earthly distinction, and humbles himself before the mournful shrine ... There, the son whose wayward folly may have embittered the last days of a father will, as he gazes upon his grave, best receive the impulse that would urge him, as an expiation of his crime, to perform a double duty to his surviving parent. There, in fact, vice looks terrible, virtue lovely; selfishness a sin, patriotism a duty. The cemetery is, in short, the tenderest and most uncompromising monitor of man ...

Quite a moral education, then, is a cemetery according to Loudon; but in these times when all empirical claims are supposed to be evidence-based, I can just hear detractors of his view demanding to know what is the evidence, according to properly conducted controlled trials, that habitués of

cemeteries are better people than those who never enter them.

In his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the eighteenth-century poet, Thomas Gray, pointed a similar moral, though somewhat less directly than the Victorian. Of those unknown to fame who were interred in the churchyard, he wrote:

*Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with disdainful smile
The short and simple annals of the poor.
The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

Whether my taste for cemeteries derived from Gray's poem, or my taste for Gray's poem derived from my taste for cemeteries, I can no longer recall; perhaps the relationship was dialectical, but both tastes have remained with me.



The church of Sint Lambertuskerk in Maastricht, Limburg, Netherlands, on June 19, 2016. (Michielverbeek/CC BY-SA 4.0)

Startling Vulgarity

The cemetery is so beautiful that it must once have given a dignity to death and consoled those who knew or intuited that their end was near.

Alas, this dignity and consolation is available no longer: new interments are in strict and narrow ranks in a distant piece of land, and the tombstones themselves are of a startling vulgarity: shiny and highly polished black, with brilliantly-gilded lettering of words without even the emotional resonance of *Departed this life*, accompanied often by crude carvings of teddy bears or sporting equipment.

The words *Mother* and *Father* have been replaced by *Mum* and *Dad*, as if verbal familiarity somehow attenuated the seriousness and finality of death: demotic in heaven as on earth. Not

coincidentally, it is increasingly *de rigueur* among the intellectually advanced middle classes not to dress differently for funerals—to come just as you are, so to speak, as if for, say, an informal meal with next-door neighbors, or as if popping out to the nearest convenience store for something you have run out of. What, after all, is so special about death?

Nearly forty years ago, one of Britain's foremost architectural historians, James Stevens Curl, ended his book, "The Victorian Celebration of Death," with the following words:

Today, the dignity which should be given and accorded to those who grow old or those who die has been reduced to considerations of giving the minimum physical comforts to those no longer economically productive, and of disposing of the refuse once life is extinct.... They apprehended the problems with gusto and realism—a realism that we should be well advised to study as lessons for our own half-hearted approach to death.

In short, if death is nothing, life is nothing.

When Professor Curl first published on cemeteries and funerary art, a magnificent legacy in danger of destruction by deliberate neglect and wilful condescension towards it, his interest was regarded as bizarre, morbid, almost as a kind of intellectual perversion. This was the very reverse of the truth in my opinion: to the contrary, it is the avoidance of all that has to do with death that is perverse.

Saint Michael's Kirkyard

Just how great a work of art a cemetery can be is demonstrated in his most recent book, "Saint Michael's Kirkyard, Dumfries: A Presbyterian Valhalla."

As with Venice, the whole is greater than the parts: we are here far from the egoistic notion of the self-proclaiming iconic building of the modern starchitect. True, by modern standards the tombs are grandiose, elaborate exercises in uselessness from a purely utilitarian point of view. Local worthies such as merchants, lawyers, doctors or town officials, once eminent but now forgotten, are commemorated as if they had been world-historical figures. The Scots, with their reputation for a rather dour plainness in life, suspecting the ordinary pleasures as moral snares, allowed themselves extravagance in death, at least in Dumfries. And unlike my local cemetery, St Michael's kirkyard is the last resting place of one towering figure, that of Robert Burns, the ploughman poet, the national bard of Scotland.

The book's many photographs at once induced in me a desire to make a pilgrimage there. Professor Curl's immensely erudite disquisition on the memorials (with amusing, acerbic footnotes drawing attention to the almost fervent ideological philistinism of the present day) would be an indispensable guide.

A visit to the kirkyard would not be merely an aesthetic or touristic experience: it would conduce to reflection on the nature of our society and the current state of our culture, even on questions of political philosophy. The kirkyard, which has been a burial place for so many centuries that the level of its ground is raised, did not come about spontaneously, though it was not the fruit of an overall design either. As Curl makes clear, this immense accumulation of noble monuments could only have taken place in a society—that of South-West Scotland, predominantly rural, of which Dumfries was the local metropolis—that not only possessed and had trained, but recognized and valued, designers and craftsmen of the highest caliber. This was a society of aesthetic discrimination and it is unlikely that anything of a similar grandeur (size, I need hardly add, is an entirely different matter) could be produced

today, even if anyone desired to produce it.

Of course, a social utilitarian would no doubt object that an impoverished society—impoverished by our standards, that is—that expended so much effort, energy, talent and resources on memorializing the dead, most of whom would inevitably have been forgotten within three generations, was misapplying its resources, or misallocating capital as woefully as any socialist society. It would have been better if it sought to alleviate poverty than to raise up monuments of a sumptuary nature. Robert Burns himself, after all, had struggled much of his life with poverty, and indeed died young, possibly of a disease (heart failure consequent upon rheumatic fever) that was in part attributable to that poverty. Moreover, the kirkyard monuments were clearly those of an upper crust of a stratified society: class distinctions persisted even after death because not everyone could be buried equally. How much effort had been misdirected when there was so much suffering—of a frequency and intensity quite unknown today—to be alleviated!

Thus we learn to despise or excoriate the past for its wrong scale of values. How could anyone have thought to spend the equivalent of a farm laborer's annual income (on which he had to keep an entire family) on a mere gravestone? Let the dead bury their dead: resources are for the living, especially for those without resources. How superior, morally, is our sensibility! At last we have found, or developed, a true scale of values.

Every age has a tendency both to decry and to congratulate itself. Those who suppose that we have at last found a true scale of values are apt to overlook the fact that, had the obsession with social justice, equality of outcome and so forth, existed from the outset of history, we should have been bequeathed nothing from the past that we value today, all of which is vulnerable to the criticism that it was the product of an unjust society.

A modern fanatic might be defined as someone who looks upon Angkor Wat, or the Taj Mahal, or Chartres Cathedral, and thinks, 'Social injustice!' But civilization is more than the fulfilment of a few moral injunctions or imperatives.

We are inclined to forget also that future ages may look back on us and our moral deficiencies with horror and wonder how we could have overlooked such evident injustices and moral horrors, how our scale of values could have been so distorted. We have our own departures from utility as conceived of by utilitarians, but few, I think, that will be as admirable as the St Michael's Kirkyard of Professor Curl's book, which is a monument not only to individuals, but to a society with a fine aesthetic sense and proper appreciation of grandeur, now entirely lost or replaced by a vulgar meretriciousness.

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