

Extracts from Great Names, Stylish Stones

Musings in Montparnasse Cemetery, Paris

The July morning was shining and sunny as I passed Rue Emile Richard, the only street in Paris with no-one living on it. Flanked by the big walls enclosing the two parts of Montparnasse Cemetery, the Rue Emile Richard always looks dull even on the brightest days, something to do with trees and their shade, nothing to do with the shades hovering around the cemetery.

Here no Eiffel Tower or Moulin Rouge, no River Seine, Sacre Coeur or Notre Dame. Just single graves and headstones, although some of them quite ornate ... and some of the people commemorated here were equally adored and adorned in their lifetimes.

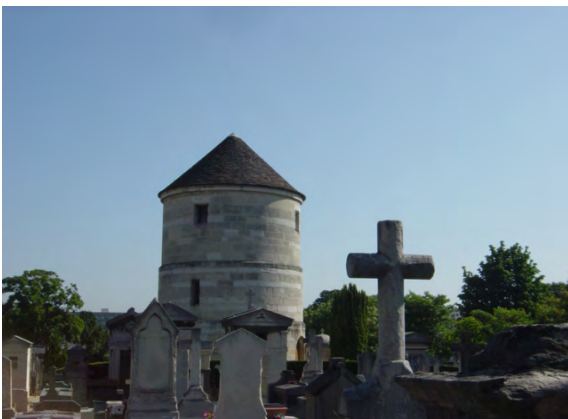
Wikipedia describes Montparnasse Cemetery as “a highly popular tourist attraction”. On the morning I visited it felt empty, certainly as far as other living beings were concerned. However, compared to country village graveyards in Southern France, Montparnasse was bustling; several workers were driving around in little trucks, shifting stones, tidying up, a couple of them even digging a new “hole”. A few women were busy replacing flowers, either real or artificial - not many men around suggesting they don't bother with tending loved ones' resting places or more likely they don't survive. A group of young students with clipboards and guidesheets for writing the answers were rushing about finding famous headstones. One they were buzzing around was a huge solid elevated tomb for the inventor Charles Pigeon (1898 - 1959).

I easily found Serge Gainsbourg's grave. There were a couple of people looking at the photos and other mementoes placed on his stone by admirers. I recalled seeing him on TV in 1992, the year of his death. There had been several programmes dedicated to the great performer's memory. One showed old clips of his performances, one with his daughter Charlotte about 12 years old standing by the piano as dad crooned his way drunkenly through a song. I wonder if she ever recalls her dad's notoriety in her film star fame or if she'll be alongside some day with dad in Montparnasse Cemetery in the centre of Paris. Had Serge ever thought about what would happen after he died? Would people bother at all? Would there would be reverence, dignity, well-wishers, critics, visitors to his tomb? Considering the wild way he lived life I doubt it. Such thoughts are only for people musing on fame by looking at its graveyard memorial.



Serge Gainsbourg's tomb covered in gifts from fans.

Montparnasse cemetery has a windmill dating from the 17th century when the land was for farming owned by a hospital and a religious order. There were stone quarries nearby so building the windmill was easy. Pity about the lack of sails, though. Later the hospital used the land as a burial ground for unclaimed bodies. In 1824 the City of Paris formalised the land as a cemetery for Left Bank residents. Now it is still a decidedly "living" graveyard with around 1000 burials every year.



Le vieux moulin in the middle of Montparnasse cemetery.

Ionesco, the playwright, is in Montparnasse. I remember reading him at school in Scotland because we had to study one of his plays called *The New Tenant*. The main character talks while a couple of people fill the stage with furniture until he is totally overwhelmed. This was the theatre of the Absurd we were told, a strange play. Ionesco was a Romanian/French writer, living in France from 1938 until his death in 1994. Ionesco's grave was now crowded round by the dead. I would have thought a stranger and more ornate stone would

have befitted an Absurdist. However, the inscription makes up for it: “Pray to the I-don’t-know-who: Jesus Christ I hope.”



An empty coffin heading towards its last resting place

This is not a patch on Pere LaChaise Cemetery as a resting place for famous bodies. That other dead centre of Paris pulls in crowds to see the tombs of the likes of Jim Morrison (the '60s Rock-poet died in Paris at 27), Oscar Wilde, Chopin, Colette, Moliere and Edith Piaf ("Non, je ne regrette rien"). However, it can be walked round easily in a couple of hours, and it has a great atmosphere insofar as it is in the heart of Montparnasse. You can keep in touch with the outside world because you can easily see buildings all around over the cemetery walls. There is also the instant reward just as you go in the main entrance off Boulevard Edgar Quinet - the grave of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and his wife, the writer Simone de Beauvoir. Their simple grey slab of a tomb always topped with a flower or a rough note left by an admirer; not quite the profusion of mementoes attracted by the resting places of rock stars, but nonetheless it's clear that they are remembered and worshipped still in death. One oddity is people leave metro tickets on their tomb. They also leave them on Serge Gainsbourg's and it seems there's a song connection. But not sure about the Sartre/Beauvoir metro ticket thing.



Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir - a stone adorned with simple mementos.

The following are my notes at the time of finding the large monument to a French explorer:

Dumont d'Urville, explorer (1790 – 1842) MDCCXC / MDCCCXL11

Died sur le chemin de fer de Paris a Versailles !! (Must have been some train accident – 2 other members of the family died on same date, 8 May, 1842). Voyaged round the world 3 times, the 3rd to the South Pole.

Indeed it had been a train accident. Dumont and his family were on a train to Paris from

Versailles (a trip of only about 30 kms) on May 8, 1942. The train derailed and the tender's coals set fire to it. His whole family perished in the fire. Interestingly, in life he had been a history-maker, and so too in death he was at the forefront because it was France's first rail disaster.

D'Urville was also a writer as well as an explorer. He wrote "The New Zealanders", possibly the first novel containing fictional Maori characters.

Where I live in New Zealand just north of Wellington, on a clear day I can see across to the South Island and a group of islands dotted off the coast. Among them is D'Urville Island.



An oddly phallic headstone in honour of Dumont D'Urville, "navigateur, exploreur, voyageur, écrivain".

A thrill for me in Paris is being asked for directions, being taken for a local. I regard this as good going, especially when I've not bothered to try! What a nice person your average Parisian must be! Usually I'm able to give basic directions because I have noticed a street name nearby. On this visit to Montparnasse Cemetery a young couple from Switzerland asked me where they were now exactly in the cemetery on their map. I was able to point to the street running through the graveyard ("the street of the dead" in Paris) and then indicate the lane we were on. They were pleased and I was dead - so to speak - chuffed to be taken for a local once again, although there was clearly a moment of doubt on their part when they heard my distinctly non-French accent.



The much-derided Tour Montparnasse fits very well with scenes from the cemetery.