

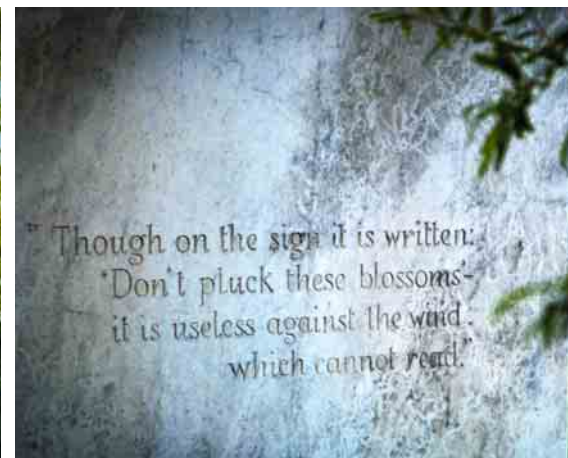
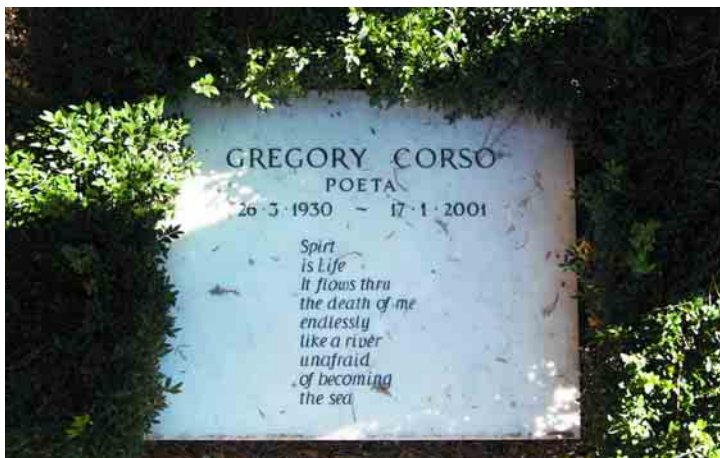
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A grave in the Cimitero Acattolico, in Rome, Italy.



## DESTINATION

# Remains of the day

Rome's Cimitero Acattolico, as seen on mockumentary 'The Trip to Italy', is the final resting place of poets, painters and pranksters. Words and pictures by **Gary Jones**.

**L**ow-budget movie *The Trip to Italy* was an unlikely indie sleeper hit this year, thanks largely to its two stars' quick-fire impersonations of Michael Caine, Al Pacino, Anthony Hopkins and other silver-screen notables. The mockumentary's central conceit sees semi-fictionalised versions of British comics Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon flaunting their mimicry skills while on a road trip of the culture-rich Mediterranean nation.

Along the way, Coogan and Brydon retrace the European "Grand Tour" steps of English Romantic poets of the early 19th century. On arrival in Rome, therefore, it's a given that the funny men will steer their Mini Cooper (a nod to Caine's 1969 cinematic caper *The*

*Italian Job*) towards the Eternal City's most fascinating yet off-beat locale.

Rome's Cimitero Acattolico – its non-Catholic cemetery – dates back to the early 18th century, when Pope Clement XI allowed England's Stuart court in exile to bury its dead on a patch of wasteland. Over time it became the final resting place of Protestants, Buddhists, Confucians, Jews, Zoroastrians and non-believers from across the world. It's arguably the most beautiful boneyard on the planet.

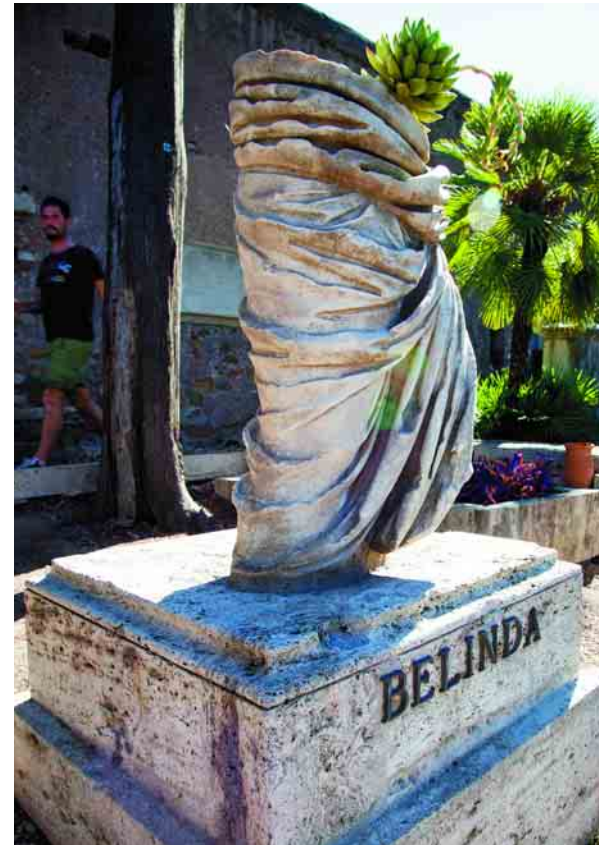
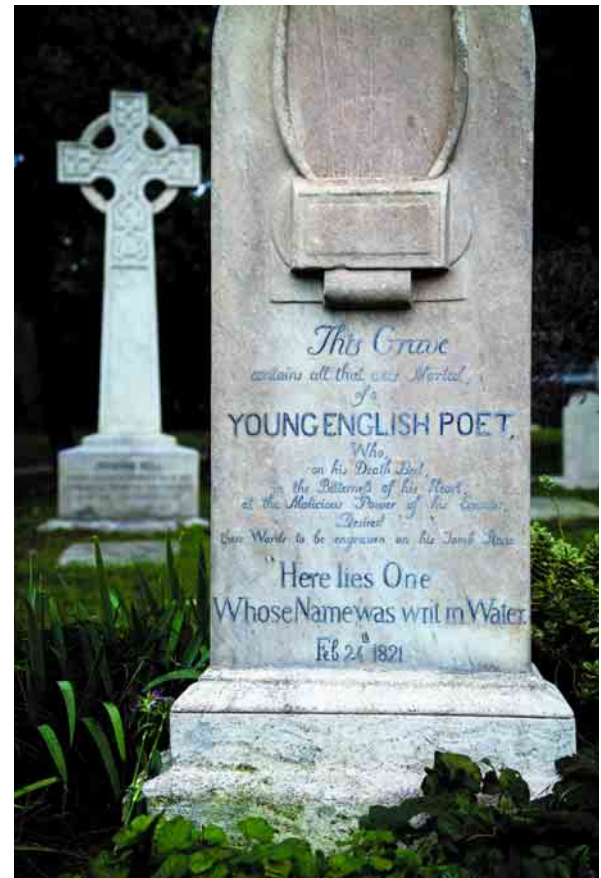
*The Trip to Italy*, in its movie form, is an abridgement of a six-part, three hour BBC television series, but they still had 108 minutes to play with. Why, then, do Coogan and Brydon not visit the *cimitero*'s most revered poet in residence? How

do they also miss god-sent opportunities to impersonate hell-raising thespian Peter O'Toole, Britain's buffoon of the bawdy, Benny Hill, and the mighty Orson Welles?

**INSULATED FROM ROME'S** snarly traffic by a sound-proofing section of the Aurelian Walls (thrown up between AD271 and AD275 to enclose the seven hills of ancient Rome), the Cimitero Acattolico is serene and sylvan. Bird-song wafts from its cypress, umbrella-pine and pomegranate trees. Manicured hedges fringe lovely gardens of roses, hydrangeas and azaleas. Daisies speckle the lawns.

Though the cemetery is twitching with life, visitors are attracted by the dead. The burial ground is packed with





perished painters, sculptors, philosophers, actors and authors – testament to the pull that Rome has long exerted on creative types. Inscriptions on tombs can be found in English, Chinese, French, German, Lithuanian, Russian, Greek, Bulgarian, Japanese and other languages.

On entering the cemetery in *The Trip to Italy*, Brydon recites Percy Bysshe Shelley (in the orotund voice of Hopkins, to spiky Coogan’s annoyance) and the duo climbs the terraced plots to where that poet’s ashes were inurned after he drowned off Tuscany, in 1822, at the age of 29. Shelley’s modest gravestone bears lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: “Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange.”

The words quoted by Brydon, however, are from Shelley’s *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*, whose grave is a shrine to cemetery visitors, but which *The Trip to Italy* avoids. That memorial to Keats, who succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 25, just four months after arriving in Italy in 1821, does not bear his name, simply stating, “This Grave contains all that was Mortal of a YOUNG ENGLISH POET.” It also features a couplet chosen by Keats (he considered himself a failed wordsmith, and so not worth remembering): “Here lies One/Whose Name was writ in Water.”

Others thought otherwise. Ruminating on Keats’ final resting place before his own passing, Shelley wrote, “The cemetery is an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place.” Oscar Wilde, who travelled to Italy as a young man, in 1877, declared Keats’ gravesite – and not the Vatican – to be “the holiest place in Rome.”

It’s certainly one of the Italian capital’s most quirky attractions, and it’s likely Coogan and Brydon stumbled upon the grave of Gregory Corso (1930-2001), youngest of the Beat Generation writers of the 50s that included Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Just steps away rests English actress Belinda Lee (1935-1961), who performed alongside the comi-salacious Hill. Typecast in her brief career as a sex kitten, Lee’s torrid affair with a Roman aristocrat caused such a scandal, the pope felt he had to intervene.

Long-time Rome resident Richard Mason (1919-1997), British author of Hong Kong-staple *The World of Suzie Wong*, is also buried here. His grave is inscribed with words from a go-with-the-flow Japanese proverb: “Though on the sign it is written: ‘Don’t pluck these blossoms’ – it is useless against the wind, which cannot read.” Then there are the two airmen who bought the farm when their plane clipped a tree at Rome Aerodrome in 1919. One of their passengers, bound for Cairo, was T.E. Lawrence, who survived with a fractured shoulder and cracked ribs. O’Toole later played the starring role in David Lean’s 1962 epic, *Lawrence of Arabia*.

When Coogan and Brydon pose for photographs in the Cimitero Acattolico, they do so in front of one of its most haunting graves: that of American Emelyn Story, who popped her clogs in 1895, at the age of 74. The *Angel of Grief* statue that dominates the burial chamber was designed by her husband, sculptor William Wetmore Story. The couple’s apartment in Rome’s chic Palazzo Barberini had been an unofficial clubhouse for overseas writers, musicians and artists in the second half of the 19th century, and is recalled in Henry James’ 1903 biography, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*.

Finally, when *The Trip to Italy* crew packed up to leave the *cimitero*, they would have passed the grave of Generale Nicola Chiari (1922-1998). Little is known of Chiari, who is believed to have been a customs officer from Naples. True or not, he was likely a classic-movie buff with a sense of fun, and the inscription on his headstone is a last-gasp salute to Welles’ 1941 masterpiece *Citizen Kane*. It reads, “Rosebud. what does that mean?”

Picture: handout



**Clockwise from top left:** the gravestone of Beat Generation poet Gregory Corso; a departed Nicola Chiari asks a familiar question; the epitaph of Richard Mason, author of *The World of Suzie Wong*; the tomb of Percy Shelley; the *Angel of Grief*, by William Wetmore Story, adorns the grave of the sculptor’s wife, Emelyn; the unnamed grave of poet John Keats; the tomb of British actress Belinda Lee; a still from *The Trip to Italy* shows Rob Brydon (left) and Steve Coogan in the cemetery; the Cimitero Acattolico.