



## Article

# Neo-Victorianism as a Cemetery: Heterotopia and Heterochronia in Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* and Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the nature of neo-Victorianism as a heterotopia and heterochronia, that is, situatedness where the relationship between the past and the present is paradoxically concurrent and palimpsestic. This is done via a discussion of the cemetery as a governing metaphor to describe neo-Victorianism, as it is a highly heterotopic and heterochronic space. A hauntological approach is applied to interpret the attempt to bury the spectre of Victorianism in Michel de Certeau's "scriptural tombs" as the main project of neo-Victorianism. Two neo-Victorian novels, Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001) and Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009), are selected as illustrations of this phenomenon, as they both focus on Highgate Cemetery in London as a key element of their narratives. Both these texts show that neo-Victorianism, conceptualised as a cemetery, is a heterotopic and heterochronic archive of the spectres that rarely stay buried in their narrative tombs.

**Keywords:** cemetery; Chevalier; hauntology; heterochronia; heterotopia; Highgate Cemetery; Niffenegger; neo-Victorianism; spectre



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## 1. Introduction

Michel Foucault's article on heterotopia, titled "*Of Other Spaces*" (1986) and based on a lecture delivered in 1967, starts with a comparison of the Victorian and the contemporary eras. While the nineteenth century was, as he says, obsessed with history understood as linear development of time, that is, "crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and menacing glaciation of the world" (Foucault 1986, p. 22), present culture is focused on space, thus becoming "the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near-far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 1986, p. 22). It would be difficult to discredit these all-encompassing statements, although the current neo-Victorian movement—which gained momentum after Foucault's death in 1984—shows that perhaps today is the epoch of both time and space. Like Victorians, contemporaries obsess about the past (or spectres, to use a Derridean term), but they also are fascinated by the palimpsestic nature of time, or, to employ Foucault's words, its juxtaposition, near-and-far-ness and dispersion, and they are preoccupied with time's accumulation in spaces with layers of temporal deposits.

Foucault's heterotopia and heterochronia are, therefore, a befitting paradigm to apply to neo-Victorian fiction. This article will do that with a specific focus on the cemetery, both as a metonym for this literary and cultural movement and as a recurrent motif in this fiction, thus offering an analysis of neo-Victorian cemetery as heterotopia and heterochronia on extradiegetic and intradiegetic planes. The latter is discussed in relation to Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001) and Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009), which both feature Victorian Britain's most famous London cemetery: Highgate. Depicted as a heterotopic space, Highgate becomes a "counter-site" (Foucault 1986, p. 24), where Victorianism and post- and neo-Victorianism meet and, at times, confront each other.

The literary texts discussed in this article are not obvious choices when it comes to their categorisation as neo-Victorian novels. Neither of them is, strictly speaking,

set in the Victorian period: Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001) starts on the day Queen Victoria dies, while the action of Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) takes place in contemporary times; and while Chevalier's novel might be interpreted as thematically linked to a shift between Victorianism and upcoming modernity, as I will demonstrate further, the references to the Victorian era in *Her Fearful Symmetry* are much more subtle. Yet, the scope of neo-Victorianism and the extent of neo-Victorian texts' self-conscious engagement with the period remain widely debated among neo-Victorianists, including Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, who in 2010 stated that neo-Victorianism is "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, p. 4, original emphasis). Yet, in "On the Neo-Victorian, Now and Then", they recognise that the term "Victorianism" in "neo-Victorianism" is often used to refer to the Long Nineteenth Century, which is the period between the French Revolution and the 1920s (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, p. 493). Moreover, they assert that a "plurality of vision is vital to neo-Victorianism" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, p. 495), as it encompasses a variety of media and genres, oscillates between high and popular culture, and often exceeds the strict time and space delineations of the reign of Queen Victoria and the borders of her empire (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, pp. 495–96). Additionally, in another article, Heilmann and Llewellyn admit that they

have become increasingly alert to the international and global spheres in which the term 'neo-Victorianism' is now deployed, or locations and moments in which, to us, there may be trace elements of potential engagement with the concepts behind neo-Victorianism as a larger global framework for discourses around nostalgia, heritage and cultural memory. (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2013, p. 24)

This opens up a possibility to include even those texts that do not reveal a clear-cut self-conscious critique of Victorianism in the mode of neo-Victorianism, as Jessica Cox has noticed (Cox 2019, p. 7), pointing out a similar desire for greater elasticity and expansion of the term articulated in (Kohlke 2014, p. 25).

Whereas this openness to a wider nineteenth- and early twentieth-century setting as "Victorian" allows one to accept Chevalier's *Falling Angels* as a neo-Victorian novel, the issue with Niffenegger's work is more complicated. As has been noted by Emma V. Miller, *Her Fearful Symmetry* is related to the Victorian era not through its setting but via "an intricate extrapolation of the Victorian fascination with mourning, death and the possibility of an afterlife" (Miller 2017, p. 197).<sup>1</sup> Sally Shuttleworth describes the novel as a text "placed within the nineteenth-century frame defined by Highgate Cemetery, with the protagonists consuming and re-enacting, in a different key, the plots, rituals, and obsessions of the Victorian age" (Shuttleworth 2014, p. 190). Susan K. Martin, on the other hand, states that it is "perhaps not, strictly speaking, a neo-Victorian novel", although the text "works extensively with its nineteenth-century context, including the spiritualism trope", and "plays with the idea of living on the very edge of Highgate, a quasi-borderline space between the Victorian and modern urban environment" (Martin 2015, p. 203). Additionally, the more open definitions of neo-Victorianism as narratives with Heilmann and Llewellyn's "trace elements" of engagement with Victoriana allow one to more clearly see crucial references to the Victorian past in this novel, for instance, to nineteenth-century historical places, people and literary texts. These include Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–1860), which shares with Niffenegger's novel some typical sensation tropes, such as doubles and mistaken identities, family secrets revealed via letters and diaries, and mental illness. Other allusions to the Victorian literature and literary figures involve the protagonist twins arriving at their new flat (see Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 103), with the building and apartment described in ways that evoke *Alice in Wonderland* (Miller 2017, p. 204), and Elspeth Noblin's ghost mentioning possible inspirations for haunting derived from the writings of Le Fanu, Henry James,<sup>2</sup> M. R. James and Edgar Allan Poe (see Niffenegger [2009] 2010, pp. 169, 347). References to Dickens and Dickensian figures also appear a number of times (Shuttleworth 2014, p. 188). The author herself admits to using Victorian references in ways that are distinctly neo-Victorian, that is, "taking all the old clichés and the workings

of the nineteenth-century English novel and trying to use them in a twenty-first-century novel in a way that makes sense" Niffenegger qtd. in (National Public Radio 2009, n. p.). In her discussion, Martin pertinently regards Highgate as an important liminal space, representing the typical neo-Victorian oscillation between past and present (Martin 2015, p. 202), and this function is evident in both novels examined here, where the cemetery constitutes a heterotopic and heterochronic space.

## 2. Cemetery as Heterotopia and Heterochronia

Although the term "heterotopia" has other provenances (Johnson 2016a, p. 3), its most popular understanding in the Humanities is based on a definition proposed by Foucault and discussed in his aforementioned article. While "Of Other Spaces" is not part of the official corpus of Foucault's work and is notoriously ambiguous and underdeveloped (Johnson 2016b, pp. 1–3; 2013, p. 790), heterotopia belongs to some of Foucault's most often quoted concepts and is generally believed to be supplemented by his more commonly known works on institutional spaces, such as the mental asylum, prison or hospital. Yet, as Johnson notes, a cemetery is one example that, in spite of being a perfect illustration of a space that is both heterotopic and heterochronic, has been mostly abandoned by Foucault himself and only hinted at throughout his oeuvre (Johnson 2012b, 2013). Since then, few scholars have filled this void—among them, most prominently, Peter Johnson—discussing the cemetery as a paradigmatic demonstration of Foucault's heterotopia.

Foucault defines heterotopia in contrast to utopias: unlike the latter, the former are real places present in every culture, "places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously *represented, contested, and inverted*" (Foucault 1986, p. 24, added emphasis). The crucial, paradoxical feature of heterotopias as spaces that both recreate and contest social structures makes them "absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (Foucault 1986, p. 24). Foucault follows this definition with a typology of heterotopias, which he called a heterotopology, and illustrates his six principles of heterotopia with a number of institutions and events that constitute, according to him, prime examples of heterotopic spaces (Foucault 1986, pp. 24–27). Foucault mentions the cemetery as an illustration of the second principle only—that over the course of history, heterotopias may shift their forms and functions—and develops his argument by using the example of Victorian cemetery reform, with burial grounds moved from the heart of the city to the suburbs (Foucault 1986, p. 25).

For the purposes of this discussion, the most crucial principle of heterotopia is heterochronia, that is, "the absolute break with [ . . . ] traditional time" (Foucault 1986, p. 26), much as Chevalier's *Falling Angels* and Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* collapse distinctions between past and present into palimpsestic conjunction through the Highgate trope. Foucault admits that the cemetery is at once highly heterotopic and heterochronic, associated as it is with "the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which [the individual's] permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance" (1986, p. 26). Not only do cemeteries make us realize our mortality, thus projecting us onto a great cycle of life, but additionally they might be considered spaces where time is palimpsestically juxtaposed, becoming a "layering of meanings at a single material site" (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 84) with a temporal dimension, spaces where "time never stops building up and topping its own summit" (Foucault 1986, p. 26). As Philippe Ariès notes, human attitudes to death—and the burial rites and sites that are part of these attitudes—might appear to be a-chronic, but at the same time, as his study titled *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1976) shows, they are in permanent evolution and flux (Ariès 1976, p. 1), thus instantiating a paradox: at once changing and perpetual. While an old cemetery alters with times and evolving burial fashions, it simultaneously seems to constitute a constant, unchanging presence, frozen in the moment, eternally rooted in a bustling, ever-shifting city or its outskirts, which, in time, also shift their borderlines. Thus a garden cemetery

far from the city's centre is soon surrounded by the busy streets and the abodes of the living. Nevertheless, as the history of cemeteries shows (cf. Ariès 1976, Arnold 2006), the permanence of burial grounds is illusory, as they may undergo transitions to other sites or even complete dissolutions. Ariès also stresses the permanence of the heterochronic juxtaposition of time in cemeteries: "The city of the dead is the obverse of the society of the living, or rather than the obverse, it is its image, its intemporal image. For the dead have gone through the moment of change, and their monuments are the visible sign of the permanence of their city" (Ariès 1976, p. 74). Hence the necropolis—the city of the dead—is a permanent testimony to fleeting mortality, both constant and momentous, "hold[ing] both continuity and transience" (Johnson 2012a, p. 2). Similarly, Foucault mentions two opposing but interconnected characteristics: on the one hand, heterochronic heterotopias represent accumulations of time, as in archives such as museums and libraries; on the other hand, heterotopic spaces display "fleeting, transitory, precarious aspects" (Foucault 1986, p. 26), for instance in festivals and funfairs. Again, the paradoxical marriage of temporariness and permanence is evident here. A comparison between burial grounds and archives may be fruitful in the sense that a cemetery constitutes an accumulation of lives buried there; metaphorically, it is an archive of the dead, or "a kind of 'museum' of the dead" (Michel Ragon, qtd. in Johnson 2012b, n. p.). At the same time, these sites' juxtaposed transience and precarity (Foucault 1986, p. 26) are evident in their signification of human mortality and the ephemerality of one's life.

The contradictory and liminal nature of cemeteries as heterotopic and heterochronic spaces is what "others" them, in the same sense that heterotopias are named "other spaces" by Foucault: "spaces that are somehow 'different': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory and transforming" (Johnson 2013, p. 790). The opacity of cemeteries' functions and meanings is aptly noted by Johnson: "cemeteries recall the myths of Eden and paradise; manifest an idealised plan; mark a final rite of passage; form a microcosm; enclose an utter rupture in time; offer multiple and contradictory meanings; and enfold both the mundane and the extraordinary" (Johnson 2012a, p. 6). Moreover, heterotopia's capacity to transgress binaries and escape the limits of the politics and the economy of the spaces in the city (see De Cauter and Dehaene 2008, p. 90) also makes it a hauntological space, "a third realm between the private space of the hidden and the public space of appearance, a third sphere that we could venture to call the space of *hidden appearance*" (De Cauter and Dehaene 2008, p. 91, added emphasis). This hauntological understanding of heterotopic spaces—among them burial grounds, "full of graves that possess simultaneously a presence and absence" (Johnson 2012a, p. 4)—invites us to view the cemetery as a befitting metaphor of neo-Victorianism as a textualised space, which is likewise haunted by spectres and phantoms.

Images of death, burial and haunting pervade neo-Victorian scholarship as metaphors for the characteristic features of the neo-Victorian mode of cultural production—its simultaneous rootedness in the past while projecting the earlier period onto the present. For instance, Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham propose an interpretation of neo-Victorianism as an exemplar of the uncanny, with "Victorianism understood as a revenant or a ghostly visitor from the past" and "a double" (Arias and Pulham 2010, p. xv), which "opens up multiple possibilities for re-enactment, reimagining, and reinterpretation" (Arias and Pulham 2010, p. xix). Arias and Pulham's metaphor of a revenant implies an unburied or excavated spectral Other of the Victorian past, haunting the metaphorical burial ground of neo-Victorian texts. A similar reference to a spectral doppelgänger is made by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, who perceive neo-Victorianism as "quintessentially Gothic: resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period's nightmares and traumas" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012, p. 4), while Heilmann and Llewellyn, noting the unending influence of the nineteenth century on current culture and social life, ask whether "the Victorians [are] the ultimate undead" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, p. 493). The metaphor of the undead past, used in the context of neo-Victorianism, brings up the issue of

the instability of the what Michel de Certeau terms “scriptural tombs” (De Certeau 1988, p. 2). Julian Wolfreys, on the other hand, compares neo-Victorianism to a mediumistic activity, “some spiritualist apparatus, a technology that simultaneously archives, records and transmits” (Wolfreys 2013, p. 154), echoing Tatiana Kontou’s proclamation that neo-Victorian “authors themselves become mediums” (Kontou 2009, p. 5), thus pinpointing the agency of neo-Victorian creators of texts as excavators of the buried past. These propositions to use Gothic motifs of haunting and spectrality as a metaphor for neo-Victorianism are well summarised in the concept of neo-Victorianism as a cemetery: a place haunted, unstable and “other”, where the past cannot stay buried for long. In her chapter on “*Neo-Victorian Cities of the Dead*”, Susan K. Martin admits to interpreting the cemetery as a synecdoche for London (Martin 2015, p. 202). In a similar vein, Catherine Arnold uses the history of death and burial sites in London as a prism through which to look at the history of the capital city, asserting that “London is one giant grave” (Arnold 2006, p. 1). I would like to follow in the critics’ footsteps and approach neo-Victorianism as a giant cemetery—a heterotopian space where “time is out of joint” (Derrida [1994] 2006), space and time become palimpsestic, and Victorian spectres are buried in “scriptural tombs” (of neo-Victorian textuality).

### 3. Heterotopia and Heterochronia in *Falling Angels* and *Her Fearful Symmetry*

Highgate Cemetery is one of the garden cemeteries established on the outskirts of London in the 1830s to help remedy the serious sanitary issue that the overcrowded capital faced in the early nineteenth century. Highgate was the third out of seven graveyards located “within a six-mile radius of Central London; they surround the city like figures on a clock” (Arnold 2006, p. 123). Established in 1839 on land that used to belong to the Ashurst Estate in Highgate village (Bickersteth 2009, n. p.), Highgate became an epitome of a Victorian London cemetery, “wherein Egyptian pyramids jostle with weeping angels and Grecian urns stand alongside Celtic crosses” (Arnold 2006, p. 123). Its most renowned monuments include the Egyptian Avenue, a passageway with sixteen vaults, entered via a characteristic oriental-style gate (Bickersteth 2009, n. p.); the Circle of Lebanon, with vaults built around an ancient and imposing Cedar of Lebanon; and the Gothic-style Terrace Catacombs, occupying the former location of the classical terrace gardens of Ashurst Mansion (Bickersteth 2009, n. p.). In 1856, the cemetery was extended to include what is now known as the East Highgate, and until the 1930s, Highgate Cemetery—dubbed the “Victorian Valhalla” by John Betjeman (Arnold 2006, p. 133)—remained a favourite burial ground for the capital’s affluent citizens. Some of the eminent Victorians interred there include Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and Karl Marx (Clements 2017, p. 3). Yet, it was not only the rich and famous that were buried in Highgate; for instance, the first burial in the eastern part of the cemetery was that of a baker’s daughter (Bickersteth 2009, n. p.). Rather, Highgate replicated the social structure of Victorian society, a city in miniature, where “class, religious order and even ethnic systems were faithfully replicated” in the layout and architecture (Martin 2015, p. 211).

However, after World War II, Highgate Cemetery fell into decline and disarray, finally closing its gates in the 1970s. It was only when The Friends of Highgate Cemetery was formed in 1975 that Highgate was restored and eventually reopened to visitors (Bickersteth 2009, n. p.). However, its overgrown appearance has been preserved in a policy of “managed neglect,” which has allowed The Friends to both control the growth of trees and other plants in the cemetery and, at the same time, preserve its romantic atmosphere (Baxter 2017, p. 30). This allows visitors to experience the heterochronic aspect of this space, which, although situated in the twenty-first-century metropolis, creates an illusion of Victorian time stood still. For Kitty Coleman in *Falling Angels*, the Victorian characteristic of the cemetery’s architecture and stonemasonry is the source of her distaste: she calls it “that blasted cemetery” and its monuments “preposterous”, even if she can appreciate its “lugubrious charm, with its banks of graves stacked on top of one another—granite headstones, Egyptian obelisks, Gothic spires, plinths topped with columns, weeping ladies, angels, and of course, urns—winding up the hill to the glorious Lebanon cedar at the top”

(Chevalier [2001] 2002, p. 16). Yet, for the characters in *Her Fearful Symmetry* a hundred years later, Highgate constitutes a charming, mysterious symbol of the city's Victorian past: "vast and chaotic" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 108), it is "a stony wilderness of Victorian melancholy" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 63). While Victorianism is old-fashioned and sentimental for the modern Kitty, for the contemporary characters of Niffenegger's novel Highgate is a romantic space that epitomises the city's past.

The urban nature (cf. Gandy 2012) of Highgate Cemetery is also important for this discussion of neo-Victorianism as a cemetery. What visitors deem an "authentic" reflection of the Victorian era, namely the burial ground's overgrown, dark, and eccentric mysteriousness that mirrors London as a labyrinth in period Urban Gothic, is, in fact, nothing like nineteenth-century Highgate. The original cemetery was designed as a park in pristine condition, with small shrubs and flower beds: "the landscape was to be embellished by gently rolling, tree planted lawns, separated by sinuous circuitous walks and orientated by the careful placement of monuments and catacombs" (Baxter 2017, p. 22). One Victorian visitor noted the elegance of the cemetery, describing "broad gravel paths [that] wind up either side of the steep slope to the Church of St Michael (. . .). Above the Catacombs the path continues to ascend till it reaches a broad level terrace, with a handsome balustrade" John Lloyd, qtd. in (Baxter 2017, p. 23). Therefore, the image of an old, "authentic" cemetery is actually a much later development following Highgate's decline, carefully controlled by the contemporaries to preserve the illusion of a Victorian cemetery as unkempt and atmospheric. The layer of its Victorian past, still evident in the organisation of the cemetery and its monuments, is palimpsestically merged with later deposits of natural overgrowth and the decay of tombstones, creating controlled chaos and an illusion of authenticity—more neo-Victorian than originally Victorian. Highgate's upper location on Hampstead Hills is also symbolic; originally, it offered a clear view of the capital and its "churches so numerous, that one fails to count them; prisons, hospitals, and crowds of public buildings" (Highgate Cemetery 1859, p. 851).<sup>3</sup> Hence, it could be perceived as a place of contemplation for those who might meditate on the futility of life bustling below. The view of the lively city visible from the necropolis provided a good vantage point from which the society of the Victorian capital could be best measured and reflected on. Now, however, the views are obstructed by tall trees and overgrown bushes and ivy, and thus limiting the possibility of seeing the capital city. Thus, if we want to extend this metaphor to neo-Victorianism, the current positioning of Highgate Cemetery evokes the problematic availability of the Victorians to contemporaries, whose claims to be able to grasp the "authentic" and "faithful" representation of Victorianism in their neo-Victorian narratives seems doubtful.

The two neo-Victorian novels discussed here both use Highgate Cemetery as their vantage point, yet they are set at two very different stages of its history. Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* takes place between 1901 and 1910 and opens, as already mentioned, on the day Queen Victoria dies. To pay their respects and to symbolically commemorate their deceased monarch, the London families visit their local cemeteries, and in the case of the Colemans and the Waterhouses, the local space of mourning is Highgate. Their family tombs neighbour each other, and their two young daughters—Lavinia Waterhouse and Maude Coleman—are of a similar age. The girls run away to play together on the cemetery grounds, where they meet the gravedigger's boy, Simon Field. This opening scene of children playing in the cemetery sets the tone for the novel's appropriation of Highgate as a heterotopic space. Johnson refers to a recording of Foucault's 1970 radio talk where children's games are mentioned as a prime example of a heterotopia; Johnson comments that "children's inventive play produces a different space that at the same time mirrors what is around them" (Johnson 2016a, p. 4). Lavinia and Maude's meetings with Simon to run about between the headstones become a repeated occasion; the Colemans' maid, Jenny Whitby, would leave the girls to roam the cemetery freely while she met with her older gravedigger boyfriend in secret. These scenes of the novel make Highgate Cemetery a doubly heterotopic space, as the children cross the boundaries of decorum and social class (Martin 2015, p. 205), while the maid violates the rules of sexual propriety.

The Colemans and the Waterhouses soon become neighbours in the city as much as in the cemetery, as the Waterhouses rent the house overlooking the Colemans' garden. Yet, the families do not become friendly, at least not as far as the mothers, Kitty Coleman and Gertrude Waterhouse, are concerned. The issue seems to be one of social class; the Waterhouses are lower middle class and cannot afford the same lifestyle as the Colemans. The social contrast between the two families is mirrored by the gravestones of their family tombs. While the Colemans' grave is ornamented with an imposing classic-style urn, the Waterhouses decided to choose a weeping angel that their daughter Lavinia likes, but which Richard Coleman dismisses as sentimental. Both families consider each other's choice of ornamentation distasteful and unimaginative, but these very varied choices also extend further to their houses' interior design. Gertrude Waterhouse compares her own house to Kitty's, pointing out their differences:

I blinked at the colours she'd had it done in—mustard yellow with a dark brown trim, which I suppose is fashionable now. She called them 'golden yellow' and 'chocolate brown,' which sound much better than they looked. I prefer our own burgundy. There is nothing to compare with a simple burgundy parlour. [. . . ] Her taste is very refined—embroidered silk shawls over the sofas, potted ferns, vases of dried flowers, and a baby grand piano. I was rather shocked by the modern coffee set, which has a pattern of tiny black and yellow checks that made me feel dizzy. I myself prefer a simple rose pattern. (Chevalier [2001] 2002, p. 47)

Gertrude's reaction shows that her own style is much more traditionally Victorian—burgundy walls and rose patterns—while Kitty's taste is already Edwardian, with Art Deco elements. This is also evident in Kitty's fashion choices; on that first meeting at the cemetery, Kitty shocks with her choice of attire. While the Colemans—the Victorians at heart—appear at Highgate “in full mourning” (Chevalier [2001] 2002, p. 18), Kitty picks a blue silk dress that makes her stand out from the sombre crowd, “like a peacock spreading its feathers at a funeral” (Chevalier [2001] 2002, p. 25). Her dislike of Highgate and of John Waterhouse's paintings (see Chevalier [2001] 2002, pp. 16, 18), and her taste in fashion and interior decoration all represent a post-Victorian mindset—a term denoting an attitude to Victorianism marked by a detachment from the Victorian past, not Victorian anymore, yet not fully Modernist either. While post- and neo-Victorianism seem similar,<sup>4</sup> due to the fact that they both chronologically succeed Victorianism, post-Victorianism immediately follows nineteenth-century, while neo-Victorianism is a development characteristic of the later twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. More importantly, however, the distinction between post- and neo-Victorianism lies not necessarily in chronology but in their respective attitudes to the Victorian predecessors (cf. Swenson 2017, p. 184). While post-Victorianism is invested in cutting all links with Victorianism, neo-Victorianism is “post-Victorian culture's creative return to, or engagement with, the Victorian” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2014, p. 495).

Thus Kitty Coleman, with her eccentricity, restlessness and late suffragist activism, becomes a representation of the post-Victorian revision of the Victorian era, embodying the transition towards twentieth-century modernism—a transition that is a theme running through the whole of *Falling Angels*. Highgate Cemetery becomes an important setting and symbol of this transition, constituting a heterotopia of crisis and a space of a rite of passage. Severing the links with the Victorian era is evident in the cemetery in a number of ways: the Colemans' angel breaks, representing the passing of the Victorian way of life, whereas the blurring of boundaries between Victorian social strata and their transgression is not only enacted by the children. The adults—Kitty Coleman and her maid Jenny—also perform transgressions at the cemetery, namely sexual ones, as they both strike up romantic affairs that result in illegitimate pregnancies. Kitty and the superintendent of Highgate Cemetery, John Jackson, commence an illicit relationship, and both Jenny and Kitty's affairs enact another transgression—that of the lines between life and death (Martin 2015, p. 223), symbolised by the cemetery where the affairs occur, as a space of death becomes the space where new life is created. Furthermore, when Jenny is made privy to her mistress's secret

and helps her with an illegal abortion, the conventional power structure of a Victorian household is turned upside down.

The Waterhouses are not the only ones who represent the Victorian outlook already fading away as a new lifestyle, represented by Kitty, gains momentum. Another character, who attempts to keep Kitty safely confined within the limited framework of Victorian femininity and family life, is her mother-in-law, Edith Coleman. Being of an older generation, Edith is Victorian through-and-through, and her attachment to the Victorian way of life is evident in her discussion with the superintendent of the Highgate Cemetery about cremation. When visiting the Highgate columbarium with Kitty and the girls, she expresses a conviction that cremation is unchristian, even heathen (see [Chevalier \[2001\] 2002](#), p. 86). The 1902 Cremation Act, mentioned by Superintendent Jackson, is a symbolic mark separating Victorian funeral rites from more modern ones; and this short quibble between Jackson and Mrs Coleman would not constitute a significant scene for the novel, were it not a starting point for his affair with Kitty, and, more importantly, a link to the final scene of the novel where Jackson burns Kitty's body to fulfil her final wish. The novel ends not only with Kitty's cremation but also with the burial of King Edward VII; two royal funerals, opening and closing the narrative, frame the novel whose main theme is the dying throes of the Victorian era.

Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* fast forwards to about a hundred years later. In the contemporary era, Elspeth Noblin dies of cancer in a London hospital, attended by her boyfriend Robert Fanshaw, a guide in Highgate Cemetery and a Ph.D. student researching its history. She leaves her flat overlooking Highgate Cemetery to her sister's twin daughters, Julia and Valentina, who decide to move to London from the U.S. for a year. The "symmetry" mentioned in the title of the novel refers to a mirror reflection, an image used by Foucault in his discussion of heterotopia to explain the relationship between utopia, heterotopia and real places—a place that does not exist (utopia) is reflected and, at the same time, counteracted by an "other" space (heterotopia) in the mirror, which never coincides with the real place one occupies when looking at one's own reflection ([Foucault 1986](#), p. 24). The image of mirror reflection is also applied to neo-Victorianism, for instance, in Simon Joyce's book title and cover of *The Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* ([Joyce 2007](#)). The cover image includes a contemporary view of London, seen through a windshield of a car, while the rearview mirror reflects a nineteenth-century vista of the capital. The two images generate a double view, suggesting that these two perspectives—the Victorian and the contemporary one—are to be seen simultaneously, as they counteract each other, just as the utopia and the real do in the heterotopia of the mirror. Similarly, inspired by Joyce's work, Heilmann and Llewellyn note that "the window, mirror, or lens, is [ . . . ] adaptable to the ways in which the neo-Victorian literature sets up a mirror-like or reflective stance between our own period and that of the nineteenth century [ . . . ], the text becoming almost a glass permitting a double-viewed reflection" ([Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010](#), p. 144). The motif of twins can perform a comparable function, as in the case of Augustus Leopold Egg's 1862 painting *The Travelling Companions*,<sup>5</sup> formerly used on the website of *Neo-Victorian Studies* to illustrate the journal's aims:

[Victorian and neo-Victorian] ages of literature and the arts reflect and converse with each other, the nineteenth century dreaming into the future, our own present moment reading and re-imagining the past, conjoined in an ever-changing interplay of light and shadows, visibility and obscurity, self and doubled other. ([Neo-Victorian Studies Home Site 2008](#))

Victorianism is, therefore, "our nineteenth century [sic] cultural twin" ([Miller 2017](#), p. 199), confronting and reflecting the contemporary era in a palimpsestic and heterochronic way.

In Niffenegger's novel, Julia and Valentina combine both the motif of mirror reflection and that of twins, as they are identical or "mirror" twins. This term means that not only are they indistinguishable in their appearance but also that the insides of their bodies are mirror reflections of each other: "while Julia was organised in the usual way, Valentina was internally reversed. Her heart was on her right side, with all its ventricles and chambers

inverted" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 42). Their appearance together is otherworldly, and when Julia and Valentina enter the flat inherited from Elspeth, the uncanniness of their own twinning is consolidated by multiple mirror reflections:

The front hall was full of umbrellas and mirrors. The twins were reflected eighteen times in as many mirrors, and their reflections were reflected, and on and on. They were startled by this; both stood perfectly still and were each unsure which reflection belonged to which girl. Then Julia turned her head: half of the reflections also turned; the effect was diminished. 'Spooky,' said Julia, to mar the silence. (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 103)

Each other's doubles as well as, physically, the doubles of their mother and aunt, who were also identical twins (Watkiss 2013, p. 166), Julia and Valentina's uncanny mirror bodies and relationship creates its own heterotopic, "other" space. Identical and inevitably connected, seemingly inseparable, the twins nevertheless represent opposite bodies, personalities and sensitivities, and their relationship turns out to be far from a symbiosis. Therefore the concept of "symmetry" in the title represents a number of relationships on extra- and intra-diegetic levels: "the relations between past and present, this life and afterlife, and also the questions of individuation and identity which arise when you live with a mirror image of yourself" (Shuttleworth 2014, p. 187). The uncanny heterotopia of the twins' relationship is enhanced by the haunting of the flat by their Aunt Elspeth that soon becomes apparent.

The word "symmetry" in the title also performs another function—that of an almost exact homophone of the word "cemetery" (Cokal 2009, n. p.), thus drawing the reader's attention to Highgate, a constant presence, even if hovering in the peripheries of the novel. Highgate is always within grasp; the building in which the twins, Elspeth's grieving partner Robert, and their upstairs neighbour Martin Wells live, is right next to the cemetery, its garden hiding a secret gate that leads straight to the Terrace Catacombs in the northern part of the cemetery and is often used by Robert to gain illicit entrance. Not allowed into the cemetery after its closing hours, Robert nevertheless uses the privilege of the garden gate to stroll there at night and enjoy the quiet atmosphere of Highgate after dark. On summer evenings, he meets children playing there—and although their presence can be rationally explained by a missing rail in the cemetery's fence, their silent, mysterious games create an effect of uncanniness, strengthening the effect of Highgate as a heterotopic and heterochronic space. Other descriptions of Highgate Cemetery offered by various characters in the novel also make use of heterotopic features. The burial ground is repeatedly depicted as removed from normal time and space; at Elspeth's funeral, for instance, Robert notices that "[s]ound seemed to have fallen away" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 10). Later, when he prepares to visit Highgate at night as he is prone to do, Robert notes that the garden adjoining the cemetery "had fallen out of time and become an enormous image of itself" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 63). The cemetery is also described as unreal, "spread out in the moonlight like a soft grey hallucination, a stony wilderness of Victorian melancholy" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 63), or "a fairyland" (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 108). Thus, it becomes a simulacrum of a Victorian cemetery, a space outside of everyday reality yet constantly present right outside the windows of the main characters' flats.

In his discussion of heterotopia, Foucault also draws attention to the fact that "[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1986, p. 25), using examples of a theatre, a cinema, and a garden to illustrate this principle. A burial ground fulfils this same requirement of a heterotopia, as it carries within itself a dimension of the memory-making process, both on a personal and on a national level (Ariès 1976, pp. 72–73). In this sense, cemeteries and grave sites are spaces where the memory of the dead is acted out and preserved, and where "performances marking the rites of passage from life to death represent some of the most elaborately staged occasions on which fictions of identity, difference and community come into play" (Roach 1996, p. 28). The funeral rites are performative in more than one sense: a cemetery becomes not only the stage for the

transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead, where memory is ritually, repeatedly performed, but it is also a theatre of social performativity, yet one characterised by “anxiety-inducing instability” (Roach 1996, p. 39). The ultimate “otherness” of the funeral performance, and of its stage that is the cemetery means that “the theatrical and the performative elements which are essential to funerals are, at the same time, the structures which threaten to undo the normative function that funeral performances are intended to perform” (Baron 2011, p. 3). In much this vein, the Highgate described in Niffenegger’s novel proves distinctly performative. Early on in the text, during Elspeth’s funeral, Marijke Wells—one of Robert’s neighbours and Martin’s wife—“suddenly saw the cemetery as an old theatre: the same play was still running, but the costumes and hairstyles had been updated” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 11). Similarly, in his Ph.D. about Highgate Cemetery, Robert notes that “the Victorians had created Highgate Cemetery as a theatre of mourning, a stage set of eternal repose” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 65), yet paradoxically the heterotopia throws him into crisis, inspiring a ceaseless restlessness that prevents him from ever finishing his doctoral thesis. As in *Falling Angels*, Highgate Cemetery’s heterotopic character is strengthened by children playing in its grounds—seemingly ghostly, they were

running between the graves silently, breathing hard but running without calling out. [...] The children continued to play in the cemetery in the evenings, and Robert occasionally observed them, wondering who they were and where they lived, wondering what they meant by the strange games they silently played among the graves. (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, pp. 64–65)

Their silent presence marks their importance as transgressive characters—perhaps not so much in a social sense (comparable to Lavinia, Maud and Simon in *Falling Angels*) but rather in terms of their liminal character as neither ghosts nor living beings. For Robert, this division seems insignificant, as he revels in the children’s uncanniness and sees the cemetery as a space where the living and the dead co-exist. The cemetery is studded with tombs of Victorian personages that Robert proudly mentions while showing tourists around the site (see Niffenegger [2009] 2010, pp. 197–204). He tenderly visits the dead during his nightly excursions behind the garden gate, as he subversively violates the ritual opening and closing of the heterotopia by ignoring its only entrance via the main gate:

He often sat with Michael Faraday, the famous scientist; Eliza Barrow, who had been a victim of the notorious serial murderer Frederick Seddon; he spent time brooding over the unmarked graves of foundlings. [...] Sometimes he borrowed a flower from Radclyffe Hall, who always had an abundance of blooms, and relocated it to some remote and friendless tomb. (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, pp. 65–66)

Robert seems to have a special relationship with the dead—a communion of sorts (Miller 2017, p. 208), evident especially in his obsession with Elizabeth Siddal. Her tragic and romantic biography is something he “fondled [...] in his mind” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 66), attracted to her unavailability in death. Soon the reader realises that Elspeth becomes similarly romanticised by Robert, and Lizzy Siddal becomes an alter-ego of Elspeth in his dream about Highgate full of Victorian ghosts.

Robert’s fascination with the Victorians is further manifested in his doctoral thesis that was initially meant to be focused on the history of Highgate: “he imagined the cemetery as a prism through which he could view Victorian society at its most sensationally, splendidly, irrationally excessive” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 65). Yet, in time, he becomes possessed by the Victorians that lie buried in Highgate: “he got sidetracked by anecdote, fell in love with the futility of elaborate preparations for an afterlife that seemed, at best, unlikely. He began to take the cemetery personally and lost all perspective” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 65). His project takes on mammoth proportions: “Sometimes I think my dissertation is going to be the size of Highgate Cemetery itself, grave by grave, year by year, every blade of grass, every fern” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 374). Robert, a historian—a stand-in

for a neo-Victorianist—“attempts to control and frame the past” (Miller 2017, p. 208), but fails to give the Victorian ghosts a “scriptural tomb” of his dissertation. His dream about the resurrection day at Highgate Cemetery (see Niffenegger [2009] 2010, pp. 388–89) shows how impossible it is to contain the ghosts in their graves—they crowd around Robert, hungry, as the past (and Elspeth with it) comes dangerously close: “He felt uneasy, confined. Suddenly he had the sense that something horrible, monstrous, was standing behind him, pressing its disgusting hands on him” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 389), as it is undermining his postmodern identity and throwing him into crisis. As Emma V. Miller has convincingly argued, in Niffenegger’s novel “our relationship with the dead is reciprocal” (Miller 2017, p. 197) and “the past can be villainous” (Miller 2017, p. 210)—in other words, the Victorian past “bites back,” to paraphrase de Certeau’s statement (De Certeau 1986, p. 8). This metaphorical relationship of neo-Victorianism with the past—where the latter’s villainousness may be perceived as debilitating, enslaving through nostalgic re-creation and repetition—is here literalised by Elspeth’s haunting of her old flat, making herself known to the twins and Robert, and finally convincing them to realise the plot in which she possesses Valentina’s body, condemning her niece to take her place as a ghost haunting the apartment that looks out at Highgate Cemetery.

In Niffenegger’s novel, the city is marked with Victorian presence in heterotopic spaces of haunting memory. Another such space is Postman’s Park, an old churchyard in central London that was reopened in 1880 as a public park, with the Memorial to Heroic Self-Sacrifice established in 1900. The ornamented tiles commemorate ordinary Victorians who heroically saved others and perished themselves: “the stories were extremely abbreviated, hinting at mayhem, but they were decorated with flowers and leaves, crowns, anchors. The ornamentation belied the words: drowned, burned, crushed, collapsed” (Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 235). The Postman’s Park is heterochronic—an archive of the Victorian dead. Yet, its history also tells us that London is a palimpsest; before the Cemetery Reform, the city constituted a literal layering of bodies buried underneath—now it serves as a metaphor of layers of history that spread throughout the contemporary capital. In the novel, the Victorian deposit becomes most evident, pointing out the text’s most prominent theme, that is, the hauntological relationship between the past and the present. The Victorians’ obsession with death—their fear of being buried alive and of body-snatching, and their belief in spiritualism—is not only mentioned in various period references but is also recreated in the contemporary plot of the novel (Miller 2017, p. 205), where Elspeth’s ghost communicates with the twins and Robert via automatic writing and an Ouija board, and Valentina’s body is stolen from the crypt in Highgate and snatched by Elspeth’s spirit.

At the end of the novel, the ghosts of the Victorians buried in Highgate appear again—this time, joined by Valentina’s spirit. The scene where the ghosts fly around the city on crows (see Niffenegger [2009] 2010, p. 480) shows how the spectres of the Victorian era stay in London, saturating its spaces, always present in the city. Both novels discussed here show the inherent heterotopic instability of a burial ground and, by extension, of neo-Victorian “scriptural tombs”. In *Falling Angels*, Kitty’s funeral in Highgate Cemetery is a double enterprise: after a traditional burial by her (still Victorian) family, she is excavated and cremated by her lover, and her ashes are dispersed over the cemetery’s meadow, while her grave in Highgate remains empty. Simon’s role here is that of a neo-Victorianist, who steals some of the ashes and buries them in his grandfather’s garden under a rose bush to “be sure of where some of her is” (Chevalier [2001] 2002, p. 401). In *Her Fearful Symmetry*, on the other hand, the dead (Victorians and otherwise) do not stay buried at all but are omnipresent and self-realising spirits; the grave does not pin them down. Elspeth not only leaves her coffin and never comes back but also steals her own niece’s body to have a new life and bring another generation into the world, while Valentina does not even have a grave as she does not have a corpse, her spectre floating free with the Victorian ghosts.

The novels discussed above focus on this heterotopic and hauntological working of the past and present by using the cemetery as their key metaphor. In *Falling Angels*, Highgate

Cemetery is, on top of other functions, in particular, a heterotopia of crisis—a metaphor of a crucial transition from the Victorian past to the modern present; thus, the cemetery becomes a space of a cultural rite of passage. In *Her Fearful Symmetry*, however, the most crucial aspect of Highgate is its heterochronic character—London in general and its most famous cemetery, in particular, are, in this novel, a palimpsestic space of the past's imminence in the present.

#### 4. Conclusions: Neo-Victorian Heterotopia and Heterochronia

Foucault's definition of heterotopias as spaces "in which the real sites [ . . . ] are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 1986, p. 24) demonstrates a correspondence to existing definitions of neo-Victorianism. Heilmann and Llewellyn's aforementioned definition indicates the self-reflective and subversive aspects of neo-Victorian narratives, which, like heterotopias, both represent and contest Victorian institutions (in a Foucauldian meaning of this term). Moreover, while they reflect, recreate and at times parody the Victorian literary genres and realist mode of writing, neo-Victorian texts, like heterotopian spaces, are "absolutely different" (Foucault 1986, p. 24), since they are neither "original" nineteenth-century novels, nor contemporary historical novels (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, p. 4).

Other aspects of neo-Victorianism make a befitting illustration for the six principles of Foucauldian heterotopia. Themselves spaces of crisis and deviance, neo-Victorian cultural texts form a collection of voices of the period's Others/spectres, at the same time as touching upon Victorian taboos and opening up hidden Victorian spaces of deviance, such as prisons, lunatic asylums or orphanages. Additionally, neo-Victorianism is a shape-shifting mode of cultural production, often constituting a cannibalisation of Victorian genres and modes of writing. Its "phantasmatic quality" (Primorac 2018, p. 11) of nostalgically depicting "the past that never was" (Kaplan 2007, p. 3) represents Foucault's performative heterotopia and heterochronia. Neo-Victorianism, then, is simultaneously the archive of the dead Victorians, visited by now living contemporaries, and also a festival and freakshow of the sensational secrets of the Victorian era. Thus, neo-Victorianism also represents a heterotopia of compensation—both for what we wish we knew about the Victorian past and what we imagine we know, creating an illusion of the superiority of contemporary, more "enlightened" culture.

Accordingly, both cemeteries and neo-Victorianism constitute heterotopias and heterochronias, for both enact "past presence and present absence" (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 84). Admittedly, however, while in the cemetery, this presence/absence paradox is "condensed into the spatially located object" (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 85), in neo-Victorian cultural texts, this phenomenon is more transient, and, indeed, spectral, as it concerns a narrative space. Neo-Victorianism as a cemetery, where the spectres of the Victorian past are buried in textual crypts (that simultaneously enable the spectres' haunting beyond their confines), is heterotopic in the sense of its "layering of meanings at a single material site" (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 84), while neo-Victorian fiction's palimpsestic nature is more heterochronic, building deposits of meanings simultaneously on both nineteenth-century and contemporary temporal planes. If neo-Victorianism equates to viewing "the Victorians in the rearview mirror" (Joyce 2007), then this too is a heterotopia. "The place I occupy" which is "absolutely real" (Foucault 1986, p. 24) is the present, while the "absolutely unreal" (Foucault 1986, p. 24) is the utopia of the Victorian past that never was (Kaplan 2007, p. 3). As in Foucault's metaphor of the mirror, where heterotopia is created in the dynamics of the reflection of the real in the utopia on the other side of the glass, in neo-Victorianism, the past and the present are concurrent, mutually influential, creating situatedness where past and present co-exist in the same space-time. As such, neo-Victorianism is a hauntological project of both being present and absent, of heterotopia and heterochronia.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> However, Miller believes that neo-Victorianism is not a fitting term for Niffenegger's novel, instead suggesting it be designated as "Victorian-Contemporary" because of the "almost ideological power of this particular period over our current contemporary acts of apparent creativity" (Miller 2017, p. 211).
- <sup>2</sup> Niffenegger has mentioned James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as influences on her novel (O'Keefe 2009, p. 19).
- <sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Dr Ian Dungavell of the Friends of Highgate Cemetery for sharing the transcript of this Victorian description with me.
- <sup>4</sup> At times, these two terms are treated as synonymous, or as competing for the same denomination; cf. (Bryk 2002; Kirchknopf 2008; Sulmicki 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> The image depicts two identically dressed, 'twinned' female travellers, seated on opposite sides of a moving railway carriage and can be viewed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augustus\\_Leopold\\_Egg\\_-\\_The\\_Travelling\\_Companions\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augustus_Leopold_Egg_-_The_Travelling_Companions_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg) (accessed on 1 August 2020).

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