

# Requiescant in Pace

## Staging Nature as a Socio-Religious Practice in Highgate Cemetery

*Paola von Wyss-Giacosa*

### *1. Dis-placing the Dead*

It is an eerie, bleak scene unfolding before the eyes of the onlookers: in front of the white portal of a church, dismembered bodies emerge from the dark ground (fig. 1). Gradually, the scattered limbs and heads join together to form new persons, but these appear to be randomly recomposed, intermingling parts of adults and children, of women and men, all wearing a jumble of clothes from different periods. Some of the figures seem disoriented, confused by the events, others, enraged by the sudden disturbance of their sepulchral rest, have turned against the person they deem responsible. The terrified man, depicted on the right-hand side, is pushed against the pillars of the building's entrance and tries to fight off the crowd with his tricorn.

We owe this somewhat disturbing, but remarkable small composition, hitherto unpublished, to the Swiss amateur artist Johann Martin Usteri (1763–1827).<sup>1</sup> Many of his drawings and caricatures represent moralising visual commentaries and observations both on the history and on contemporary every-day life in his hometown of Zurich. After Usteri's death, a close friend, David Hess, collected his works—over four thousand sheets—in several albums, adding titles, dates, and, at times, quite extensive explanations.<sup>2</sup> In the present case the caption informs us of a violent dispute that occurred in the year 1796 between the city architect, Hans Conrad Escher, and his predecessor, Hans Jakob Scheuchzer. Escher, we are told, intending to repave the ground in front of Zurich's main church, Grossmünster, had the mortal remains of those buried there removed and translated to another place, in an unduly confused condition. Scheuchzer attacked Escher for this lack of piety, not least because it offended him per-

---

1 On Usteri's life and work see Ulrich 1990.

2 Kunsthaus Zurich, Dept. Prints and Drawings, Inv.-No.: Z.A.B. 2609.14.



Fig. 1: Johann Martin Usteri, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, around 1796, pen and ink and watercolour on paper, mounted on paper, image size: 35 x 35,5 cm; paper size: 38,5 x 38,8 cm, Kunsthaus Zürich, Dept. Prints and Drawings, Bequest by Magdalena Oeri-Hess, Inv.-No.: Z.A.B. 2609.14 (Image: Paola von Wyss-Giacosa 2014).

sonally, since his own grandmother was among those so rudely disturbed.<sup>3</sup> Rather than showing the verbal confrontation between the two architects,<sup>4</sup> Usteri inventively chose to depict the forced resurrection of the dead.

The brief visual aperçu from Zurich—though this rather anecdotal incident never even made it into the local papers—is indeed quite valuable and noteworthy a source document. Beyond its historical and illustrative value it serves as a heuristic tool for further consideration in the present context, in that the artist tried to imagine and publicly display the distressed condition and the indignation of the dead being disturbed. In so doing he gave a visual expression to feelings, reactions and thoughts that did not merely concern one episode in Switzerland but must rather be seen within a much broader, European, context of new developments regarding burial policies, and, thus, of debates and ensuing changes concerning the position of the dead within the city and within society, in the quite literal sense of the space and place accorded to them.

## 2. *New Places of Rest*

The changing places of the dead, or rather *for* the dead, indeed offer a vast and challenging field of study, as does the notion and social expectation, explicitly expressed in the classic formulaic wish «requiescant in pace», of an inviolate, permanent rest, a calm and peace intimately linked to such places—at least in people's imagination and hope.<sup>5</sup> Usteri's composition may be seen as an early testimony of how, in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

---

3 Hess' caption reads as follows: «Im Jahr 1796, unter der Aufsicht des damaligen Staats-Bauherrn Escher, wurde der Kirchhof vor dem Grossmünster in Zürich verebnet und gepflastert, wobey viele Todtenknochen ausgegraben, und dann, durcheinander vermengt, längs der französischen Kirche, wieder in die Erde gelegt werden mussten, was viel Gerede in der Stadt verursachte. Der frühere Bauherr Scheuchzer, auf seinen Nachfolger im Amte ohnehin nicht gut zu sprechen, ergriff diese Gelegenheit, demselben die bittersten Vorwürfe zu machen, dass er die Ruhe der Todten gestört und auch die Gebeine seiner Grossmutter frevelhaft aufgewühlt habe. Es gab eine heftige und höchst possirliche Szene auf dem Kirchhofe, zwischen dem alten kolossalen und dem neuen kleinen äusserst lebhaften Bauherrn, welcher letzterer immer bey Wind und Wetter mit einem Chapeau-bas unter dem Arm, im Winter mit einem Muff einherzugehen pflegte.»

4 A pencil sketch, also in the Kunsthau Zurich, Dept. Prints and Drawings, L 53, fol. 12, indicates that this may have been the artist's original intention.

5 A collection of essays, discussing case studies through time, is presented in Jupp/Howarth 1997.

the closure of inner-city churchyards and the ensuing relocation of remains, time and again were the source of public uproar. Concurrently there is also, not surprisingly, a rich body of sources eloquently advocating and promoting the qualities of the newly instituted garden cemeteries on the outskirts of cities. One such document, published in 1865, some sixty years after the Swiss artist's drawing, but still bearing witness to the debate on burial grounds, stems from one of the largest European metropolitan areas; it is the first guide to London's Highgate Cemetery. William Justyne, author of this and other cemetery guides, writes:

The ancient churches of London—venerable relics of olden piety—which survive to witness the growth of this great Babylon, and stand like hoary sentinels in the midst of the surging flood of life that rolls along its echoing streets from earliest dawn to almost dawn again, were once surrounded by quiet grounds where the green grass nodded in the sunshine over the graves of the citizens. Those sacred spots were passed with reverence then! Now they are blocked in, narrowed, and in many instances have totally disappeared before the advancing tide of brick and mortar. They sturdily resisted encroachments, and long after the sunshine had been excluded and all vegetation gone, they were used for the purpose of burial. The unpleasant truth, however, that the city burial vaults and grounds were becoming so many sources of death-dealing pestilence, gradually forced itself on public attention, and at last became too apparent for even the respectable blindness of official routine; so after years of procrastination, and many violent controversies with those individuals which always impede a social reform, the solemn old places have been closed, and the advantages of rural cemeteries recognized by every class of society.<sup>6</sup>

While a reform of the burial practices is presented by the guide's author as imperative for sanitary and social reasons, when describing the new private burial grounds a strong rhetoric involving «nature» is noticeable, employed to emphasize the quality of the sites as peaceful and dignified, as aesthetically and morally uplifting, and, not least, as permanent.<sup>7</sup> Justyne in fact makes his booklet start with a brief description of Highgate's «many natural beauties» which «contribute many natural charms to this solemn region.»<sup>8</sup> The extensive passages on landscape in the guide and in several oth-

---

6 Justyne 1865, 13.

7 See Rutherford 2010; Jackson 2014.

8 Justyne 1865, 7.

er publications on commercial park cemeteries recur conspicuously, as do those on the seasonal changes accompanying the dead and on the atmospheric qualities of such a natural environment. They are carefully orchestrated, not least intended to counter the arguments of those fiercely opposed to such developments. The «individuals which always impede a social reform» mentioned above, as official records show, obviously acted principally for political and economic reasons.<sup>9</sup> Still, they no doubt were also expressing sentiments such as the ones that had inspired Usteri's painting and arguing their case by denouncing the closure and displacement of urban churchyards as impious acts eradicating memories and places and violating the peace of the dead.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the design of Justyne's hardly coincidental green cover (fig. 2), featuring, on the bottom, six dignified angelic figures holding up a banner with the inscription «Requiescant in pace» and framed by a trefoil arch on columns, stands in clear contrast with the unsettling vision of the dead violently rising in front of Zurich's Grossmünster.<sup>11</sup>

9 See the Metropolitan Burial Act of 1852, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1855/jun/08/metropolitan-burial-grounds-the-burial>, (accessed May 19, 2017): The Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield, argued that the closure of the parish burial grounds, particularly in the poor East End, posed increasingly worsening problems. Blomfield was also critical of parishes no longer having control over burials, now in the hands of private companies, and remarked on the significant loss of income the new system brought about for the clergy: «But the Metropolitan Burials Bill, while it operated with great hardship on the poor, inflicted another grievous injury upon the parochial clergy. By this Bill the parochial clergy were deprived of that which was the chief source of their incomes—namely, burial fees.»

10 An interesting source in this context may be Basil Holmes' 1896 publication on burial grounds in London, particularly the reference to the Disused Burial Grounds Act: «All the City churchyards are now protected from being built upon by the Disused Burial Grounds Act of 1888, but that Act has not yet been read to include the sites of the churches themselves which are from time to time removed, and which have all had interments in the vaults underneath them.» The same author, in a chapter on graveyards as public gardens, refers to Sir Edwin Chadwick's report of 1843, in which the social reformer wrote that a disused burial ground should be kept open as public ground. See Holmes 1896, 76 and 226. See also, more generally Warpole, 2003.

11 George Cruikshank created a disturbing representation of the burial conditions in London in the 1840s in his biting caricature «Enon Chapel – Dancing on the dead.» A corrupt Baptist minister had crammed thousands of bodies in a vault beneath the chapel near the Strand in London, resulting in a scandal that contributed to the burial reform. See Jupp 1997.

Despite the gravity of the concerns expressed by Justyne, it may thus be inferred that talk of the beauty and harmony of the new garden cemeteries—like the emphasis, in the quotation, on the disappearance of vegetation from the once «sacred spots» of the city churchyards—should not be viewed as merely descriptive or simply as a marketing device (though the commercial aspect was, no doubt, very important). Rather, it must also be regarded as part of a targeted argument, one meant to offer a sensible alternative to a practice that had, for a long time, seen the mortal remains buried in the proximity of their loved ones.<sup>12</sup> The prospect of their resting in the serenity of a commemorative garden, in the midst of what William Wordsworth had described as the «soothing influences of nature»,<sup>13</sup> should help emotionally appease this loss of a close spatial link between the community of the dead and that of the living. The new cemeteries offered a liminal space animated by the timeless quality of nature perpetually renewing itself; they created attractive public places, thus the implicit argument, in which the performativity of nature would help ease the pain of the bereaved, supporting their common hope for an eternal peace of the dead, while at the same time inviting visitors to enjoy the beautiful landscape.

---

12 In a diachronic perspective, an observation on the concluding banner of the recent exhibition «Highgate Cemetery at a crossroads» seems worth quoting here: «People need somewhere close to home to bury their loved ones.» See [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Banners\\_final-LO.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Banners_final-LO.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2018).

13 The English Romantic poet's *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810) had a great impact in the Victorian era. See Wheeler 1990, 47–68.



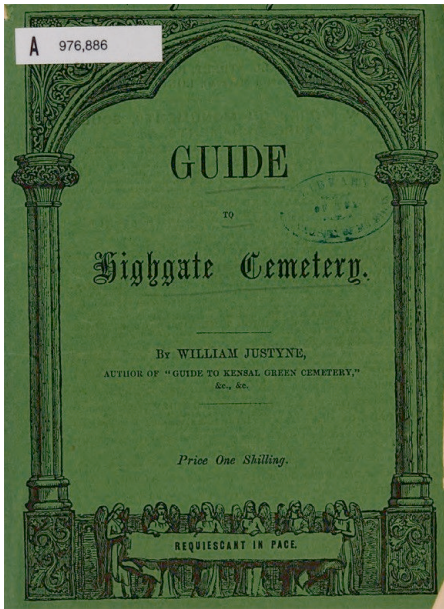


Fig. 2: *Guide to Highgate Cemetery, Cover, London 1865.*<sup>14</sup>

In what follows I will take a few select examples from Highgate Cemetery as a case in point, and focus on historical and current source material that presents and represents a particular performativity attributed to nature. I will discuss facets of the theatricality of the landscape, be it the melancholic atmosphere ascribed to it, its aura of wild, romantic seclusion or its role as a peaceful abode. Indeed, such talk of <nature> was part of a carefully chosen rhetoric already in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the cemetery was realized. It aimed at relating a specific, chosen space to a largely shared imaginary—whereby the term <imaginary> refers to a product of imagination, to a framework of mental and material images, to a common ground and dimension of society.<sup>15</sup> Linking liminal places such as burial grounds with gardens, it sought to carry forward such an imaginary as a whole field of action and of cultural, religious and social references. I argue that this strategy proved successful for a very long time—in fact, it is noteworthy that to this day the value of the cemetery as a con-

14 <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015043572810&view=1up&seq=2>, Public Domain, (accessed May 15, 2017).

15 For an in depth discussion on the imaginary see Pezzoli-Olgianti 2015.

fined, yet public green space remains a narrative in its own right, and on many grounds, within the reasoning of the Friends of the Highgate Cemetery Trust, a charity founded in 1975 with the aim of preserving the historic ground for the public benefit and as a place of burial.<sup>16</sup>

It seems necessary, at this point, to outline more explicitly the notion of 'place' used in the present context. In a highly regarded article published in 1996, the American phenomenologist Edward S. Casey observes: «*Places gather*: [...] Minimally, places gather things in their midst—where 'things' connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts.» And he specifies: «By 'gathering' I do not mean merely amassing. To gather placewise is to have a peculiar hold on what is presented (as well as represented) in a given place. Not just the contents but the very mode of containment is held by a place [...] a holding *together* in a particular configuration [...] a holding *in* and a holding *out* [...] a configurative complex of things [...] intrinsic to the holding operation of place is *keeping* [...] places also keep such unbodylike entities as thoughts and memories.»<sup>17</sup> Casey's characterisation of place offers a methodologically useful background for my brief considerations on socio-religious notions and practices linking nature and burial grounds. Moreover, to better understand this quality of «nature as a liminal place», one which entails the promise of peace and perpetuity, as well as the recurrent and intractable problems of the allocation and use of space, a diachronic perspective is chosen. This allows me to point out aspects of continuity within the arguments on burial grounds, but also within the transformations, adaptations and changes of Highgate until today.

### 3. *A Garden for the Dead, a Garden for the Living*

A beautiful spot on the outskirts of London with magnificent views of the city, one well known as a popular destination for outings, was chosen by the London Cemetery Company for Highgate.<sup>18</sup> The cemetery, opened in 1839, was planned by the architect Stephen Geary and the garden designer David Ramsey in the tradition of private landscaped gardens and executed in an area that had been one of mundane recreation and pleasure, a circumstance that was not without its critics:

---

16 See <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/the-friends> (accessed May 22, 2018).

17 Casey 1996, 24–25.

18 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, 2014.



Occupying one of the loveliest and most pleasant sites in the vicinity of the metropolis, and decorated by a profusion of flowers, and by showy bits of architecture, whatever may be its charms, this place, has certainly nothing of that solemnity which its purpose seems to call for. To the gaiety arising from the natural beauties of the scenery and prospect it might seem like churlish hypercriticism to make any objection; but instead of any attempt to subdue it, we perceive that pains have been studiously taken to render it prominent.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such observations, Highgate was soon perceived by most to emanate just the quiet atmosphere a cemetery should have while still appearing to be an open, inviting place. Its skilfully staged «natural beauties» were conceived to set the scene for individual as well as social interaction, for mourners and for promenaders. An early comment on Highgate seems to confirm the successful realisation of the project: «The beauties of the place, indeed, appear to be fully appreciated, for the gardens, as we may not inappropriately term the grounds, are daily filled with persons evidently enjoying the quiet, the pure air, and the splendid landscape.»<sup>20</sup>

---

19 Companion to the Almanac, 1839, quoted in Collison 1840, 176.

20 The Penny Magazine, 21.12.1839, quoted in Collison 1840, 179. See also, on the recreational aspect, also intended from the inception, as a function of rural cemeteries, Penny 1974, especially 70–72.



A CEMETERY OF THE FUTURE.

FRONTISPIECE.

Fig. 3: *Frontispiece of God's Acre Beautiful, or The Cemeteries of the Future, London and New York 1880.*<sup>21</sup>

Park cemeteries were a new proposition that had to be both dignified and attractive. They were meant to be perceived as positive on different socio-religious levels. The notion of nature, in this context, was used in reference to a landscape, to a garden, one that indeed was carefully planned and executed.<sup>22</sup> In remarkably long and learned overviews on funerary rites and places in history, the authors of several publications on the new burial grounds in Europe and overseas quoted, among others, old tracts from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries on ancient funerary cultures.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the intention in introducing this historical evidence on landscape as a source of solace and pleasure to men since times immemorial was to convince people

21 <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/hhdygx62>, Public Domain, (accessed June 18, 2018).

22 For further consideration of gardens from the perspective of aesthetics of religion see Mohn 2010.

23 See for instance Collison 1840; Justyne 1865; Robinson 1880.

that the idea of a garden as a cemetery was very old, ancient in fact, and mostly, that it was universal. For, if such a use was old and universal, it may persuasively be argued that the peace of the dead was not being disturbed, but rather recreated by those setting up the new burial grounds in nature.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the frontispiece chosen for *God's Acre Beautiful* (fig. 3), a volume on the topic published in 1880, suggests just that: The «Cemetery of the Future»—as the caption of the image reads—shows a lush parkland with antique-style architecture in the distance. Past and future appear to be merged beyond time in a prosperous place of eternal rest.

Some twenty years after Highgate's opening, Justyne, in his guidebook to the cemetery, was writing of a «holy loveliness upon this place of death, as though kind angels hovered about it, and quickened fair Nature with their presence, in love for the good souls whose tenantless bodies repose there.»<sup>25</sup> What the author, obviously quite deliberately, described on a general level and with regard to the overall conception, he explicated and further emotionalised in comments and observations on the atmospheric quality of single graves in the course of an imagined walk through the burial ground. In his description of the resting place of an infant in the West Cemetery, accessible at present only by guided tour,<sup>26</sup> many analogies are found that relate to nature: «Along this road [...] there is a beautiful little cross to the memory of Arthur George, infant son of Mr. and Mrs. Aston. It stands in the centre of a garden, where during the summer season the most exquisite flowers appeal to the heart with their delicate loveliness, and eloquently plead the fond remembrance of that little human bud so early plucked, whose name is recorded on the miniature memorial, and whose spirit is dwelling amid the flowers that never perish in the golden sunshine of eternal Heaven.»<sup>27</sup>

The single graves may—as Justyne's description seems to suggest—be regarded as miniature gardens within a vast funerary landscape, each in its own right a presentation and, at the same time, a representation of a mutual interdependence between the living and the dead. Each grave is a place, following Casey's definition; it holds together and keeps, in a particular

24 The Elysian Fields are a particularly interesting reference, because they evoke both a Greek and a Biblical tradition, surely undergirded by a notion of Victorian Aesthetics.

25 Justyne 1865, 7.

26 The Friends are discussing periodical open access to the West Cemetery as a means to encourage return visits. See Exhibition banners, homepage.

27 Justyne 1865, 39. Such analogies can be found in contemporary collections of funerary mottoes. See Palliser 1872, 17–29 (section on the deaths of infants).

configuration, visible and tangible things, but also «such unbodylike entities as thoughts and memories.»<sup>28</sup> The individual grave does so through its position, through the tombstone with a name and dates, through its desolation or trimness, through an inscription or the visual representation of powerful symbols such as a rose, a lily or ivy, but also through the planting surrounding it, through a bunch of flowers, a candle or a personal object left behind.



Fig. 4: *The Grave of Caroline Tucker (1910–1994) in Highgate’s East Cemetery (Image: Paola von Wyss-Giacosa 2016).*

The bereaved as well as the many touristic visitors to the cemetery today, moving in the funerary landscape from one grave to another, are confronted with a complex, multisensory experience. On their walk they take in the scents, see the light effect in the trees, or a view of the landscape, by this bodily involvement establishing a multifaceted connection to the place. A more recent grave located in the East side extension of Highgate, where one can wander around freely, further exemplifies nature’s performativity.

---

28 Casey 1996, 25; see also Assmann 2010 and Belting 2001.

The monument for Caroline Tucker consists of a statue in white stone on a pedestal.

It is the image of a young woman, in a simple dress, kneeling with rose blossoms on her lap, as if dwelling in a garden (fig. 4). Plants surround her, and the changing seasons time and again renew the appeal of the figure's tranquil beauty. Onlookers may read the inscription on the pedestal: the name, followed by the phrase «Darling Wife, Mother and Grandmother», and the dates of her birth and death, 1910–1994. The serene expression of the young—or rather ageless—woman, her peaceful condition, convey a sentiment of solace and indeed seem to have a strong impact on visitors; several photographs of Caroline Tucker's tomb can be found when searching for images of Highgate on the web. Taken over the course of the last two decades, in different seasons and from different angles, they are occasionally accompanied by a brief comment on the atmosphere of this particular place within the cemetery.<sup>29</sup> Caroline Tucker was over eighty years old, when she passed away, but the monument and the vegetation seem to suggest to onlookers that time is suspended for her.

Highgate's West Cemetery was planned purposefully, following the aesthetic theories of the time, pairing classical antiquity to modern sensibility.<sup>30</sup> It appears as a self-contained world, with serpentine paths and walks through copse of trees, time and again opening up to new prospects and beautiful lawns. But even in the cemetery's expansion to the East, which was done with no overall concept for the planting, nature, in its performativity, functions as a large area of reconciliation between the spaces of the living and the dead, and, more generally, as an atmospheric site for visitors and tourists. The two parts of the garden cemetery, both in their permanence and in their constant change, may each be perceived as sequences of settings with a strong semantic power; as symbols of a journey, the stages of which are marked by buildings and trees, by avenues, monuments, ivy and shrubs, by paths, tomb stones and flowers. They represent places of memory and remembrance, recounting stories of lives lived and offering spaces of personal reflection and collective emotion to visitors. Memorial gardens, in their overall institutional conception and on an individual level, were meant to serve as idyllic abodes for the dead and for the living and are as artful as they appear natural. Nature, in the rich socio-religious imag-

---

29 See, for instance, <http://www.beckybedbug.com/2013/08/highgate-cemetery.html> (accessed April 24, 2018): «This was my favourite of the whole site. The woman is so beautiful and tranquil, resting within the plants.»

30 See Rutherford 2010.

inary it inspired, can evoke a faith in resurrection and a primordial, harmonious stage of humanity, and indeed, both in the conception and in the reception of graves, associations with Paradise, Arcadia and the Elysian Fields are frequent, as the description of the tomb of little Arthur George Aston or the recurrent photographic capturing of Caroline Tucker's funerary monument may have exemplified.

The succession of graves in Highgate—as it is documented in diverse writings and images or beheld in the individual and collective experience of visitors—can be interpreted as a constellation of images of nature unfolding. It can be perceived as a field of action, too, not only evoked, but also deliberately developed and staged through time, carefully reflecting and constructing, integrating, negotiating and deploying a many-layered cultural imaginary. Nature, in this context and taking up Casey's definition once more, may thus be understood to be an integral element and expression of what is presented and represented in Highgate as a place of funerary practice and as a historical site, and this, still following the American philosopher's thoughts, with an attention not just for the content but also for the mode of containment.

#### 4. «Not just a green park»

Highgate, as any other garden cemetery complexly staged, necessitated not only a clear initial conception by its creators but also instructions and rules for the users, so as to shape and control the intended performativity of the domesticated nature and, concurrently, to give it continuity. In the regulations of 1878, for instance, we read, with regard to the vegetation, that «all Grave owners desirous of turfing, planting, or otherwise ornamenting their Graves themselves, must make application to the Superintendent at the Cemetery or to the Directors.»<sup>31</sup> Another point in the booklet, in the section on charges for gardening, seems worth mentioning here: «The Company undertakes, by sealed deed, to maintain the decoration of graves in perpetuity, upon payment of a sum to be ascertained upon application to the Secretary.»<sup>32</sup>

---

31 London Cemetery Company 1878, 7–8.

32 London Cemetery Company 1878, 18. Indeed, the Options Report of the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trustees of August 2017 mentions many graves privately owned in perpetuity (2.1. Burials); Baxter 2017a.



Current regulations have obviously been adapted to new needs, but they are still concerned with bridging the overall conception of the cemetery and people's individual needs.<sup>33</sup> The Friends of the Highgate Cemetery Trust, whose central goal and major challenge it is to maintain the memorial landscape, issue them. A brief review of some of the questions posited by the recent exhibition organised by the Friends, «Highgate Cemetery at a crossroads» (July 18–August 6, 2017), well illustrates their engagement and the complexity of their task, summarised as follows on the introductory banner: «Highgate Cemetery has been in use as a cemetery for 178 years and has now reached a point where important decisions need to be made about its future. Burial space is running out and maturing trees are destroying graves and memorials. Doing nothing is not an option. We would like you to help us find the right answers for the future of this amazing place.»<sup>34</sup> Several juxtapositions of old and recent photographs in the exhibition illustrate how the «original landscape», a «garden with clumps of trees and shrubs framing distant views of London»,<sup>35</sup> is now hidden by ashes and sycamores, how the enormous number of these self-seeding trees is growing out of control, endangering the surviving historic trees and the ecological value of the site as a green space and wildlife habitat. Suggestions are made to enhance the biodiversity through new planting and landscaping, enriching the visitors' experience and contributing to the «romantic atmosphere of the Cemetery.»<sup>36</sup> Another major concern is the future of Highgate as a «living cemetery»: «Visits by grave owners and relatives enhance the meaning of the place as a landscape of memory, and provide an important reminder that this is not just a park.»<sup>37</sup> With reference to other burial sites in England and abroad (such as the famous Père-Lachaise in Paris), feasible solutions are presented for the imminent running out of space, namely grave re-use.<sup>38</sup> The last central question brought to the public's attention in the exhibition concerns the importance, maintenance and

---

33 They are found on the homepage of Highgate Cemetery, in the section on burials, <https://highgatecemetery.org/burials> (accessed May 22, 2018).

34 First banner; a pdf of all the banners of the exhibition, as well as a questionnaire, are available on the homepage. [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Banners\\_final-LO.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Banners_final-LO.pdf) / [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Questionnaire\\_with\\_responses\\_web.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Questionnaire_with_responses_web.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2018).

35 Exhibition, banner 2.

36 Exhibition, banner 3.

37 Exhibition, banner 4.

38 The Options Report of the FOHCT refers to studies on the ethics of grave re-use, namely the recent publication by Rugg/Holland 2017.

possible further development of Highgate as a unique site for visitors and tourists.

In his article, Casey remarks: «Rather than being one definite sort of thing—for example, physical, spiritual, cultural, social—a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in its occurrence as an event: places not only *are*, they *happen*.»<sup>39</sup> Taking up the phenomenologist's observation, it seems relevant to ask what such a place as a funerary landscape, might represent on a socio-religious level today. More specifically how might this question be answered in the case of Highgate, originally and intentionally conceived on the outskirts of the city but now, after almost two centuries, located within the urban centre? Is the garden cemetery an imposing example of Victorian funerary culture and thus primarily a historical site? Or is it rather a moralized terrain, a place of loss, despair and reconciliation, one of commemoration? Is it a religious or a secular ground, or is it both, a self-confined island of green and quiet and a liminal abode? Users of the cemetery time and again seem to engage in a dialogue with the place and with older graves in taking their decisions on how to lay their loved ones to rest. By the same token, the visitors to Highgate who come to see the graves of famous personalities from past and present advertised on the homepage of the cemetery seem to react and relate to the place and nature's performativity in different ways, even though they are probably not acquainted with many of the rich symbols from the original design, nor aware of many botanical, or other, references on the tombs. Still they may perceive many a detail and correspondence, they may be moved or intrigued not just by the «unique atmosphere of sublime melancholy»<sup>40</sup> but also by an arrangement of trees, by a seasonal blooming, by the recurring presence of certain plants and flowers, by an object left on a tomb, and decipher and interpret them on their own, contemporary terms. Places *happen*, as Casey writes, and therefore the spaces of the living and those of the dead meet time and again under new conditions.

In fact, in recent decades, some architecturally noteworthy new houses were built on ground that once belonged to Highgate Cemetery which was cheaply sold off in the 1960s to improve its precarious financial situation. These private residences on Swains Lane border the cemetery. Eldridge Smerin Architects designed one which relates to the very unique environ-

---

39 Casey 1996, 27.

40 Exhibition, banner 2.

ment in many ways, not least through the name of the mansion, «House in Highgate Cemetery.»<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 5: Eldridge London Architects + Designers, *House in Highgate Cemetery*, Swains Lane (Image: Lyndon Douglas 2008, © Eldridge London).

On the architect's homepage we read about the building (fig. 5): «Each space benefits from an open terrace onto the cemetery and its wooded landscape.»<sup>42</sup> The architecture and design magazine *Dezeen* in 2008 reported on its position: «Unlike the lower part of the cemetery where people often go to see Karl Marx's grave, the upper part where the house is located is overgrown and largely unvisited allowing it to act as a stunning back-

---

41 The construction, replacing a house built in 1970 by architect John Winter, won, among other things, a RIBA award in 2009 and was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize. Also on Swains Lane, two doors down, Dominic McKenzie Architects built Eidolon House, winner of the Sunday Times Home of the Year 2014. Between these two buildings, stands another house, named Valhalla by its current residents, who, according to their architect cut their plants in the shape of tombstones. It recently received a new facade using «traumatised wood, as dead as we could make it», proposed in 2015 by the architect Denizen Works. See <http://www.hamhigh.co.uk/property/a-deathly-feat-of-architecture-overlooking-highgate-cemetery-1-4691445> (accessed August 20, 2017); [https://www.dezeen.com/2016/07/26/valhalla-highgate-denizen-works-burnt-wood-cladding-modernist-house-highgate-london-facade/#disqus\\_thread](https://www.dezeen.com/2016/07/26/valhalla-highgate-denizen-works-burnt-wood-cladding-modernist-house-highgate-london-facade/#disqus_thread) (accessed April 24, 2018).

42 <http://eldridgelondon.com/work/house-in-highgate-cemetery> (accessed August 24, 2017).

drop for the spaces within the house.»<sup>43</sup> Several comments about the house on Swains Lane were made on the homepage of *Dezeen* following the article's publication, ranging from enthusiastic: «The creep factor is Fabulous!»; «The design is «Dead on» to critical: «I wonder, [...] do the Londoners see this house dominating over the cemetery, where soul shall remain quiet. It is a very green area, but it is not just a green park [...]»; «Well do any of you know this place? I have lived in Highgate and used to visit this part of the cemetery when it was open for a few days a year. This is quite a sacred place. The house I love but the location—NO—it's to insensitive in this environment and imposes on the cemetery—how did you get away with it—did you bung the council or something?»<sup>44</sup>

Such comments, in their diversity, remain thought provoking in their own right, despite being over a decade old. They offer an additional background to the Friends' present reflections and considerations, leading back to matters of politics and regulation, of legal and moral ownership of the burial ground, and thus, importantly, to the issue of «requiescant in pace», to the changing places for the dead and to Usteri's painting discussed in my introduction.

When Highgate was first opened some argued that too mundane and recreational a spot had been chosen for it, one that, as quoted above, was not solemn enough for its function.<sup>45</sup> Around the same time, the first questions about the future of disused intramural graveyards were raised, about preservation of such grounds from encroachment.<sup>46</sup> Arguments were made that even if converted they should be maintained for the benefit of the public as gardens. Highgate today is considered to be a very green area, but as one of the comments on *Deezen* put it, it is «not just a green park.» This raises some persistent questions: which functions will such a garden cemetery continue, and which will it cease or adopt in the future? Furthermore, how will such decisions reposition Highgate in the constellation of images of a city that is outgrowing previous limits and borders and so challenging previously established spaces and places?

The impact of the 2017 exhibition is reflected on Highgate's homepage in the section «News». A document informs visitors to the page about the

---

43 <http://www.dezeen.com/2008/10/20/house-by-eldridge-smerin> (accessed September 6, 2016).

44 <http://www.dezeen.com/2008/10/20/house-by-eldridge-smerin/> (accessed September 6, 2016). Mistakes in spelling and grammar have been left uncorrected.

45 See *infra*, 310/311.

46 See *infra*, footnote 10.

results of the questionnaire distributed on that occasion.<sup>47</sup> It was presented by the Friends as a request for help and may indeed be read as a call to the public to reflect actively on and contribute to future decisions and regulations, and, thus, to the happening of Highgate Cemetery as a place. Though the total number of people who filled out the form, 340, is not very high, still a trend in the answers can be made out that would want to see Highgate open and functioning in the future, both as a cemetery and as a historic site for visitors. The Friends also offer an update concerning the Conservation plan for Highgate that they are trying to put in place.<sup>48</sup> To tackle the complexity of the task, the elaborate option report proposes a subdivision of the West and the East Cemetery into seven and five «character areas» respectively,<sup>49</sup> and offers descriptions, reflections and recommendations as to their future. These considerations frequently involve, both verbally and visually, facets of the rich imaginary on nature developed and carried on through time. The coming years will mark new stages in the history of Highgate Cemetery and in the role of nature's powerful performativity in it, not as a mere object of aesthetic perception and of regulation, but as a central agent in the past and future happening of this place.

## Bibliography

- Assmann, Aleida, 2010, Re-framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past, in: Tilmans, Karin/van Vree, Frank/Winter, Jay (eds.), *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 35–50.
- Baxter, Alan, 2017a, Highgate Cemetery Options Report *Draft* Prepared for FOHCT, August 2017, [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/1746–170\\_Highgate\\_Cemetery\\_Options\\_Report\\_V2.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/1746–170_Highgate_Cemetery_Options_Report_V2.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2018).
- Baxter, Alan, 2017b, Highgate Cemetery Conservation Plan. Initial Baseline Study *Draft* Prepared for FOHCT, June 2017, [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/1746–170\\_Initial\\_Baseline\\_Study\\_1low.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/1746–170_Initial_Baseline_Study_1low.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2018).
- Belting, Hans, 2001, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, München: Wilhelm Fink.

47 [https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Questionnaire\\_with\\_responses\\_web.pdf](https://highgatecemetery.org/uploads/Questionnaire_with_responses_web.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2018).

48 Baxter 2017b.

49 Character areas are «broadly defined as areas within which the prevailing character is distinct from adjacent areas in terms of topography, landscape design, planting, and built form (including character of memorials) or a combination thereof.» Baxter 2017a, Highgate Cemetery Option Report 1.

- Casey, Edward S., 1996, How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time. Phenomenological Prolegomena, in: Feld, Steven/Basso, Keith H. (eds.), *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 13–52.
- Collison, George, 1840, *Cemetery Interment. Containing a Concise History of the Modes of Interment Practised by the Ancients [...]*, London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans.
- Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, 2014, *Highgate Cemetery. Saved by its Friends*, London: FOHCT.
- Holmes, Basil, 1896, *The London Burial Grounds*, New York: Macmillan and Co.
- Jackson, Lee, 2014, *Dirty Old London. The Victorian Fight against Filth*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Jupp, Peter C., 1997, Enon Chapel. No Way for the Dead, in: Jupp, Peter C./Howarth, Glennys (eds.), *The Changing Face of Death. Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 90–104.
- Jupp, Peter C./Howarth, Glennys (eds.), 1997, *The Changing Face of Death. Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Justyne, William, 1865, *Guide to Highgate Cemetery*, London: Printed by Moore.
- London Cemetery Company, 1878, *The Rules, Orders, and Regulations of the London Cemetery Company*, London: London Cemetery Company.
- Mohn, Jürgen, 2010, Die Konstruktion religiöser Wahrnehmungsräume und der wissenschaftliche Blick. Religionsästhetische Überlegungen anhand von Gartenanlagen in der europäischen Religionsgeschichte, in: Beinhauer-Köhler, Bärbel/Pezzoli-Olgati, Daria/Valentin, Joachim (eds.), *Religiöse Blicke – Blicke auf das Religiöse*, Zurich: TVZ, 59–82.
- Palliser, F. and Palliser, M.A., 1872, *Mottoes for Monuments or Epitaphs, Selected for Study or Applications, Illustrated by Flaxman and others*, London: J. Murray.
- Penny, N. B., 1974, The Commercial Garden Necropolis of the Early Nineteenth Century and its Critics, *Garden History*, 2/3, 61–76.
- Pezzoli-Olgati, Daria, 2015, Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Setting the Scene, in: Pezzoli-Olgati, Daria (ed.), *Religion in Cultural Imaginary. Explorations in Visual and Material Practices*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 9–38.
- Robinson, William, 1880, *God's Acre Beautiful or The Cemeteries of the Future*, London: The Garden Office, Holmes 1896.
- Rugg, Julie/Holland, Stephen, 2017, Respecting Corpses. The Ethics of Grave-Re-use, *Mortality*, 22/1, 1–14.
- Rutherford, Sarah, 2010, *The Victorian Cemetery*, Oxford: Shire Publications.



- Ulrich, Conrad, 1990, Johann Martin Usteri. Der Maler, Zürich: Buchverlag Berichthaus.
- Warpole, Ken, 2003, Last Landscapes. The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West, London: Reaction Books.
- Wheeler, Michael, 1990, Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

