

From Retro to Neo-Victorian Fiction and Beyond: Fearful Symmetries

Sally Shuttleworth

University of Oxford

There are many Victorian eras. As a child in the early 60s, my own introduction to things Victorian was through the dark, brooding serials screened for children at Sunday teatimes. Dickens recounts in 'Nurses' Stories' how the fears engendered by his nurse's tales still live within him in adulthood. Dickens' own narratives, as recreated for television in these classic serials, defined in turn the nightmares of a new generation, from Miss Havisham in flames at the window, to the menacing horror of the grotesque Quilp. Memories of the Shivering Sands, in an adaptation of Collins' *The Moonstone*, still flood through me if I step on moist sand. This was a Victorian era delivered in grainy black and white, and defined by darkness, repression and violence, without any leavening of humour. For the current generation, the Victorian era is an altogether looser, and more congenial affair, a label liberally applied (with little concern for the niceties of dates) to any production in 'costume', from Jane Austen on, and perhaps best defined by the sprightly, sexually explicit television adaptations of Andrew Davies. Other, more interesting, recreations of the Victorian world emerge in the current Steam Punk movement. Rooted in the aesthetics of Victorian technology, the exuberant physicality of its creations contrast sharply with post-modernist electronic minimalism. The movement celebrates a return to craftsmanship, in a playful reworking of William Morris. Looking back to the world of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, steam punk

gleefully embraces its own nostalgia in what Brian Catling has termed ‘a calibration of longing’.

The Victorian age is an ever fertile terrain which we draw upon to feed our own needs and desires, the shapes we produce shifting with the social and political landscapes of the decades, and (our political masters will be pleased to hear), with the intellectual trajectories of Victorian scholarship. Whilst feminist scholarship in the seventies and eighties gave rise to a rash of novels reinserting the female voice into history, or the silent spaces of classic novels, more recent scholarship on race and imperialism, or sexuality has had an equally strong impact on subsequent forms of the historical novel. The term, ‘retro-victorian’ in my title refers back to an earlier essay, ‘Natural History: The Retro-Victorian Novel’, first written and delivered as a conference paper in 1993, although the conference volume itself was not published until 1998. These five years saw a significant shift in the British political landscape: whilst 1998 takes us to the euphoria of the early Blair years, 1993 was just after Thatcher’s gloomy reign (1979-90), when the UK was still under Conservative rule, with John Major at the helm. Victorianism in these years had a very particular charge, as pinpointed in Alasdair Gray’s wonderful satirical novel of 1992, *Poor Things: Episodes from the early life of Archibald McCandless M.D. Scottish Public Health Officer*. Gray creates his own ‘blurb for a high-class hardback’: ‘Since 1979 the British government has worked to restore Britain to its Victorian state, so Alasdair Gray has at last shrugged off his post-modernist label and written an up-to-date nineteenth-century novel’. Layer upon layer of irony surrounds this creation of an ‘up-to date’ nineteenth-century novel; its impetus, as the facetious blurb notes, is the Thatcher government. Famous for her declaration that ‘there is no

such thing as society', Thatcher led a government which championed rampant individualism and the free market economy, and attempted to dismantle the welfare state, all the while calling on the electorate to embrace a return to Victorian values. Samuel Smiles was once again elevated to hero status, with *Self-Help* republished (in an abridged version) by Penguin as a business management classic, with a foreword by that arch-conservative minister, and architect of 'Thatcherism', Sir Keith Joseph.

For a nineteenth-century scholar it was a disturbing time, with massive cuts to university budgets and social welfare programmes, all under the banner of a new Victorianism. At the same time, the early 1990s saw a flood of novels either set within, or focused upon, the Victorian period. 'Natural History' set out to analyse that phenomenon, focusing specifically on a particular subset which explored the impact of Darwinian theory (drawing on A. S. Byatt's 'Angels and Insects' and Graham Swift's *Ever After*). Frederic Jameson, in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) had argued that our postmodern age exhibited an historical deafness, which was manifest in a 'well-nigh libidinal historicism' (18) whose symptoms were the flattening out of history into image, and 'an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions' (286). It is a damning cultural judgement. In suggesting the term 'retro-Victorian' fiction, I wished to lift the genre out of Jameson's category of pastiche, and into a more knowing, self-conscious and ironic form -- style not for its own sake, but to interrogate the relations of past and present. Although the two texts adopted very different narrative frames (immersion and mimesis in the Byatt, and Victorian/contemporary juxtaposition in the Swift), both focused on the overthrow of natural theology and arguments for Design, with the development of the new biology.

Both texts are undoubtedly exercises in nostalgia, but a nostalgia, I argued, not for the comfortable world of religious faith, but rather the intensity of experience, the sense of personal authenticity gained, at a point of crisis. In an age allegedly without grand narratives, such dramas of conscience carry an intense appeal. To set against the rampant individualism, and bastardised form of social darwinism of early 1990s politics, we were given a version of the Victorian age that focused on moral conscience (although of a highly personalised, introverted form, distinct from a more generalised social conscience).

In one of the early progenitors of the retro-Victorian novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), John Fowles had also invoked the explanatory framework of Darwinism, linking his own postmodern freedom as author, to the overthrow of the Victorian gods. As an author he notes (with an explicit nod to Robbe-Grillet and Barthes), he is a god 'but in the new theological image', and his ability to disrupt readers' sense of reality is a challenge to 'your Time, Progress, Society, Evolution and all those capitalized ghosts in the night that are rattling their chains behind this book' (85-87). Fowles playfully attacks Victorian shibboleths, and in particular any sense of linear history and progression, but the text is nonetheless trapped itself within the assumptions of its own era. The author/narrator writes of Darwin with the arrogance of hindsight: 'Charles called himself a Darwinist, and yet he had not really understood Darwin. But then, nor had Darwin himself' (47). The vision of Darwinian theory Fowles presents is of permanent flux, and 'something far more serious than the undermining of the Biblical account of the origins of man: its deepest implications lay in the direction of determinism and behaviourism, that is philosophies that reduce morality to a hypocrisy and duty to a

straw hut in a hurricane' (105-6). Fowles reads the 1960s sense of relativism, and the lack of an overarching moral and epistemological framework back into the Victorian period, constructing a Darwinism for the age of B. F. Skinner and R. D. Laing. Darwinian theory, now properly understood, takes on a thoroughly iconoclastic force, undermining not only religious frames of reference, but those central tenets of high Victorian culture: morality and duty.

The attractions of Darwinian theory for the post-modern author are legion. The figure of Darwin himself offers a potent self-image for the ambitious writer, aiming to name and shape the world anew. Both the post-modern novelist and Victorian sage (in current reconstructions of 'Darwin') are involved in exploring and disrupting myths of origin, seeking through language to refashion our world and cultural constructions of history and selfhood. Darwin becomes in himself a form of origin, a figure who recast the foundations of modern knowledge, from the temporal framework of existence, to understanding of what it is to be human. Whilst distrusting of grand narratives and certainties, the postmodern author yet puts faith in the power of the creative mind to overturn fixities. Darwin is at one and the same time a figure of Victorian authority, and an analogue of the postmodern writer. In the Victorian-focused novels that have followed on from Fowles in the 60s, and Byatt and Swift in the early 90s, Darwinian theory has remained a powerful component, whether in explicit reworkings of Victorian cultures of natural history and voyages of discovery (Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* or Roger McDonald's *Darwin's Shooter*) or more diffuse engagements with the tenets of evolution. There appears an unstated acknowledgement that any attempt to rethink and recast our own historical origins in the Victorian period must take account, at

some level, of the great reshaper. The recent, extraordinary fanfare, both within the media and the academy, around the Darwin centenary in 2009, neatly encompassing both man (200 years since birth) and work (150 years since the publication of the *Origin*), confirmed his centrality within contemporary culture. Such treatments were rarely questioning, or playful, but operated more as a solemn installation of Darwin within the pantheon, becoming, in Fowles' term, a god, but in a 'new theological image' (86).¹ Our post-modern age looks back to Victorian times, both as an age of outmoded certainties, and also as the origins of a secular, scientific culture.

Since the early 1990s there has been an intensification of Victorian-focused novels, with distinct thematic sub-genres developing, such as low-life and underworld, lesbian sexuality, or psychiatry.² Whilst the 'retro-victorian' novels of the early 1990s seemed to take their cue from George Eliot, employing a self-conscious interrogation of our relations to a Victorian past, in order to find a greater sense of fixity, depth or moral purpose in an increasingly rootless modern age, the fiction of the Blair years and the economic bubble of that era, was generally less angst ridden.³ In the looser arena of what is now most commonly termed neo-Victorian fiction, the split contemporary/victorian narratives are largely discarded, and the presiding genius seems less George Eliot and more Wilkie Collins (with an added generous measure of sex). Plots and preoccupations focus more on the slippery nature of identity than crises of conscience, and Victorian England becomes an atmospheric spatial category, rather than a temporal period which predates and defines our own.

The turn of the millennium had huge symbolic significance for the ways in which we construct our narratives of cultural identity, as the Victorian era became overnight a

period seemingly distanced by two centuries; more substantively, it also signalled a major weakening in the ties of cultural memory. With the death in 2009 of Harry Patch, the last surviving British soldier of the First World War, there was much media focus on the loss of a living link to this momentous, but distant past.⁴ The demise of the last Victorian is now imminent (as I write, in September 2012, there are eight people in the UK, all women, still surviving who were born in the Victorian age).⁵ From that point, direct transmission of oral memory will cease, and our access to the Victorian age will be mediated, whether through familial transmission of memories, or archival databases, such as the National Sound Archive at the British Library.⁶ Whilst the sense of atmospheric immediacy evoked through films or television might, paradoxically, increase, our sense of direct historical lineage will decline. At the time that Fowles was writing in the 1960s, there remained, even in the midst of the great post-war reconstruction boom, a strong sense of the Victorian period dominating the material, tangible aspects of daily life. Victorian terrace housing framed the landscapes of our cities, with outside privies, and coal fires still the norm. The massive blackened buildings of Victorian factories still supported mass employment in heavy industry, whilst education was shaped by the spatial configuration of Victorian schools. Such material continuity easily bred a sense of imaginative closeness with the Victorian period. Whilst Victorian architecture still shapes our cities, albeit to a lesser degree, the advent of indoor bathrooms, central heating, telephones and all the paraphernalia of the digital age lessen the sense of domestic continuity. In the domain of work, Victorian warehouses and factories are more likely to support luxury dwellings, than heavy industry. The diminution of physical links has bred, in its turn, a celebratory nostalgia for an imagined

world, seen most strongly in the steam punk movement, with all its lovingly created impossible machines, whilst the neo-Victorian novel focuses, to a surprising degree, as Hilary Schor has pointed out, on the relationship between the material and immaterial world, as manifest in our preoccupation with Victorian ghosts, mediums, and spiritualism.

Cultural Memory: ‘The Behavior of the Hawkweeds’

A new form of engagement with the Victorian era is now emerging in contemporary fiction, one that does not attempt to recreate a Victorian novel for the twenty-first century, but rather focuses on the ways in which we engage with the Victorian period through cultural memory. I will look at two, very different examples, ‘The Behavior of the Hawkweeds’ in Andrea Barrett’s collection, *Ship Fever* (1996), and Audrey Niffenegger’s *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009). Barrett’s stunning collection offers a series of meditations on science, both historical and contemporary. The title story is set, without framing narratives or postmodern artifice, at the period of the Irish famine, focusing on the struggles of a doctor in Quebec as wave upon wave of disease-ridden emigrants arrive on Canada’s shores (the parallels with current problems of forced migration are unstated, but omnipresent). ‘The English Pupil’, by contrast, offers a wonderful vignette of Linnaeus at the end of his life. A man who had sought to name the whole natural world, to hold it in his mind, and set his stamp upon it, is now the victim of a stroke, unable to recall even his daughter’s face and name. There is extraordinary poignancy in this contrast between the taxonomic and imperial vision, and the faltering man, trapped in a mind which still has vivid flashes of memory, but cannot focus on the

present. Our reading of the story is of course framed by our own knowledge that Linnean taxonomy has long-survived the man, and his names, categories and hierarchies live on in common culture, despite the incursions of the new temporal frame ushered in by evolutionary biology.

‘The Behavior of the Hawkweeds’ focuses centrally on memory and inheritance, in all their inter-related forms. Set entirely in contemporary America, it yet reaches back to the figure of Gregor Mendel, the Moravian monk whose work, ignored at the time, became the foundation stone for theories of genetic inheritance. At one level the story traces a tale of direct cultural transmission: ‘Even now this seems impossible: how could I have known someone of an age to have known Mendel?’ (20). The story is narrated by a woman whose grandfather had, as a child, worked with Mendel in his monastery garden. History is replicated in the next generation as the narrator in her own childhood had, in turn, helped her émigré grandfather in the nursery where he worked. In complex intertwining strands, the science of genetic inheritance, with its sexual underpinnings, is woven into a tale which encompasses Mendel’s thwarted research, and the frustrations of a modern marriage. The title is wonderfully allusive, with that second definite article, and its archaic ring, capturing the language of nineteenth-century botanical research, whilst also suggesting a modern familial, or marital drama, featuring the Hawkweeds. The botanical referent is to Mendel’s work: not to his research on peas, which led to his framing of the laws of inheritance, but rather to his fruitless subsequent research on hawkweeds, recommended by the scientist Nägeli. Principles of sexual reproduction lay at the heart of his failure: hawkweeds, which reproduced asexually, by parthenogenesis, failed to conform to the patterns of inheritance established

by his experiments on the sexually reproducing peas. The wayward behaviour of the Hawkweed is mirrored in the narrator's marriage, which, after successful reproduction, has transmuted into an asexual form.

In the modern tale, Mendel's research becomes a form of cultural and sexual capital as the narrator, a woman, who like Mendel is set outside the scientific establishment, tries to increase her allure to her geneticist partner by dramatising her links to Mendel. When the tales of oral memory, crafted to suggest an intimate relation to the origins of his discipline, fail to work, she offers papers, tangible evidence of an historical lineage which clinches the deal. Her value, she realises, lies in 'the way I was linked so closely to other times and places' (24). In this story about the power of stories, and the ways in which we draw on the past to construct our sense of identity, science provides both an overarching theory of replication, and the cultural content of self-defining narratives of descent. As wife and mother, the narrator sits in her husband's genetics lecture for thirty years, listening to him appropriate and reproduce her Mendelian tale: 'The one I told him, in which Mendel is led astray by a condescending fellow scientist and the behaviour of the hawkweeds. The one is which science is not just unappreciated, but bent by loneliness and longing' (13). Success in breeding has not blunted the loneliness and longing which suffuses the narrator's own interpretation of Mendel's life. Her relations with her husband are based on a form of withholding, of a second tale which for her gives meaning to the first, in which the Mendelian story is repeated and transmuted in the next generation, fashioning her life. She is, she declares, a woman who knows 'a pistil from a stamen' (17). Just as her grandfather had helped Mendel in the sexual reproduction of plants, 'open[ing] pea flowers and transferr[ing] pollen with a

camel-hair brush', so she as a child worked with Tati in his nursery. The sexual propagation of plants becomes tragically confused, however, with generational, sexual, racial and political conflict when her grandfather, a Czech, believes he sees his boss, a German, molesting her. In the ensuing struggle the German slips and dies, and her grandfather is accused of murder. With extraordinary concision, Mendelian genetics, and the tale of his rivalry with Nägeli, are reworked through subsequent generations in dramas of ethnic hatred and sexual trauma.

The narrator measures her life through Mendel, seeing herself in relation to pairs of men: 'Mendel and Nägeli, Mendel and Tati; Tati and Leiniger, Tati and me' (27). The unspoken coupling here is that of her childhood self and the German boss Leiniger, 'red-faced, sweating, grinding into the wooden bench' (16) whose lust in old age leads to his death. Her hidden story, with its traumatic reinterpretation of Mendelian inheritance, only emerges into partial light with her own re-entry into sexual vitality. Stimulated by the presence of a young German researcher, she seizes control of her tale of Mendel from her astonished husband, who had come to regard it as his own. Shaping and controlling of history becomes once more part of the dynamics of sexual exchange, although this time unsuccessfully. The German's rejection reprises the assault by Leiniger, whilst the Third Reich's preoccupation with purity of race and breeding are retrospectively layered over Mendel's gentle experiments with peas. Sebastian's study of Rassenkreis, or race circles, and the eruption of the German word into the narrative, parallels the narrator's own recourse to her grandfather's insult, 'Prase', and the hidden history it represents. Whilst Sebastian becomes a famous scientist, her husband, Robert, by contrast, loses direction as genetics moves on from Mendel, and he is left stranded

with his stories, which students no longer wish to hear, a form of Ancient Mariner of science.

‘The Behavior of the Hawkweeds’ is not a neo-Victorian story; it eschews the over-used structure of paralleled nineteenth and twentieth-century narratives to reflect more broadly on the workings of memory and inheritance. Mendel’s laws of inheritance work at a physical level – Robert’s genetic mutation (he had six fingers) is passed not to his daughter, but his granddaughter. Structures of replication work, however, more pervasively at cultural, social and personal levels, raising the question of the relationship between scientific law and individual will. The issues in play are those addressed by Hardy in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, or *Jude the Obscure* – how far are Tess and Jude determined by their ancestry, or their own interpretation and internalisation of the workings of heredity? At heart the questions are those raised by the great nineteenth-century founder of sociology, Emile Durkheim, in his study of suicide: how can an act, whose essence appears to be its voluntariness, yet be statistically predictable? Barrett’s story shows the power of oral and familial transmission of memories, and their translation into culturally defining narratives. It also traces the ways in which the individual makes sense of his or her life by creating and imposing patterns and symmetries, defining selfhood through a replication of the past. Barrett’s narrative is consistently subtle, and under-stated; as the story unfolds, the fruitless work of a nineteenth-century monk on the reproduction of hawkweeds illuminates the cultural, intellectual, and sexual frustrations of a woman at the end of the twentieth century. ‘The Behaviour of the Hawkweeds’ reaches back through memory to the nineteenth century, exploring in the process how the

dry scientific principles of sexual reproduction are re-enacted in the ways in which we engage with the scientific stories of our past.

Cultural Memory II: Her Fearful Symmetry

Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* is also not a neo-Victorian novel, but rather a twenty-first century tale suffused with Victorian tropes and concerns. The long fingers of the Victorian age reach out from their graves. Spatially and thematically, the novel is dominated by Highgate Cemetery where, it is noted, Karl Marx and George Eliot are the star attractions. As in *Possession*, perspective is supplied by a young academic, who in this case is writing a thesis on the cemetery. He imagines the cemetery, 'as a prism through which he could view Victorian society at its most sensationably, splendidly, irrationally excessive; in their conflation of hygienic reform and status-conscious innovation, the Victorians had created Highgate Cemetery as a theatre of mourning, a stage set of eternal repose' (52). In its conjunction of psychoanalytic and materialist interpretive tools, the reading is persuasive, but Robert himself loses faith in his own theory; as individual biographies 'seduce' him, he becomes 'sidetracked by anecdote': 'He began to take the cemetery personally and lost all perspective' (52). The dilemma of the researcher, seduced by the particularity of materials so that controlling theoretical narratives cease to hold, is also that of the individual writ large. Like 'The Behavior of the Hawkweeds', *Her Fearful Symmetry* addresses how we retell and negotiate our relations to the past, both immediate, and historical. Controlling distance, in this case, is wonderfully disrupted by unruly Victorian narratives, entering into and taking possession of both characters and literary structure, so that the Victorians' preoccupation with life

after death starts to appear rational and understated, compared with the excesses of the contemporary plot. As a reworking of the Victorian ghost story, the novel is concerned with after life in all its multifarious meanings.

The opening of the novel, with its teasing chapter title 'The End', is deeply, and horribly, matter of fact: 'Elspeth died while Robert was standing in from of a vending machine watching tea shoot into a small plastic cup'. There is no grand Victorian death scene; this contemporary version of death is unspeakably banal, as if life itself is indeed nothing more than a stuttering flow into an ugly plastic container, which then abruptly ceases. Without shift of tone, we move from Elspeth's final thoughts, to the gurgle of death, to her disembodied spirit looking down on her material self, before she becomes 'scattered nothingness'. The trope of final, out of body experience is becoming so naturalised in contemporary culture, it scarcely disrupts the flat realism of the scene. Robert, in his response, a young man curled around the body of a middle-aged woman, mirrors and indeed exceeds some of the most melodramatic excesses of gothic fiction, but the narrative is deliberately stripped of the language and sentiments of the gothic. When Elspeth and Robert discussed what she could leave him after death, he suggested, reincarnation, or that Victorian favourite, a lock of hair; Elspeth countered with a 21st equivalent, cloning, or the gift of her twin nieces. The Fearful Symmetry of the title captures the relations between past and present, this life and after life, and also the questions of individuation and identity which arise when you live with a mirror image of yourself. Like Barrett's Mendelian tale, Niffenegger's story is concerned with replication: Elspeth and her identical twin, Edie, have themselves been replicated

(without it seems any intrusion of male genetic material), in their more youthful versions, Julia and Valentina.

The Victorian novel was of course obsessed with twinning and doubling, and how it could operate across class or generation. In *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock is replicated in her maid, Hortense, but also in her daughter Esther, whilst *The Woman in White* offers the classic doubling of Laura and Anne Catherick, across the class divide. Francis Galton, in his studies of twins, took the preoccupation into a new scientific dimension, laying down the foundations for subsequent psychological and sociological studies of the relative effects of nature and nurture.⁷ Perhaps most germane to Niffenegger's work is Hardy's disturbing last novel, *The Well-Beloved* (1897), with its replication of woman, and male sexual desire, across the generations, as the protagonist falls in love serially with a woman, her daughter, and granddaughter. When Robert first see the twins, 'He was enchanted. They were like an early Elspeth, a previous version that had been withheld from him until now. *They're so young. And so strange. My God, they look like they are about twelve*' (98). The perception of their youth does not prevent him from lusting after them; the twins are, in a different form, the child woman so desired by the Victorians. We are also in the territory of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, in which the longing to possess, and to be part of one's beloved's past, creates troubling conjunctions between child and adult male sexuality. In this novel, disturbance is partially smoothed away by making Robert's initial relationship with an older woman, so it becomes less troubling in repetition than in *The Well-Beloved*

As Freud noted in 'The Uncanny', doubling and haunting are intimately related. Robert, as a true aspiring Victorian, wishes that Elspeth would haunt him, but 'she was

not haunting him, except in memory, where she dwindled and blazed at all the wrong moments' (54). Niffenegger plays on the relationship between psychological and literal interpretations of haunting; the uncontrolled flares of memory become literalised when the twins discover that Elspeth is haunting their flat. There is no sense, however, of the uncanny, or the supernatural. Freud observes that the uncanny in magical practices, or the minds of neurotics, occurs when there is 'the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality' (367). Niffenegger erases these distinctions between the psychical and material world: Elspeth is a down to earth ghost, treated as an entirely natural phenomenon by the twins and Robert. In a playful note to the neo-Victorian reconstructive industry, she has to learn how to be a ghost. She wishes she had read more Le Fanu for tips on haunting (134), and mixes up reading of *Middlemarch* and *Emma* with *Turn of the Screw* and bits of M. R. James and Poe to learn about ghosts (275). She follows the usual patterns of signalling a ghostly presence, such as slightly rearranging furniture and significant objects, before she realises that she can write in dust, pondering as she does so that 'household dust was largely comprised of shed human skin cells. *So perhaps I'm writing with bits of my former body*' (215). New meaning is given to the liturgical phrase, 'from dust to dust', and to central feminist tenets: she is not writing on but *in* the body.

Like the ghostly Elspeth, Robert and the twins also turn to Victorian literature and culture in order to navigate their way through the cultural, social and psychological spaces of contemporary life. Julia and Valentina read the *Lonely Planet* guide, and Dickens (70), to prepare for their trip to London, whilst Robert, consumed with interest in Victorian thanatology and burial practices, is erotically fascinated by the story of

Lizzie Siddall, ‘he fondled her life’s trajectory in his mind’ (54). We are told twice that he has little interest in the novels of Mrs Henry Wood (160, 261), presumably because the resurrection of the dead wife in *East Lynne* is a sham (she never died in the first place). Arriving in London, the twins’ responses are framed by *Alice in Wonderland* (82) and Dickens (in the person of their lawyer) (91). The most Dickensian figure in the tale, however, is set outside a Victorian frame. Martin, setter of crossword puzzles and translator of ancient texts, is introduced in startling terms as he steps out of the shower: ‘A spectator unfamiliar with Martin might have worried about his appearance; he was bright red, as though a superhuman housewife had parboiled him to extract impurities’ (18). The conceit is pure Dickens, but the character, with his obsessive compulsive disorder is not allowed to languish as a Dickensian ‘grotesque’ but becomes the sympathetic pivot of the novel, counterpointing the main tale (Niffenegger in an interview observed that the novel arose initially with the idea of ‘a man who is agoraphobic and can’t leave his apartment, and a girl who visits him’: the idea of the cemetery, and of twins, came later (‘Highgate Cemetery’, 1)). With his obsessions organised around the controlling idea of symmetry (19), and his piles of boxes which contain, he informs Julia, ‘emotion. In the form of objects’ (131), he forms a condensed, internalised version of the death rituals and grandiose tombs of the Victorian cemetery. Symmetry becomes a form of control, a way of imposing meaning in the face of death and loss, but it also, as the twins know to their cost, acts as a form of imprisonment. In a novel preoccupied with resurrection, it is Martin who, in conquering his fears and all those repressed emotions embodied in those boxes, experiences a true rebirth.

As victim of a 'superhuman housewife', Martin inhabits the inherent ambiguities identified by Freud in ideas of the homely or 'heimlich', suggesting at once an intimate home tended by a 'careful housewife' (343), but also a terrain of hidden secrets. Such ambivalence gives rise to his notion of the 'unheimlich', or uncanny, and the psychological disturbance created by doubling, and repetition. The double itself, he observes, originally conceived (in the figure of the soul), as 'an assurance of immortality', becomes in reverse 'the uncanny harbinger of death' (357). *Her Fearful Symmetry* gives literal form to this insight. The twins, in their mirrored state, are both blessed and cursed by symmetry. Niffenegger is fascinated by this replication of selfhood, and the comforts, and traumas it delivers, particularly at the point of movement into adult sexuality. With the added dimension of sexual rivalry with her alternate mirror image, the ghost of her mother/aunt, Valentina is doubly imprisoned. Her planned escape, through death and revivification, is deeply overdetermined, picking up on Victorian stratagems, associated with the cemetery, to prevent being buried alive (a fate Freud describes as 'the most uncanny thing of all' 366), and Victorian fictional texts, both Collins' *Woman in White* (which Valentine reads as she hatches her plot, 275), and Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* with its ghastly transfusion scene.

There are also possible contemporary echoes of the highly publicised case of the Gibbons sisters, or 'Silent Twins', whose story, captured by Marjorie Wallace in a book and TV documentary in 1986, was also the subject of a more recent opera, performed in London in 2007.⁸ Their tale, with its intense, enclosed world, secret writings, and intense love-hate relationship, leading to a crime-spree and subsequent incarceration in Broadmoor psychiatric hospital, is in some regards more extreme than that of the twins,

but there are decided parallels in the death of the first twin. After 11 years in Broadmoor, the twins were due to be released to another unit; speaking to Marjorie Wallace shortly before, Jennifer mentions casually that she is going to die (266). On the day of their transfer, she becomes ill, and dies that night (a post-mortem recorded acute myocarditis as the cause). Wallace, entitling her chapter 'End Game', speculates on the 'eerie' nature of this death, suggesting a pact between the girls to set June free. Why, she ponders, 'have all my encounters with the twins left lesions of belief, where the facts fail to meet fiction?' (274).⁹ Niffenegger, by contrast, eschews such mythologising, creating in her fiction a determinedly matter of fact recounting of both planned death, and subsequent revivification. Despite all the gothic trappings, including grave robbing, the dominant tone is not that of horror and the macabre, but realism, which verges on the comic. The revived corpse immediately wishes for sex, although 'her breath smelled wrong, like spoiled food, like the hedgehog he'd found dead in the heating system at the cemetery's office' (353). Whilst Freud attributes the experience of the uncanny to the desire to return to the mother's body (368), the plot is here reversed, with the mother inhabiting the child's body. Valentina had clearly not understood the import of *The Woman in White*, focusing no doubt on the question of doubling, rather than the stealing of identity in death. Niffenegger has rewritten *Sleeping Beauty* so that the wicked stepmother steals the prince.

The disturbing quality of *Her Fearful Symmetry* lies less in the gothic trappings of the plot, than in the 'monstrous selfishness' (339) of the characters involved, particularly that of Elspeth, now revealed as the twins' mother, who has been prepared to trick, manipulate, and indeed kill her own daughter in order to regain her own life and lover.

We learn early on that the Noblem family mausoleum has ‘a bas relief of a pelican feeding her young with her own blood, a symbol of the Resurrection’ (11). The plot offers a grotesque reversal of this motif, where instead of giving her own blood to feed her child, the mother feeds upon the corpse of her own daughter to recreate herself in a youthful bodily form. Christian theology and the Victorian preoccupation with the possibilities of life after death are reinterpreted through the ruthless individualism of our age, and its cult of youth. The myth of the pelican is transplanted by a Darwinian vision of a mother eating her young, and the survival of the fittest –Elspeth, in her rejuvenated form, gives birth to another child. This is a parable for the botox age, when Victorian preoccupations with life after death have been replaced by the development of the science of ‘human enhancement’.¹⁰

In his poem ‘Heredity’, Hardy contemplates the ‘family face’ which, in place of any theological alternative, offers a form of evolutionary immortality: ‘Flesh perishes, I live on’. It is an ominous, disturbing poem, which construes genealogical replication, and the triumph over oblivion it confers, as a form of personal threat, consuming and overriding individuality. Writing a hundred years later, Barrett and Niffenegger also address the theme of replication and after-life. Both are resolutely secular texts: Niffenegger’s title silently invokes the ‘immortal hand or eye’ of Blake’s poem, but the Almighty has no place in this work, except as a begetter of Victorian thanatological rituals. Both works are concerned with biological, cultural and historical replication, and the dramas of symmetry. ‘The Behavior of the Hawkweeds’ is a carefully crafted piece in which the genetic laws of inheritance operate as both theme and organising principle, enfolding within itself a study of cultural memory and repetition, and the

negotiation of personal identity through narrative. *Her Fearful Symmetry* is more anarchic and messy, with its Victorian strands refusing to be constrained. Genetic replication here operates both within and across generations, both affirming and threatening individual identity. The tale of the twins is set in counterpoint to that of Martin, with his rituals of symmetry, as he battles to control the repressed emotions symbolised by his boxes. In both cases we are in the territory of Freud's theory of the uncanny, where the double, or familiar, returns again in threatening form. The text as a whole is 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. History, in this case, returns as farce, or more accurately, the comically macabre.

Neither work attempts any form of historical ventriloquism, or re-construction of the Victorian novel. If there is pastiche, in Jameson's terms, it is knowing and playful. With hindsight, Jameson's analysis in 1991 of the 'libidinal historicism' which accompanied an increasing 'historical deafness' was extraordinarily prescient. The advent of the world-wide web has only increased ahistorical modes of thought; we are bombarded by texts and images which arrive shorn of historical lineage, without order or causality. At the same time, the number of neo-Victorian novels has grown exponentially. The label, of course, covers a very wide spectrum of work, but with much of this material there remains the danger that in creating an atmospheric, reimagined Victorian age, they actively undermine our attempts to understand, historically, the culture of the nineteenth century, and its relations to our own. 'The Behavior of the Hawkweeds' and *Her Fearful Symmetry* are not neo-Victorian texts. Rather than attempt

to replicate Victorian forms they have, instead, taken replication as their central theme and organising framework, pursuing its implications through biological, cultural, social and textual forms. In their very different ways, they explore how the legacies of the nineteenth century enter into the dramas of identity in the post-modern age.

¹ Fowles' formulation was applied to the avant-garde modern novelist. In current debates around evolutionary theory, the most vocal supporter of atheism, Richard Dawkins, is frequently accused of creating a new religion out of the tenets of evolutionary theory.

² Examples of these categories include: low life: Charles Palliser, *The Quincunx* (1989), Sheri Holman *The Dress Lodger* (1999); sexuality: Sarah Waters *Tipping the Velvet* (1998); psychiatry: Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace* (1997), Sebastian Faulks, *Human Traces* (2005), Adam Foulds, *The Quickening Maze* (2009).

³ For a discussion of the various categorisations of postmodern Victorian fiction see Kirchknopf, 59-66, and Bormann, 55-62. Excellent discussions of the field are to be found in Kucich and Sadoff; Kaplan; Hargraves; Gutleben; Clayton, and Arias and Pulham.

⁴ Harry Patch (17 June 1898 – 25 July 2009) inspired a song by Radiohead, 'Harry Patch (In Memory Of)', which was recorded shortly before his death, premiered on Radio 4's 'Today Show' the day before his funeral. Patch was a veteran of Passchendaele, and his recorded interviews in the last years of his life, talking about the senselessness of war, were very widely reported.

⁵ 'List of British Supercentenarians'. Wikipedia. The list appears to be updated daily. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_supercentenarians (accessed September 12, 2011).

⁶ The UK was slightly slower off the mark with reference to oral history than the US, but thanks in large part to the labours of Professor Paul Thompson, the Oral History Society and Journal were founded in 1971. Professor Thompson was also behind the invaluable development of 'National Life Stories' at the British Library Sound Archive (www.bl.uk/nls).

⁷ See his first paper on this topic, 'The History of Twins, as a criterion of the relative powers of nature and nurture', *Fraser's Magazine* 12 (1875, 566-76).

⁸ Under the startling title, 'Have I the strength to kill her?', the librettist of the opera, April de Angellis, in an article in the *Guardian* gave a full account of the twins' history, focusing on their introverted world, with its own language, and minutely written journals (which also possibly link to the jointly-authored diaries in *Her Fearful Symmetry*), and the intensity and violence of their psychological interdependence, which drove June to contemplate suicide or killing her sister. The article highlights the mysterious death of Jennifer, on the day of their release, and repeats Wallace's conviction that the twins came to believe that 'in order for one of them to be free the other must die' (7). The opera premiered in London in July 2007.

⁹ In subsequent rewritings of the story, Wallace enhances the willed nature of the death. In a newspaper article in 2003, she changes Jennifer's announcement she is going to die to a shared declaration of intention. She now records that Jennifer whispered to her, 'Marjorie, I'm going to die. We've decided' (*The Observer*, 13 July, 2003).

¹⁰ See, for example, Julian Savulescu and Nick Bostrom, eds., *Human Enhancement*, which looks at the ethical issues raised by the development of drugs and technologies which could prolong and utterly transform what we currently understand as 'natural' human life.