

Chapter 11

Cemetery Enchanted, *Encore*: Natural Burial in France and Beyond



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11.1 Introduction

Max Weber's notion of the disenchantment of the world suggests that through processes of emerging modernity the moral, cognitive, and interpretative unity characterizing the enchanted premodern world view was shattered. For Weber disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) means the belief that with the advent of industrialization, science, and rationality there are no mysterious incalculable forces at play any longer but that one can master all things by calculation (Weber, 1919, p. 16). With magic and myth being stripped from "the world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in" (Taylor, 2007, p. 25) we are embarked "on a path at the end of which there will be no more mysteries" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 15).

Weber's disenchantment narrative enjoys great popularity among historians and anthropologists of death (e.g. Engelke, 2019; Farman, 2018; Fischer, 1996; Laqueur, 2015). Disenchantment of death is usually said to have begun with the Enlightenment. During the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, the ban on burials in overcrowded inner-city churchyards and their closure resulted in the establishment of new cemeteries outside the inner-city walls (Fischer, 1996, pp. 10–23). The reasons for this development were justified legally with hygienic concerns, yet were also driven by additional motivations. Beyond reshaping the urban landscape, the closing of old, Church-controlled cemeteries and the opening of new ones outside the city reflected a new understanding of a secularized relationship between the living and the dead (Kselman 2014, p. 167). Reform contributed to disenchantment and helped to destroy the medieval-Christian cosmos (Taylor, 2007, p. 773).

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249

Disenchantment is regarded as coming fully to fruition between the second part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century, when efficiency, pragmatism, and mechanization were forced onto funerary programs. The establishment of non-denominational cemeteries even further away from the fast-growing city centers and the introduction of speedy and technologically sophisticated cremation mark a turning point in the funeral culture of the industrialized world (e.g. Clayden et al., 2018, p. 100; Fischer, 1996; Laqueur, 2015, pp. 495–522). That death and burial in the so-called ‘Western World’ remained rather disenchanting affairs until the end of the twentieth century is argued in multiple publications (e.g. Fischer, 1996; Walter, 1990). However, the question arises whether Weber’s disenchanting world is still (or ever has been) a framework applicable to the study of death-related practices. How indicative is the current funerary behavior of a secularized, disenchanting world? And, how irrational is a rationale of enchantment in the face of death and ecological concerns? This chapter will explore these questions through the current trend of natural burial.

It has long been acknowledged that Weber’s homogenizing anthropological accounts of ‘premodern’ society are too simplistic (Jenkins, 2000, pp. 15–16) and that magic, myth, and religion never entirely disappeared but, instead, were temporarily suppressed by the sediment of alternative myths until new social circumstances allowed them to reemerge. In the twenty-first century, new expressions of spirituality have emerged accompanied by a variety of developments in many sectors of life. These include a renewed focus on craft, authenticity, myth, and other aspects of human reflexivity, as well as the return of populism, tribalism, fundamentalist religion, and the rejection of sensible science (Suddaby et al., 2017). In today’s European funerary realm, one can observe a slightly diminished significance and interest in religious cemeteries, less interest in formerly widespread Christian-style monuments and grave decorations, but also new expressions of mourning and commemoration. Individualized and de-individualized collective burial spaces that emphasize group membership (Sörries, 2011), virtual remembrance (Jacobs & Ziefle, 2010; Walter et al., 2012), and a proliferation of commemorative monuments lining roads, forest paths, and the sides of lakes and rivers (Fischer, 2011) point to a reshaped relationship with the dead and to intertwined spiritualities seeking solace in a variety of forms.

This contribution takes its starting point from the silent revolution of funeral rites that is observable worldwide since the 1990s. Originating from the move towards ‘green’ cemeteries that allow for ‘natural’ burial, the ‘natural burial movement’, sometimes also called the ‘natural death movement’, has been gaining more and more attention over the last three decades (Assig, 2007; Benisek, 2017; Boret, 2014, p. 1; Clayden et al., 2015, 2018; Davies & Rumble, 2012; Hockey et al., 2012). Deemed the fastest growing environmental movement in the UK (Callender, 2012, p. 13), its continuation and alterations in France are the focus of this chapter. By exploring the French example of this movement, comparing it to Britain, and investigating what it can tell us about the fluidity of definitions, conceptions, and differing priorities, this contribution addresses current notions of life, death, continuity, plants, and, by its very nature, mystery.

11.2 A Transnational Natural Burial Movement

Since the opening of the first natural cemetery in Carlisle, England, in 1993, there has been a steady increase in different types of natural burial, counting more than 270 natural burial grounds in the UK (Natural Death Centre, 2017) and over 300 in the US (Nebhut, 2016, p. 9). Because of its inter- and transnational appeal, since then, the concept has spread to other European and non-European countries (e.g. Assig, 2007; Boret, 2014, p. 1; Clayden et al., 2015, p. ii). The ‘natural burial movement’ encompasses primarily the development of ‘ecological’ or ‘green’ burial, seeking to establish more environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional burial forms, while, at the same time, permitting a modified, more social approach to dying and mourning (Boret, 2014, p. 1). Ideally, these environmentally friendly cemeteries realize the objective of supporting the preservation of natural landscapes, the (re)generation of woodland, and a sustainable relationship between humans and their environment. At the same time, they can be understood as a societal reaction to the scarcity of burial spaces in urban contexts.

Given the sheer diversity of operators and cemetery landscapes, an all-encompassing definition of ‘natural burial’ seems not only impossible but also carries too many different connotations and cultural affinities, especially with respect to the many hybrid forms of body treatment and deposition. These can range from burial of corpses in habitats such as meadows, gardens, woods and ‘green’ cemeteries to the scattering or burying of cremated remains in forests, meadows, and bodies of water (Assig, 2007; Fischer, 2011, pp. 131–136; Klie, 2008, pp. 7–8). Too often the image and popular perception of natural burial practices is shaped by what is visible above the ground, e.g. whether the cemetery is garden-like or a woodland, and not so much by what happens with the dead body itself. Ideally, natural burial should imply a process in which corpses are dressed in materials made of natural fibers and spread out over the landscape in biodegradable coffins. However, rising cremation rates and persisting preferences for embalming, burial vaults, and agglomerations of graves in cemeteries pose a counteractive reality. As recent research by Ladislav Šmejda and colleagues about geochemical signals of mortuary areas has shown, the long-term ecological legacy of burial places is more imbalanced and hazardous than previously thought (Šmejda, 2017; Šmejda et al., 2017). According to the research group, decomposing corpses leach essential nutrients, such as iron, zinc, sulfur, calcium, and phosphorus into the ground, which are generally beneficial to local biota but are concentrated in cemeteries instead of being dispersed evenly throughout nature. This, in turn, causes overcompensation and imbalance (Le Roux, 2017). These findings are anything but new, as Karl Marx already warned of a rift in the metabolic interaction between humans and the soil (Foster, 1999, p. 379). Cremation of the corpse and deposition of the ashes are not the solution to this problem because the fuel used to cremate bodies constitutes non-renewable energy and, if not properly controlled, cremation can be a relatively important source of atmospheric mercury pollution (Mari & Domingo, 2010, p. 136).

The difference between the use of an already existing natural space like a forest and a constructed burial ground like the French natural cemetery discussed in this contribution, seems to lie in local-specific motivations rather than in differences of attributed values connected to burial places. Although most people do not believe in purgatory or resurrection of the body any longer, the choice of a specific place can very well be determined by considerations regarding its sacredness. On 15 August 2016, the Vatican issued the instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (Müller & Ladaria, 2016a, b) which amends the instruction *De cadaverum crematione* of 5 July 1963 (Másala, 1964) and addresses various points concerning cremation and natural burial: The Catholic Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places. When cremation is chosen, the ashes “must be laid to rest in a sacred place,” in a cemetery, a church, or “an area, which has been set aside for this purpose,” as not to be excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. The remains must also be protected from “any unfitting or superstitious practices.” For Catholics, keeping the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted and in order to avoid “pantheism, naturalism or nihilism,” the scattering of the ashes in the air, on land, at sea, etc. is also not allowed, “nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects” (Müller & Ladaria, 2016b). So as not to miss the opportunity of the natural burial movement, in some countries the Catholic



Fig. 11.1 Prayer place at the natural burial ground at Vienna-Kahlenberg (Klosterwald Wien-Kahlenberg), Austria. The forest belongs to the nearby monastery of Klosterneuburg but is open to the public. A burial place for a cinerary urn at a tree can be rented for a duration from 25–50 years. Burial trees are marked by a plaque with the name and dates of the deceased. Burial is possible with or without the attendance of a Catholic priest and is also open to non-Christians. (Photo: E. Weiss-Krejci)

Church has responded swiftly to these new regulations by providing individual trees for burial of cremated remains in special forest areas as an alternative to traditional burial in a cemetery (Fig. 11.1).

The question as to what part of the burial process is natural and how it differs from an unnatural burial has to be posed separately for each cultural context to reveal the practices above and beneath the ground (Davies & Rumble, 2012, p. 17). In the context of the different ‘green’, ‘natural’, ‘ecological’, and ‘woodland’ burial grounds of England, for example, ‘natural’ usually means an alliance with the organic world, independent from the ‘unnatural’ interference of commercial ventures, whereas ‘green’ suggests an element of political activism (Davies & Rumble, 2012, p. 1). Emerging from an intertwined, transnational background of a global funeral trend promoting natural burial, the first natural cemetery « Cimetière naturel de Souché » in the town of Niort, Deux-Sèvres, France contributes to the living and breathing corpus of natural burial and cemetery research. Ethnographic insights into the synthesis of transnational and local expressions of this ‘natural’ burial site sketch the natural death movement’s heterogenous realities.

11.3 « Cimetière naturel de Souché »: A Local Adaptation in Niort, France

« Cimetière naturel de Souché » is situated beside the traditional « Cimetière de Souché » on the outskirts of Niort, a municipality of 58,000 inhabitants in western France. Although a shift towards *cimetières paysagées* or *végétalisées*, i.e. cemeteries with a more ‘vegetal’, park-like design, has been notable all over France for over a decade (Lapouge-Déjean & Royant, 2017), the construction of « Cimetière naturel de Souché » was a novelty in a country barely used to these types of cemeteries. At the time of my 2018 ethnographic research, natural burial in France was still limited to this cemetery. My fieldwork consisted of participant observation, qualitative interviews, and informal conversations with Niort’s cemetery management, employees of funeral homes, gravediggers, and those who used and visited « Cimetière naturel de Souché » and its neighboring traditional cemetery. Socio-demographic information about the deceased buried at « Cimetière naturel de Souché » and priorities and expectations by both the bereaved and general visitors enriched and activated an understanding of a seemingly functional and static place. The findings give an insight into a funeral culture in dynamic exchange with broader societal and environmental concerns while prioritizing local tastes and aspirations. Quoting the former director of the cemetery office Dominique Bodin:

Ce qui se passe à Niort n'est pas vrai à Paris ou moins vrai à Lyon. (D. Bodin at « Cimetière naturel de Souché », 28 June 2018)

What is true in Paris or Lyon, isn't necessarily true for us here in Niort.¹

The motivations of the cemetery planning team provided a base from which the emergence of this alternative approach could be retraced.

11.3.1 Responding to and Implementing Change

The group that sketched out « Cimetière naturel de Souché » was made up of the office of cemetery conservation, the municipal office of urban and landscape studies, local blacksmiths, and artists. The basic idea was to counter the tendency in French funeral culture that had put the stamp on cemeteries since the 1950s. Around this time, the craft industry was superseded by the industrial production of tombstones and burial vaults. The gravestone industry slowly began to use granite instead of the local limestone used previously, which had been extracted locally and crafted into gravestones by regional stone cutters. The granite used for most tombstones in traditional cemeteries today is mass-produced and shipped to France from “the four corners of the world” (« quatre coins de la planète ») (Un Cimetière naturel à Souché, 2014, p. 10), specifically China and India. Due to grave reuse being common in France and perpetual concessions now being a thing of the past, these tombs equally burden the environment after their abandonment, as their material has to be dealt with.

In addition to the shift from a regional stone industry to an international import system, cemeteries adapted to changes in religious ideology. The lifting of the ban on cremation by the Catholic church in 1963 (Másala, 1964) has resulted in an approximate 40% increase of cremations in France over the last 50 years (0.32% in 1970 to 39.01% in 2019) (Association nationale crématisiste, 2020) and, according to information gained during my 2018 interview with funeral director Perrine Rouger, even 50% at Niort. This rise is explained by the fact that Niort has the first and only crematorium in the region of Deux-Sèvres, as well as by cremation being considered quicker, more practical, and cheaper.² It also offers greater temporal flexibility since the bodies can be refrigerated before cremation for up to 2 weeks and ashes can be stored even longer. However, given the unusually high de-Christianization of the flatlands of Niort a possible ideological link between the rise of cremation and the fall of Christian beliefs in the resurrection of the body (Charpentier & Courant, 2002, p. 29) can also be considered an explanation.

With the rising numbers of cremations, traditional cemeteries met the need for adequate burial spaces of cinerary urns with a design which persists up until today—the ‘columbaria’, or, as Dominique Bodin called them during our interview, the

¹All translations from French into English are the author's.

²A few years ago, the price for a ‘traditional’ burial in Niort, including the funeral service, a concession of 50 years, a burial vault, and a tombstone, amounted to around 5000 € per person (Un Cimetière naturel à Souché, 2014, p. 10).

“council flats of the dead” (« HLM³ de la mort ») (D. Bodin at « Cimetière naturel de Souché », 28 June 2018). These became a common feature at cemeteries from the 1980s onwards and added to the grey, granite-heavy appearance. In 2018, three out of ten cemeteries in Niort were equipped with such columbaria. In addition to entailing the same ecological issues as other monuments and tombstones crafted out of granite, their aesthetic proves hard to incorporate into a natural cemetery.

The economic difficulties encountered by some parts of the population when faced with the costly and limited set of choices in the traditional funeral sector appear especially unnecessary in light of other noticeable current societal trends. These include shifting family structures and a decreasing interest in visiting and maintaining graves. The possibilities of finding either a job somewhere else in metropolitan France or studying in one of the main cities, results in families dying apart from each other and, consequently, being buried in cemeteries spread across the country. Almost all interviewees blamed *les familles éclatées*, the split-up families, for this development. An older woman who tended her husband’s grave at the traditional cemetery of Souché expressed a general dissatisfaction regarding the abandonment of graves in the following way:

Plus personne ne vient ici, le monde devient fou. Mes enfants n’entretiennent pas la tombe non plus; c’est horrible. (female interviewee at « Cimetière de Souché », 17 June 2018)

Nobody comes here anymore, the world is going crazy. My children aren’t tending the grave anymore either; it’s horrible.

The administration noticing not only the abandonment of graves but also the cemeteries developing into deserted landscapes aimed to respond with a design that would respect the deceased, the environment, and families alike.

The creation of « Cimetière naturel de Souché » was also driven by ecological considerations. While pesticides had already been banned in France in 2011, additionally ridding the cemetery of its daily waste accumulation such as potted, freshly cut, and artificial flowers, plaques, and other non-biodegradable objects was seen as a way to manage the ‘environmental debt’ left for generations to come. Last but not least, the fact that in the city of Niort green public space is in high demand provided an additional incentive for the cemetery planning and construction. This transformation of urban space requires some adaptation to heterogeneous notions of respect and mourning and a view of cemeteries as multifunctional spaces for the bereaved and non-bereaved alike. The park-like aesthetic also invites visitors to perceive the cemetery not only as a burial ground but to use it as place of remembrance and as a green space where people might seek solace in nature.

Bordering the traditional cemetery « Cimetière de Souché », « Cimetière naturel de Souché » was built on a c. 4000 m² field which already contained several trees and other plants giving the place its basic structure (Un Cimetière naturel à Souché, 2014, p. 11). The techniques employed for the construction of the new cemetery were guided by an idea of harmony within an already existing environment, with its

³Habitation à Loyer Modéré.



Fig. 11.2 Visible and overgrown limestone gravemarkers on inhumation graves. (Photo: S. Tschebann)

natural materials, local vegetation, and the municipal resources available. Stone slabs, cobblestones, logs, and iron material were, therefore, reused to construct benches, art installations, and other facilities at the site such as chestnut fences and insect ‘hotels’.

The first, most noticeable feature on visiting the site is the grave and landscape design. There is only one type of tombstone for both inhumation and incineration graves. The foot-sized and square limestones from local productions may be engraved with the deceased’s information and require no further maintenance, cleaning, or looking after once being set in place (Fig. 11.2). Sprays of flowers used during the funeral are kept at the grave for a maximum of 3 weeks. Grave decorations and plants on top of graves are allowed as far as they blend in with the surroundings and are biodegradable. The family can personalize the perimeter of the burial place by planting small shrubs and other plants that respect the “rural spirit of the place” (« l’esprit champêtre des lieux ») (Ferrer et al., 2017, p. 15). This has led to high variability in appearance of burial plots which can range from very simple, undecorated, and plain graves to extravagant decorations of various plant species and arrangements of stones, seashells, pine cones, and other material found within and outside the region. The families can also opt to leave the grave-tending to the municipal workers, sowing grass on top of it and mowing it regularly if the grave becomes abandoned over time.

The cemetery prides itself with going beyond other types of French ‘landscape cemeteries’, or *cimetières paysagées*, not only in the area of local stone use but also

by returning the bodies of the deceased or their ashes to the earth in as natural a state as possible (Mairie de Niort, 2015, p. 3). It is with regard to the private, less visible funerary realm that the deeper underlying agenda of natural burial at this cemetery comes to the fore. The departed are to be dressed in natural fibers such as linen, cotton, hemp, etc. and are deposited in coffins of untreated wood from a French forest or in recycled and biodegradable materials (Ferrer et al., 2017, p. 15). Those who opt for cremation can choose either burial of the urn or dispersal of the ashes in a special area called the ‘garden of remembrance’ (*jardin du souvenir*). Because in this case there are no individualized spaces, the names of the deceased are engraved on leaf-shaped brass plates and hung from the so-called ‘spring tree’ (*arbre du printemps*), an installation made out of copper (Ferrer et al., 2017, pp. 18–19). Incineration followed up by dispersion of ashes without a monument provides a feasible alternative to the struggle of meeting the financial requirements for an individualized grave.

According to Amanda Clot, director of the cemetery office, the current rate of inhumation versus cremation is 1:2. Half of the cremated bodies are interred in formal graves whereas the other half are dispersed at the *jardin du souvenir*. For a successful incorporation of the ‘natural’ into the cultural funeral landscape, high cremation rates proved to be logical in the case of « Cimetière naturel de Souché », as a significant element of French funeral customs, the cemented burial vault, is not permitted. This resulted in very few inhumation graves at the beginning, only slowly growing in numbers over the years.

11.4 (In)Animate Agents

The Niort cemetery conservation office is the administrative force behind the management of the natural cemetery. It fulfills a position at the crossroads of funeral business, users, visitors, landscape design, and monitoring the regulations of the charter and the cemetery’s aesthetics. Due to the ‘lack’ of death care professionals helping with the personal grave space, most of the time the site is basically in the hands of municipal workers that tend the landscape. This rift between the cemetery as a collective public resource and a deeply private space of mourning is a common feature among many other cemeteries in Europe (e.g. Clayden et al., 2015; Davies & Rumble, 2012; Nielsen & Groes, 2014). The public and the private factions usually only intersect during funerals, when bereaved family members and cemetery workers come together.

According to the former and the present cemetery directors the cemetery is used by a diverse population ranging from ‘Bobos’, ecologists, and economically weaker families to notable people of a higher social status. Judging from exchanges with interlocutors, religious belonging ranges from believing Christians, atheists, to

those interested in Buddhist and Taoist ideas. Hence, no encompassing statement of a particular religious, de-Christianized or secular profile of the deceased and non-deceased can be made. However, the heterogenous profile of the visitors was contrasted with a shared spiritual appeal attached to nature ‘stepping in’ for processes of meaning-making. This is reflected in the absence of religious symbols in material commemorations and arguments by administration members and visitors alike, who claim that the cemetery’s design and atmosphere have an appeal beyond religious confinements.

11.4.1 Grave Decorations

Over the years the cemetery conservation office noticed recurring violations in the form of certain objects left on the graves, such as angel figurines, flower bouquets wrapped in plastic, and Christmas trees, to name a few. These conflicts provide insights into the creative variety of material expression of agency, remembrance, and ways of bonding throughout the cemetery and through objects. One woman I talked to uses seashells and feathers, brought back from the coast where her husband used to sail, to symbolize his hobbies and express his passions and personality. The administration is generally displeased with the spreading of seashells and similar ‘animated objects with agency’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Robben, 2018, p. xviii), since they are deemed inappropriate for the region’s scenic environment. Another recurring memorialization with a ‘forbidden’ object is a schoolbook, replaced weekly by a grave visitor, seemingly to keep the deceased, imagined to be either a teacher or a pupil, ‘up to date’ with the weekly progress of school lessons.

The natural cemetery presents a contested space where the bereaved and the administration are entangled in constant negotiations over grave properness through leaving or removing organic and inorganic objects. Commemoration through objects highlights differences and similarities with other cemetery behaviors indicating a spiritual engagement, meaning making, and caring for the deceased in a reciprocal manner. This is particularly evident in flowers and other plants present at the natural cemetery, growing and withering with shifting values and negotiations of cleanliness and pollution (Fig. 11.2).

11.4.2 Cultural Flowers, Natural Weeds

Changes in French cemetery design must be regarded in relation to the national pesticide ban passed by the French government in 2011, which has changed the hue of public spaces, sidewalks, and cemeteries from a grey to a greener one. The

sudden occurrence of weeds and other plants unhindered by chemicals, accompanied by wildflowers and patches of grass is not equally embraced by everyone. It also highlights a dichotomy within the French realm of the cemetery, closely connected to notions of respect, fear, abandonment, care, and control. In the traditional conception a well-tended cemetery is rich in gravel and granite and contains well-tended graves decorated by a ‘tamed’ flora that is either kept in pots on the tombstones or tucked away behind plastic packaging. Interlocutors at the traditional neighboring cemetery in most cases viewed unhindered growth of wild plants on graves negatively, because to them a non-tended grave is synonymous with the deceased not being cared for. As a result, graves which display a certain degree of wildness and are without commercial flowers are associated with an image of abandonment and ‘uncleanness’, triggering fears that the city negates its duty to conserve cemeteries. Weeds, wild flowers, fallen leaves, and grasses taking over a cemetery can be related to what Mary Douglas has famously termed ‘matter out of place’:

[...] if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognize this is the first step towards insight into pollution. (Douglas, 2001, p. 41)

At the natural cemetery the definitions and expressions of care, cleanness, and abandonment have shifted to a more fluid set of notions, as the bereaved express very different styles of flowering the graves, ranging from well-enclosed and low in height to extending beyond their borders. However, comparable ideas of a connection between caring for the grave and caring for the dead persist. The administration has taken measures to counteract the appearance of abandonment by directly sowing grass seeds on tombs and regularly mowing the grass in order to meet some families’ incapability or unwillingness to care for the grave, while also respecting public demands of an aesthetically ‘clean’ cemetery.

Caring for graves primarily through flowering are continuing signs of devotion through which networks of kin are maintained (Goody & Poppi, 1994, pp. 149–150). Flowers can be interpreted as “symbolic mediators” (Gibson, 2010, p. 626), a notion used originally by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in relation to objects, animals, and humans offered in sacrifices (Hubert & Mauss, 1899, pp. 134–136). Flowers not only serve to process the abstract idea of death and dying for the bereaved by covering it up with something more colorful and appealing, but also serve as mediators between the bereaved and deceased in a form of symbolic, material communication, or as one visitor explained as “a way to externalize thoughts” (« une manière d’extérioriser des pensées ») (male interviewee at my Niort residence, 27 June 2018). One could also see the flowers on graves as a form of transaction or exchange. A first-time visitor to the natural cemetery described the function of flowers as follows, pointing to a meaning beyond an aesthetic decoration and utilitarian upkeep for order’s sake.



Fig. 11.3 Roses fixed to a leaf-shaped plaque of a departed at the *jardin du souvenir*. (Photo: S. Tschebann)

Flowers are a sign of love that one brings to the grave. In exchange, because one gives love, one gets something back—it helps with the grief because a relation is being kept alive. One, therefore, actually gives them to oneself, not to the dead. (female interviewee at « Cimetière naturel de Souché », 9 July 2018)

Elaborating on Marcel Mauss' gift theory (Mauss, 1925) in combination with consumer research, John Sherry defines the gift as a reciprocal norm of exchange, where an individual is obliged to give, receive, and reciprocate. This threefold obligation, deriving from its cultural embeddedness, is designated through cultural conventions by which intangible essences (such as 'life' or 'hope') also transform into gifts that can be redistributed (Sherry, 1983, p. 160). In this case, the intangible essence is respect, accomplishment from fulfilling a deed, or a bond and connection one keeps up and gets back from a partner of exchange that might not be physically but metaphysically present (Fig. 11.3).

The 'lens of death' through which social anthropologists try to see the enduring appeal of spaces imbued with cultural significance, reveals a long-standing interconnectedness between nature and deathscapes. Created out of a reciprocal flux between a pragmatical utilitarianism and spiritual, socio-cultural needs, the natural burial movement of the twenty-first century shares some aspects with the narrative of the rural cemetery movement of the early nineteenth century. This comparison not only provides a critical look on the idea of a purported nineteenth-century disenchantment but also serves the purpose of showing that stand-alone factors such as hygiene, ecology or enchantment should not be made solely responsible for shifts in values and practices in the mortuary realm.

11.5 Precursors and Variations of a Movement

11.5.1 *The Rural Cemetery Movement*

As mentioned in the introduction, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, juridical regulations, pressing social reasons and health hazards in overcrowded cities, with the fear of a diminishing cult of the dead, led to a first wave of movement of the dead to areas outside the city centers and to a new cemetery concept. The trend was spearheaded by Austria and France. In Vienna, five communal cemeteries were founded in 1784 as part of the burial reform by Emperor Joseph II. In France, the opening of Père-Lachaise in Paris was accompanied by the issuing of the Napoleonic burial decree of 1804 which laid down strict regulations placing all cemeteries under government control (Fischer, 1996, pp. 15–16). This decree was a direct response to the “scorn and insensibility” into which the care for the dead had fallen during the Revolution (Goody & Poppi, 1994, p. 154).

In many places, these new cemeteries were characterized by a geometric design and a sort of ‘natural theology’ in which art had its shaping function to diverge between the natural and human-made beauty. The following quote by William Peabody refers to the famous garden cemetery of Mount Auburn in Massachusetts, which was founded in 1831 and marks the starting point of the so-called ‘rural cemetery movement’ in the US (French, 1974).

Nature under all circumstances was meant to be improved by human care; it is unnatural to leave it to itself; and the traces of art are never unwelcome, except when it defeats the purpose and refuses to follow the suggestions of nature. (Peabody, 1831)

The rural cemetery movement does not fit smoothly into the picture of increasing disenchantment during the process of industrialization. With its emphasis of the relationship between nature and human interference, the ideal garden cemetery of the early nineteenth century followed a “design for life and the living” (Johnson, 2008) and represented an attempt to reestablish a connection with the dead that had been feared lost. In this process the cemetery was turned “from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succor and instruction” (French, 1974, p. 47).

The rural cemetery movement was a direct response to the changing attitudes toward death and shows some parallels to the natural burial movement. However, its design and attitudes are more comparable to « Cimetière naturel de Souché » than to natural cemeteries in Britain which disclose a much more untamed nature. Douglas Davies and Hannah Rumble’s (Davies & Rumble, 2012) anthropological-theological study of Barton Glebe, a consecrated Church of England woodland burial site, and Andy Clayden et al.’s (2015) interdisciplinary, comparative study of four British natural burial sites in South Yorkshire, Mid Wales, and Hampshire⁴ make this evident.

⁴(1) Woodland Burial Ground, Wisewood Cemetery, Sheffield (South Yorkshire); (2) Green Lane Burial Field and Nature Reserve, Abermule, Montgomery (Mid Wales); (3) South Yorkshire

11.5.2 *Natural Burial in Britain*

In the emergence of the natural burial movement in the UK in the 1990s, a refocusing of attention from traditionally religious afterlife concepts to more personally constructed beliefs was one of the objectives motivating cemetery redesign (Davies & Rumble, 2012, p. 124). This redesign sought out to provide individually constructed grave spaces, as well as the creation of a form of ‘collective memorial’ where the bereaved are able to “anticipate the grave’s future within a wider landscape” (Clayden et al., 2015, p. 116). This allows for spaces of burial where the deceased and non-deceased contribute to the regeneration of former barren land through claiming it and introducing flora, fauna, and biodiversity to it.

Clayden et al. (2015, p. 195) list four questions about the status of natural burial in the UK and whether it constitutes: (1) a creative resistance to modernist death care; (2) part of a re-enchantment of death; (3) a form of collective environmental regeneration; or (4) a site for individual identity-making. The results of their research show that, while environmental considerations are relevant factors among their interlocutors in choosing a natural burial site, they are somewhat secondary motivations. The main objective seems to be the desire to display individuality through the chosen trees and other vegetation planted on top of the graves, providing a representation of the deceased and the possibility of engaging with a wider, shared landscape (Clayden et al., 2015, p. 137). The space is seen as a dynamic place which would, similarly to their own emotions and needs, change over time, probably resulting in an anonymous, yet emotionally-mapped, landscape of remembrance. Most grave markers are either trees or made from biodegradable materials which would eventually merge more or less seamlessly into the surrounding environment. The need for memorialization and the acceptance of a deathscape that changes and might result in a shared (mourning) space was welcomed by interviewees at all four British natural burial grounds (Clayden et al., 2015, p. 116). Along the same vein, Davies and Rumble conclude that their interlocutors wish to be part of a collective landscape developed through the notion of “returning to the earth” (Davies & Rumble, 2012, p. 134).

Whereas Clayden and colleagues could attest that each of their bereaved participants found ways to encapsulate the unique identities of their deceased loved ones through choosing, doing, and living with natural burial, the data from « Cimetière naturel de Souché » presents different motivations. Apart from being a cemetery in which landscape design plays a crucial role, individual identity-making proved to be less of a particularly prominent aspect mentioned by interlocutors. The expression of bonding, communicating, and continuing (kinship) care through biodegradable materials are a notable aspect in interacting with the site materially, as well as between the deceased and non-deceased in a metaphysical sense. Returning to the

Woodland Burial Ground, Ulley, Rotherham (South Yorkshire); and (4) South Downs Natural Burial Site, the Sustainability Centre, East Meon, Petersfield (Hampshire).

four theoretical questions by Clayden et al. (2015, p. 195) mentioned above, « Cimetière naturel de Souché » highlights the persistence of the century-crossing notion of enchantment.

11.5.3 *Natural Enchantment in France*

According to the creators of « Cimetière naturel de Souché », one motivation for the cemetery conception, was a form of “rebellion” against the “death business”, referring to the commercial aspects of death, leaving behind massive, imported granite tombstones, seldom visited, and burdening the families financially. Another one was to turn a place of remembrance into a place of contemplation. Amanda Clot emphasizes the primary motivation as being the aesthetic and enchanting appeal of this piece of land:

[...] c'est plus un coup de foudre pour un lieu qu'ils trouvent magnifique et ils sont content pour leur défunt [...] ils ont plus de plaisir de venir, de se recuire à ici qu'à cote (A. Clot at « Cimetière naturel de Souché », 28 June 2018).

[...] most of them fall in love with the place because it is pleasant and they are happy for their dead [...] and they have more pleasure in coming here than to the other cemetery.

This view is partially echoed by the interlocutors at the site claiming to feel more soothed, calm, and at ease here at the natural cemetery than at traditional counterparts. It certainly holds true for the non-bereaved visitors who, according to my observations and interviews, use the place for meditative (dog) walks, picnics, educational strolling with their children, social encounters in times of loneliness, and contemplations about death and the afterlife. But what about the bereaved? According to the interviews and informal conversations shared with me, the visual appeal is perceived as contributing to a less ‘cemetery-like’ appearance, especially because of the absence of prominent monuments and ‘shocking’ crosses, which provide little relief during the mourning process. The ‘lighter’, less sad, more open and friendly environment, where one can garden, strike up conversations as well as notice birds, children, and plants ‘going on with life’, offers solace. The most prominent reason for choosing the cemetery for burial was explained in terms of its appeal which can be summarized as ‘enchantment’. Some referred to the place as ‘inhabited’, ‘mystical’, ‘cosmic’, and ‘full of life’, where the soul (Christian, Taoist, or reincarnating) can be free, freer than at its ‘grey and sad’ equivalent of the traditional cemetery.

This brings us back to the concept of Weber’s ‘disenchantment’ (*Entzauberung*) and its antonym ‘enchantment’ (*Verzauberung*). The root word in German is *Zauber*, or ‘magic’, which for Weber together with myth enriched human understanding and reasoning until the advent of ‘modernity’. However, the stark dichotomies of a world enchanted vs disenchanting, primitive vs modern, and religious vs secular cannot account for movements such as the widespread engagement between 1880 and

1914 with occultism, mysticism, and, quite literally, magic (Owen, 2004, p. 6). The assumption of a linear diminishment of magic's, myth's, and enchantment's presence in the course of industrialization neglects the "tenacious persistence of myth, magic and enchantment in human beliefs, social practices and institutions" (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 1). "[W]e have never been disenchanting" argues Thomas Laqueur because "the charisma of the dead" exists also in our age (Laqueur, 2015, p. 18), or as Michael Taussig, with reference to Marcel Mauss' inquiry into the nature of magical spirits, aptly puts it: "Death, it appears, is the fount of magic!" (Taussig, 2001, p. 309). I therefore prefer to speak of *persistent* enchantment. Instead of continuing with Weber's thesis of a 'worldwide' trend of secularization, an approach focused on the dynamic nature of spiritualities and religious pluralization (Casanova, 2018) would yield richer insights into enchantment's creation, utilization, and experience than its mere negotiation.

11.6 Conclusions

Death and burial as research topics in socio-cultural anthropology are vast fields, encompassing the processes and practices involved with the metaphysical 'problem' of human death, from dealing with the corpse to deposition of the body and beyond. « Cimetière naturel de Souché », as the first one of its kind in France, departs from traditional cemeteries defined by elaborate granite tombstones, paths covered in gravel, massive grey columbaria, as well as commercial memorabilia such as plaques, plastic flowers, and various objects of personalized forms of remembrance. The 'natural' aspect of the cemetery is most present in its management above the ground by limiting waste from memorialization and interference with the landscape. Like at many other natural burial grounds, intervention in the surrounding landscape and memorialization through headstones and decorations are kept to a minimum to promote a scenic development. Setting forth a bold proposition to change handlings with the dead in a manner deeply opposed to the commercial interests of funeral businesses and gravestone companies, the cemetery conservation recovered deeply rooted and culturally defined notions of respect, purity, emotion, care, and the afterlife. This ethnographic account shows how motivations for the construction of « Cimetière naturel de Souché » were influenced as much by the transnational natural burial movement as they were by local considerations. For example, in contrast to natural burials in Britain, which are "less restricted or bounded by duty or etiquette" (Davies & Rumble, 2012, p. 55), in the case of Niort it is not the natural but the traditional cemetery where mourners can freely choose what to leave on the grave, as the guidelines are not confined to biodegradable materials only.

The research presented here also elucidates that incalculable and mythical aspects of human life and death shape the possibilities and acceptance of funeral innovations. Persisting traditions, while not set in stone, are hard to eradicate. This

does not only apply to grave decorations and flowers, but also to the impact of decomposition and cremation on the local biota's balance of essential nutrients. Cremation and agglomerated inhumation, both considered 'clean' and 'appropriate' means of body treatment and disposal, are not strictly 'green' practices (Mari & Domingo, 2010; Nebhut, 2016). Although embalming practices for bodies are prohibited at « Cimetière naturel de Souché », premortem medical treatments can also cause a dangerous chemical cocktail which, if released into the soil, contaminates the groundwater. However, current body treatments and disposal types are unlikely to go away anytime soon,

because deep-seated religious values, ethical concerns and scientific arguments are not likely to reach a mutual agreement easily. (Šmejda, 2017)

Funeral practices signify death as a social event and transform the status of the deceased member. These practices also promote the cohesion of the non-deceased, but extend further to intertwinements with a dynamic funeral culture in flux with socio-demographic, economic, and ecological changes. Experimenting with changing notions of life and death, nature and culture, purity and uncleanness, spiritualities, and environmental concerns will therefore accompany funeral developments in the future. By observing practices and exchanging with interlocutors about the significance of flowers, vegetal decorations, and grave tending at the natural cemetery, I argue that vegetal offerings (1) are continuing signs of devotion and therefore contribute to ongoing kin care; (2) function as symbolic mediators between the deceased and non-deceased; and (3) are reciprocal redistributions between objects and intangible essences (such as love).

As I have shown, the enchanting appeal of « Cimetière naturel de Souché » is due to a variety of factors. On the one hand its pleasant-to-be-in urban green space provides possibilities for therapeutic mourning, reflections about life and the afterlife, and educational purposes for both bereaved and non-bereaved visitors. Expressions relating to the cyclical nature of becoming and withering, as well as ecological continuity through decomposition hints to an attempt at closing the rift in the metabolic interaction between people and the earth (Foster, 1999, pp. 379–380). However, all indicate the enchanted quality of this place, providing its visitors with possibilities of meaning-making in the context of loss. Navigating through associations of spirituality, respect, and reciprocal care within this burial space, enchantment seems to be the safest way of keeping haunting feelings of abandonment at bay.

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