Elizabeth Siddal's Hair: A Methodology for Queer Reading
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What Is So Queer About Elizabeth Siddal?

Thus, when Margaretta Jolly... says... I’m not talking about being happy, I’m talking about being changed. Thinking differently she is implicitly describing a new language of analysis that will allow people to think in different ways... thinking differently remains an ongoing experiment. (Armstrong et al. 2010: 4)

When I read the foreword to the twenty-first-anniversary issue of Women: A Cultural Review, I was struck by the ways in which ‘thinking differently’ arose from acts of writing and reading. This chimed strongly with my own thinking about how, far from being a passive act, reading acts on the text that is being read. ‘Desert Island Texts?’ was an example of this kind of reading in action, especially given the number of different voices placed side by side—a vivid illustration of ‘writing [that] can generate forms of action it may not even predict’ (ibid.: 9). Further, ‘Desert Island Texts?’ illustrates that reading ‘can generate forms of action’ that the text ‘may not even predict’. Reading can do something to a text to make it odd, strange, unsettling, anti-normative. In other words, one can read a text queer.

On Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that ‘a counter-hegemonic stance must... give pleasure’ (Alexander et al. 2010: 10). Defamiliarization, seeming triviality and oddness
can all contribute to the ‘pleasure’ of ‘counter-hegemonic’ reading, something one witnesses, for example, in Judith Halberstam’s reading of the animation *Chicken Run*, where the animation is called, enjoyably, a ‘narrative of resistance, revolt and utopia’ (ibid.: 53).\(^1\) Plus, as Susan Sellers points out, describing the work of Cixous, ‘this insurgent women’s writing begins with the body’ (Armstrong et al. 2010: 4), and the particular part of the body I want to read queer is found at its boundaries.\(^2\)

Hair could be read as *queer* in that it crosses the cultural boundaries of the body, because it embodies that which cannot be fixed, that which mismatches, defamiliarizes, destabilizes, disidentifies and decentres.\(^3\) A queering act or *process* such as this would be a process in which these effects are produced, creating a possibility for disjuncture. A queering effect could be creative, chaotic, unwieldy, disruptive and strange. Queer reading, one could say, is a way of discovering—digging up—such a disrupting influence. Reading hair as queer is to search for its disrupting influence. One way of doing that is to investigate hair’s relationship with death.

There are several cultural figures whose hair has been given special significance—Sampson, Medusa, Lady Godiva, Mary Magdalene and Rapunzel, for example, often providing a figurative link between hair, reading and death. Elizabeth Siddal was a poet and an artist, but is most famous as a model for many Pre-Raphaelite paintings. One could take Shakespeare’s ‘So long lives this, and this gives life to thee’ and apply it to *Beata Beatrix*, for example—an image that uses Siddal as model but which was painted after her death. According to Angela Dunstan:

Elizabeth Siddal left more of an artistic legacy than her fifteen complete poems and one hundred drawings and paintings. Her life story has engendered a remarkable number of texts which offer insight not only into the cumulative process of myth creation, but to the ongoing cultural obsession with this relatively unknown though highly recognizable figure. (Dunstan 2009: 26)

I should be clear that I am discussing the cultural phenomenon Elizabeth Siddal, what Angela Dunstan calls ‘the Siddal sensation’ (ibid.: 25). The beginning of Dunstan’s essay provides a precis of the life of ‘the historical woman distinct from the sensation’ (ibid.: 25–6), but that is not what I am examining here. The reason I find Elizabeth Siddal fascinating is this: according to Rossetti’s agent Charles Howell, when he retrieved the
poems buried with her, her beauty was preserved and her hair had filled her coffin.  

Galia Ofek discusses Elizabeth Siddal’s exhumation in relation to Victorian culture and, noting that Bram Stoker was Rossetti’s neighbour, cites his story ‘The Secret of Growing Gold’, where hair grows through cracks in the floor and kills the husband and new wife. Ofek suggests that the ‘visualization of Elizabeth’s tress as an overflowing, uncontrollable power testifies to Victorian concerns that all the discursive cultural efforts to contain and tame hair could not restrain women’s energy’ (Ofek 2005: 6). Thus, it seems that one way to ‘think differently’, to find ‘pleasure’ in ‘counter-hegemonic’ reading, one way to ‘begin with the body’ is to read the hair of the dead poet that apparently could not be contained by the grave. In this essay, I look at the cultural significance attributed to Elizabeth Siddal’s hair and, as a way of reading queer, I examine the link between hair, reading and death, where hair is a returning, insistent force, Fury-like and reiterative.  

Broken Textual Promises

Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest;
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (Shakespeare 1961)

Hair is fragile, but hair is also that which endures after death: if hair is fragile, it is also tough. (As Joann Fletcher has shown, hair is one of the most enduring materials found in ancient Egyptian tombs.) In other words, one can read hair, via its relationship with death, as both fragile and tough. It is this binary that operates at the heart of the myth of the endurance, beauty and proliferation of Elizabeth Siddal’s hair after her death. Further, in the myth of Elizabeth Siddal’s hair, in its fragility and its toughness, one finds a deeper paradox, beyond what Karin Lesnik-Oberstein calls the apparent ‘ridiculous triviality’ of hair (Lesnik-Oberstein 2007: 2). As is often the case in stories about hair, one finds underneath a story about death.

Famously, Shakespeare’s Sonnet XVIII, ‘Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?’, reiterates the fragility of both beauty and life, specifically the beauty and life of the lover. In the final line, ‘So long lives this, and this gives life to thee’, one experiences a
doubleness. This line is not only about preservation of the lover after death, it is also about the act of reading. The reader is addressed directly as ‘thee’, as if the reader and the lover were one and the same. At the end of the poem is a promise, which allows the lover to endure, to beat death, through the act of reading. The reader cannot help it. So he enacts the textual promise simply by reading, and therefore brings the dead lover back to life.

At the same time as being asked to stand in for the lover, to play ‘thee’, the reader realizes that the promise of the text is broken. Forgetting for a moment the horror of the decaying (or apparently non-decaying) corpse, the text only reminds the reader of the impossibility of knowing the dead lover. There is a pull between the apparent self-fulfilment of the text through the act of reading and the removal of the possibility for fulfilment. In some ways, the myth of Elizabeth Siddal’s preservation is another moment of ‘So long lives this, and this gives life to thee’. More than that, though, Shakespeare’s poem is reminiscent of ‘the myth-making around the exhumation’ (Marsh 1992: 29), because Siddal is another lover who will not decay; who, all the same, is impossible to reach.

A couple of years before he married Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti created *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*. Both Siddal and the Magdalene are given a presence, a place in cultural history, through the meaning attributed to their abundant hair. Mary Magdalene is also subject to a textual promise like the lover in Sonnet XVIII—that is, the perpetuation of existence through the act of reading. As Katherine Ludwig Jansen points out in *The Making of Magdalen*, two of the Synoptic Gospels state that ‘whenever in the whole world this gospel is preached, this also that she has done shall be told in memory of her’ (Jansen 2001: 18, citing Matthew 26.13 and Mark 14.9). Once more, the reader cannot help but fulfil the prophecy when s/he reads, and is asked to take on the mantle of the repentant sinner.7

For both of these figures—the lover/reader in Sonnet XVIII and the Magdalen—their continued, reiterated presence enacts a textual promise, one that is ultimately unattainable. Both the couplet and the biblical verses produce a queer kind of reading, one where the reader cannot help but be implicated in the text, fulfilling the textual promise and breaking it, even becoming the characters s/he is reading about. Reading is active and proactive, not a passive thing. Ironically, these texts force one to read this way.

The myth of the enduring beauty and the hair-filled coffin of Elizabeth Siddal also enacts a textual promise: the myth was a
necessary cover for the retrieval of the poems. But at the same time, the retrieval of the poems led to the undoing of the myth of preservation: the digging up of the actual corpse only confirmed her lack of availability. The cultural presence attributed to the sonnet’s lover, to Magdalen and to Siddal is static and unchanging, always from the point of view of the onlooker and not the looked upon. While each is allowed to endure, each is unattainable, an object of desire which cannot, in the end, be dug up. Digging up will only lead to horror.

Siddal finished *The Lady of Shalott at Her Loom* in 1853 (see Fig. 1). In it, a weaver sits at the loom, but gazes over her shoulder through the window outside, about to rise from her chair. Her loom is alive with thread as if her hair were being used to form the weaving of the view in the mirror. In Tennyson’s poem, this is the very moment when the mirror cracks and the curse comes upon the Lady of Shalott which will lead to her death. This is the moment of transgression:

She left the web, she left the loom,
She took three paces through the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide,
The mirror cracked from side to side;
‘The curse is come upon me’, cried
The Lady of Shalott. (Tennyson 2003: 371)

Turning away from the ‘shadows’ she weaves into her loom is dangerous because it brings about the power of the curse, which is death. The moment Siddal illustrates is a moment of realization and of seeing. To realize and to see are dangerous possibilities in this drawing. One can find in Siddal’s drawing a sense of strong presence in the moment of danger, caused by a rejection of shadowy presence. Because that moment of danger is also the moment of realization and of seeing, it is simultaneously a moment of reading. This act of reading is a different kind of presence-in-death to the one attributed to Siddal by Charles Howell. It is, instead, proactive and self-aware. Already one can read a sense of disruptive reading in a new kind of cultural presence for Elizabeth Siddal. She is a dead lover who will not cooperate and the weaver at the moment of transgression. In order to understand how her presence has been manipulated and how she might be ‘dug up’ in a different way, first one needs to understand why the myth arose in the first place.

How Did the Myth of the Hair-Filled Coffin Arise?

One who was himself a poet later explained how when the coffin was opened, Lizzie’s face was still as beautiful as ever, and her red hair shone in the firelight. (Marsh 1992: 4)

Biographer Jan Marsh describes how ‘Rossetti was an exceptionally valuable biographical property’ and that, in the year of his own death, three biographies were written (ibid.: 21). The first was by William Tirebuck, but it is in the second biography—when the Rossetti family worked with William Sharp—that there is a record of Rossetti placing his poems in Siddal’s coffin:

In the impulse of his grief it came about that before the coffin-lid was closed on the face he should not see on earth again, he hastily gathered
together the manuscripts of the greater number of the poems now so familiar... and laid them as a last gift on his wife's breast. (Sharp, cited in ibid.: 20)

A third biography, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* by Thomas Hall Caine, was also published in 1882. It is this biography, again cited by Marsh, which first makes a specific link between Siddal’s death, the poems and her hair:

The poems he had written... were chiefly inspired by and addressed to her. At her request he had copied them into a little book... and on the day of the funeral he walked into the room where the body lay... Then he put the volume into the coffin between her cheek and beautiful hair, and it was that day buried with her in Highgate Cemetery. (Caine, cited in ibid.: 22)

Both Jan Marsh’s and Lucinda Hawksley’s biographies read like a quest to find an enduring presence for Elizabeth Siddal, but Marsh also recounts a literal quest for the subject of her biography when she describes her visit to the Rossetti family plot in Highgate Cemetery to find Elizabeth Siddal’s grave:

It was a confusing, unmapped place, the paths all but impassable. Trees and saplings grew between and from every grave, thrusting up through blocks and beds, tilting headstones askew. Creeper and ivy curled and billowed over the monuments, brambles curtained the kneeling angels, rampant cow parsley grew shoulder-high, masking large family tombs, which leant sideways, their iron-grilled doors open to wind and birds. (ibid.: 1–2)

It was here that the exhumation took place. William Sharp gives the first account. Charles Howell arranged it and then apparently ensured continued interest in his client by spreading rumours about Siddal’s abiding beauty and the hair-filled coffin. Lucinda Hawksley describes the reiteration of the myth as follows:

Howell declared that when the coffin was opened, Elizabeth remained as beautiful as she had ever been in life and her hair, which had kept growing after death, now filled the coffin and was as brilliantly copper-coloured as it had been in life, glinting mesmerizingly in the firelight... Indebted to Howell's gloriously conceived fiction is the myth of the prevailing beauty of the original supermodel, even in death. It is a story that continued to
be played out long after Elizabeth’s demise. Even today the mythical beauty of her untainted corpse can still be found repeated on numerous adulatory websites. (Hawksley 2004: 211)

As well as a longing for a return of the poems, the exhumation occurred in a response to a longing for the return of the subject of desire, a desire which death itself produced. In fact, Rossetti had ‘become haunted by the vision of Lizzie’ and ‘obsessed with the idea of séances’ (ibid.: 205). Furthermore, Jan Marsh suggests that ‘in all the myth-making around the exhumation, a distinct erotic charge is palpable’ (Marsh 1992: 29). One can observe the conflation of desire, reading, sexual knowledge and death in Elizabeth Siddal’s poem ‘Early Death’, which imagines a knowledge only possible after death:

But true love, seek me in the throng...
And I will take thee by the hands
And know thee mine at last. (cited in ibid.: 201)⁹

In much the same way that the dead lover of transitory beauty in Sonnet XVIII appears to defy the passing of time, whilst still unreachable, the myth of Siddal’s enduring beauty after death, in particular the coffin filled with red hair, is a beauty which appears to defy decay, whilst the lover is still both longed for and unreachable. Rossetti’s desire was left unsatisfied, despite the night-time exhumation. Citing Thomas Hall Caine, Marsh suggests that the first time Siddal is present in Rossetti’s early biographies—even when her art and poetry are mentioned briefly—it is as a static non-present presence, as simply a part of Rossetti’s enigma. Marsh points out that ‘the first direct glimpse...was that of her corpse, seven years buried yet miraculously preserved, as befitted the beloved of a mystical lover, poet, painter and Romantic hero’ (ibid.: 23).

In other words, Elizabeth Siddal’s apparent preservation in death led to a kind of stifled presence and the hair that filled the coffin is an emblem for it. Her most obvious contemporary ‘ghostly’ appearances are in the Pre-Raphaelite sections of galleries, her vibrant hair being one of the most striking things about the paintings. Rossetti’s Beata Beatrix ‘is a beautification of his dead bride’ (Hawksley 2004: 207; see Fig. 2), and in Millais’s Ophelia the hair flows around the head and merges with the water, a painting of death with Siddal as its subject (see Fig. 3).

Rossetti apparently believed in her literal continuation as ‘her ghost visited him every night’ and ‘wherever he slept, Lizzie’s ghost apparently found him’. These rumours fuelled his public image as tragic lover and suffering poet and artist. Whether Rossetti truly believed that ‘she was

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⁹ Elizabeth Siddal’s poem ‘Early Death’ is also cited in Elizabeth Siddal: Pre-Raphaelite Artist 1829–1862, which formed a catalogue to the exhibition of the same name at the Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield, in 1991 (Marsh 1991: 35).
not at peace’, one is left with the sense that Elizabeth Siddal’s shadowy presence has been manipulated for gain and simultaneously—as a woman artist and poet—denied (Hawksley 2004: 203).

Hair is a malleable thing and the possibilities for its manipulation seem to be constantly reiterated. Hair is used in this narrative of reputation to diminish Siddal into a ‘ghostly presence [which] offset[s] the tragic mystery of Rossetti’s life and work’ (Marsh 1992: 16). But why

Figure 2. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel (circa 1864–70), *Beata Beatrix*, oil on canvas, London: Tate.

Figure 3. Millais, John Everett (1851–2), *Ophelia*, oil on canvas, London: Tate Britain.
not read it in another way? Given that ‘the myth-making around the exhumation’ is concerned with the growth of Elizabeth Siddal’s hair inside the coffin, one might decide that the brambles, ivy and nettles, the ‘briars and branches’ in Jan Marsh’s account of Highgate Cemetery, are Siddal’s hair pouring out of her grave. If one is to read the narrative as such, it is hair that ‘curled and billowed over the monuments’, that ‘curtained the kneeling angels’ and ‘grew shoulder-high’, which caused ‘family tombs, [to lean] sideways, their iron-grilled doors open to wind and birds’. If so, then Siddal’s hair is no longer an emblem for shadowy non-presence, but is rather the overflowing and continuing presence of that which was supposed to be buried. The ghostly Siddal might have shored up Rossetti’s reputation, but instead one could read a refusal to be buried, the refusal of the woman poet to be covered up.

Hair as Cultural Object

Jonathan Gil Harris’s ‘Shakespeare’s Hair’ is one essay which discusses the significance of a lock of hair belonging to a historical figure of notoriety and, while I was writing my Ph.D. thesis, I saw what was apparently the hair of George III in the British Museum, which was, believe it or not, ruffled up to make it look ‘insane’, and the hair of George Washington, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning in the exhibition ‘Hair: Untangling a Social History’ at the Tang Museum in New York State.10

Jonathan Gil Harris holds that ‘the diachronic, transformative aspect of objects’ has been ignored and that we could use it to come to ‘an understanding of materiality as process’. He goes on to say that ‘objects are not to be understood in terms of their synchronic contexts [instead] objects possess “life histories” or “careers” that invest them with social significance and cultural value’. Elizabeth Siddal’s hair is a cultural object with a ‘life history’ or a ‘transformative ... process’ attached (Harris 2001: 485, citing Appadurai 1986). It is an emblem for transformation and for return: the poet cannot quite come back but she has never quite gone—truly a haunting, a discomfort, a disquiet. Indeed, in the following quotation, one could think ‘Siddal’s hair’ instead of ‘Shakespeare’s hair’:

the allegorical object occupies the cusp between history and transcendence. It aspires to timeless signification, yet it cannot entirely shed its historical markings, including those inscribed upon it by the processes that have made it available for allegorical use. (Harris 2001: 489)

10 See Jolly (2004: plates 35-7). I thank curator Penny Jolly for her hospitality.
The Association of Hair and Death

In ‘Attitudes toward Women’s Body Hair: Relationship with Disgust Sensitivity’, Tiggemann and Lewis understand the ‘disgust’ of their title as that which ‘guards us against recognition of our own animal nature and ultimately of our own mortality’ (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 382). Tiggemann and Lewis also describe ‘terror management theory’, which maintains that ‘much of human behaviour is aimed at maintaining psychological equanimity in the face of the uniquely human knowledge of the inevitability of death’. Such concerns ‘result in a need to distance oneself from animals’ and ‘increased appearance monitoring’. Therefore, ‘terror management theories might view the removal of body hair ultimately as a protective behaviour against reminders of human mortality’ (ibid.). When hair is somehow out of control, it serves as a reminder of death on the body. Hair is a reminder of death on the body precisely because it crosses the boundaries of the body. Indeed, according to Kristeva:

The body’s inside...shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. Urine, blood, sperm, excrement [hair?] then show up in order to reassure a subject that is lacking its ‘own clean self’. (Kristeva 1982: 53)

Hair is a paradoxical thing. Several binaries exist, the terms of which could constitute what hair ‘is’, but which oppose one another. Even though they are contradictory, they form a rather anxious attempt at ‘fixing the subject’ (Butler 1993: ix). Examples of these contradictions include: inside/outside, animal/human, wild/tamed, sacrilegious/holy, whorish/virginal, mad/sane, dirty/clean and disgusting/beautiful. These paradoxical meanings, and their proliferation, are produced by an anxiety about hair’s malleability. After all, based on a reading of what Kristeva says above, hair is not one or the other. Hair ‘is’ that which crosses boundaries. The binaries, then, are an attempt to make hair safe, to make it culturally intelligible. Ironically, these numerous attempts to fix the meaning of hair reveal the slipperiness of its meaning. To adapt Judith Butler, it is clear that ‘this resistance to fixing the subject [is] essential to the matter at hand’ (ibid.). These binaries serve ‘to reassure a subject that is lacking its “own clean self”’, which is why readings of hair which simply repeat and investigate these binaries are never satisfactory.12

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11 See also Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998).
12 I discuss this in more detail in the first chapter of my Ph.D. thesis (Tondeur 2007a).
Charles Howell’s attempt to ‘fix’ Elizabeth Siddal as an unchanging and enduring beauty offset by her coffin full of hair indulges one of these hair binaries: is hair dead or alive? Howell uses hair in his attempt to make death safe but, in raising this ambiguity, paradoxically, makes the subject more anxious, ambivalent and unstable.

Given that the purpose of the exhumation was the retrieval of poetry, reading and ‘digging up’ can be treated as synonymous. What is more, for all the associated attempts to make death safe, this is the story of the digging up of a corpse, which, according to Kristeva, is ‘the utmost abjection’. The disrupting influence in this story, with its fragile/enduring dead-but-alive hair, occurs via the return of the abject. As Kristeva says: ‘it is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous’ (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Following this reading through, hair—as that which crosses the border of the body, as the possibility of the presence of death on the body—produces anxiety. Hair is a disturbing threat to the cohesion of the body, to the cohesion of the ‘I’ and to ‘identity, system, order . . . borders, positions, rules’, and is itself ‘in-between [and] ambiguous’. In this reading, of course Elizabeth Siddal’s coffin was full of hair. The whole of Highgate Cemetery is full of it.

**The Unburied Poet**

*caught in her slowly unravelling plait of grey hair were summer seeds.* (Jamie 1999)

When Jan Marsh visits Highgate Cemetery, she experiences the ‘macabre’ of ‘decayed corpses . . . buried below’. There is a sense that ‘a whole new world’ has ‘risen’ or grown out from them (Marsh 1992: 2). Considering this experience relates to the grave of a poet, the narrative is suggestive of Kathleen Jamie’s poem ‘Meadowsweet’, ‘about the tradition of burying certain Gaelic women poets face down’ (Jamie 1999). In an analysis of the poetry of Mary Barnard, H.D. and Marianne Moore, Sarah Barnsley discusses an ‘imagery of women as “things buried”, coughing out earth and pulling themselves out through the ground’ (Barnsley 2006: 130, citing Barnard 1935). She then goes on, briefly, to look at ‘Meadowsweet’ in this context:
Jamie’s poem resuscitates women’s poetry using earthy imagery, through which she puts in place a reversal of the decaying process. Just as soil secretes nutrients to aid natural decomposition, it also secretes nutrients for growth, here it is the ‘meadowsweet, bastard balm’ that enables the woman poet to ‘dig herself out’ and possess her role as a poet once again. (ibid.: 131/C12, citing Jamie 1999)

It is possible, from this perspective, to view Elizabeth Siddal as a version of Jamie’s buried woman poet. She is a poet who was buried in the sense of her internment at Highgate Cemetery and in the sense that her poetry and art were ‘buried’ by ‘the Brotherhood’ of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in favour of a story about her burial. Jamie’s poem can be read as a celebratory antidote to the myth surrounding the digging up of Elizabeth Siddal. Here the poet digs herself out. Just as with the story of Siddal’s digging up, in Jamie’s poem the poet’s hair is crucial. The seeds caught in the buried poet’s ‘unravelling plait of grey hair’ show her the way to the surface by ‘beginning their crawl toward light’ (Jamie 1999).

In ‘Meadowsweet’, burial creates anxiety at the cultural boundaries of the body, a sense that there is an above-ground and a below-ground, which are separate, and that while the boundaries of the body are breached by decay, the unified body can be imagined by those above ground, the breaching of boundaries needing to go unobserved in order to control it. At the opening of Jamie’s poem, ‘they buried her, and turned home’ leaves the poet in stasis: ‘turned home’ suggests that, from the point of view of the buriers, the subject of Jamie’s poem remains as she was when buried. It is as if those who ‘buried her, and turned home’ are able to imagine the buried poet as a unified body, ‘not knowing [of] the liquid trickling from her lips’ or of anything active going on beneath the ground—the ‘unravelling’ of her plait or the ‘meadowsweet, bastard balm…already beginning their crawl’—precisely because she is buried and out of sight (ibid.).

A similar operation occurs in the story of Elizabeth Siddal, created when the body, about which a fantasy of intactness was important, was dug up. In this myth of intactness, the hair was an active force: now that her red hair had filled the coffin, Siddal seemed more beautiful, as if the growth of and colour of the hair were active in maintaining her intactness or, paradoxically (because the hair is active), her stasis, her inactivity.

However, as far as Jamie’s buried poet is concerned, she cannot be fixed in the ground and, simultaneously, she is that which is fixed in the ground but which emerges from the ground, just like the seeds
caught in her hair. Furthermore, one is required to shift one’s point of view to the space underground, away from the buriers in the realm of the living above ground, to understand that she is not in stasis: she is active. One is required to look where it is taboo to look: at the place of the abject, the hidden, the unimaginable. It is the seeds caught in the poet’s hair that begin this process. The hair is active in beginning, inspiring and producing movement.

One might argue that the shift in perception to the buried produces the mismatch: this is not how the buried (bodies) are supposed to behave, but, of course, this is how the buried (seeds) behave. Also, here is the process of defamiliarization: the unexpected and disallowed, the shift underground. Here, too, is disidentification and decentring: is not the centre ‘supposed’ to be above ground? Is one not ‘supposed’ to identify with the buriers, not with the buried? Such a process creates the destabilizing movement that allows the poet to ‘dig herself out’ (ibid.). This destabilizing, or queering, movement is a dynamic process that shifts and changes the ‘dirt’ and the ‘poetry’ around it.

In ‘Meadowsweet’, this destabilizing, or queering, movement is, from the outset, attributed to ‘the natural’, undermining the queer/natural opposition: nature is queer, nature is dynamic, active, powerful, creative, chaotic, unwieldy, disruptive and strange, and, in the poem, so is poetry. In the sense of celebration at the end of the poem, nature—or dirt—and poetry are a force for change and for hope.

Rather than reading in Jamie’s poem a horror in the return of the dead poet, one could argue that ‘Meadowsweet’ provides a space for a celebration of such a return. She ‘surface[s] and greet[s] them’ (ibid.) suggests restoration, joy and honesty, rather than horror and revenge. Could one not argue that such a sense of celebration is a queering effect in the poem?

However, one cannot discuss queerness and death without calling to mind Lee Edelman’s No Future. Edelman has argued that ‘the only oppositional status to which our queerness could ever lead would depend on our taking seriously the place of the death drive we’re called on to figure’, which is hardly a platform for celebration (Edelman 2004: 30). Indeed, in his essay on ‘Queer Optimism’, Michael Snediker calls Edelman’s argument ‘queer pessimism [that is] insistent on its own absolute non-enigmatic unequivocality’. ‘How’, Snediker asks, ‘could a project attached to queer optimism not bristle at a book that insists unilaterally that “the only oppositional status” available to queers demands fealty to the death drive?’ (Snediker 2006: 20).

Glossing over the difference between ‘queerness’ and ‘queers’ for a moment, perhaps the answer to this question is that something
happens after death which is a kind of future, if not for the ego. The answer to this question is an acknowledgement of the seeds caught in the buried poet’s hair, an acknowledgement of the hair that grows up from the grave at Highgate Cemetery. In this case, queer reading becomes a celebration.

Concluding Thoughts and a Methodology for Queer Reading

The quest for Elizabeth Siddal could have ended in a horror: a zombie, a lover who is dead but not dead, not decaying. After all, an unspeakable horror is disguised by the myth of Siddal’s enduring beauty. Behind the disguise is the fear of decay. Kristeva describes the corpse as a ‘cesspool, and death’. It is ‘the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders’ and ‘without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection’ (Kristeva 1982: 4). Following Kristeva, one can understand Siddal, exhumed and revealed, as rotten. Therefore, desire turns to sickness and revulsion. In finding the object of desire (whether it be Siddal or the poems), desire disappears. The myth of the preservation of Siddal’s body—the continued illusion of bodily cohesion—can therefore be read as a fetish against ‘the utmost abjection’ that is confrontation with the corpse.

The myth of the hair-filled coffin is an attempt to defend against an unfulfilled grasping at meaning. The recovery of the poems left desire unfulfilled. The poems were worm-eaten and partly unreadable. Those that were published were received badly by the critic Robert Buchanan because they were—ironically, considering the lengths to which Rossetti went to publish them—erotic. The poems in Siddal’s hair were a version of ‘So long lives this, and this gives life to thee’, in that they created the desire for a suspension of decay: as long as Rossetti did not go and open the coffin, the romantic promise of the lover and the text in her hair remained intact. Once the coffin was opened, Howell had to invent a story to allow the idea of non-decay to continue. Like Shakespeare’s Sonnet XVIII, the poems in the hair provided a focus in the reiteration of longing for the dead lover, but the promise of the text was broken. But we see in ‘Meadowsweet’ the possibility for celebration instead of despair. If one applies Harris’s notion of the ‘transformative aspect of objects’ to Siddal’s hair, and if one considers the ‘briars and branches’ in Jan Marsh’s account of Highgate Cemetery as disruptive, one ends up with a queer kind of reading which allows the promise of the text to transform what it touches.

In Highgate Cemetery, the ‘briars and branches’ are a disruptive force capable of ‘thrusting up through blocks and beds, tilting headstones

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13 This is discussed in Marsh (1992: 12–15).
14 The herb ‘meadowsweet’ looks similar to the ‘cow parsley’ Marsh sees in Highgate Cemetery (Marsh 1992: 1).
askew’. Elizabeth Siddal’s unruly hair is an emblem for reading queer. What would happen if one could harness this disruptive force as a way of reading? In order to read queer, one looks for a disruptive presence, like the hair in the graveyard, or one celebrates haunting presence or returning, unsettling presence, like the poet in ‘Meadowsweet’. One then finds that this ‘oppositional status’ leads one to discover life after death and a celebration of the queer through the act of reading. One can allow the unburied poet in ‘Meadowsweet’ to stand for the rediscovery of buried women’s art and poetry, as a political project.

Works Cited


