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"The leaves touch me on the cheek": Woman and Embodiment in the Poetry of Elizabeth Siddall

"Las hojas tocan mi mejilla": Mujer y Corporeidad en la Poesía de Elizabeth Siddall

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Abstract: This article examines the poetry of Elizabeth Siddall, addressing its long exclusion from the canon and building on recent efforts to remedy that exclusion. For over a century, the Pre-Raphaelite portraits of Siddall have taken precedence over her own work, but the tide is changing. This paper focuses on her poetry, arguing that it questions the tradition of Victorian verse it is embedded in. While Siddall's rejection of the body as an aestheticized object has been noted by many scholars as part of this questioning, this article argues that her reevaluation of that body as a subject has not been explored in enough detail. I propose that Siddall's verse, while emphasising spirituality, does not imply a rejection of nature or the senses.
Keywords: Victorian poetry; Pre-Raphaelitism; feminist poetics; embodiment; Elizabeth Siddall.
Summary: Introduction. The context of the poems. Rejecting the body as an image. Reclaiming death. Embracing materiality. Conclusion.

Resumen: Este artículo examina la poesía de Elizabeth Siddall, a pesar de su larga exclusión del canon, apoyándose en algunos esfuerzos recientes por remediarla. Desde hace más de un siglo, los retratos prerrafaelitas de Siddall han tenido precedencia sobre su propia obra, pero ahora ésta se está recuperando. Mi artículo se centra en su poesía, proponiendo que cuestiona la tradición poética victoriana a la que pertenece. La crítica ya ha subrayado el rechazo de Siddall hacia el cuerpo como objeto estético, pero su revaloración del cuerpo como sujeto no ha sido muy explorada. En este artículo, propongo que la poesía de Siddall, si bien enfatiza la espiritualidad, no implica un rechazo de la naturaleza ni de la experiencia sensorial.
Palabras clave: Poesía victoriana; prerrafaelismo; poética feminista; corporeidad; Elizabeth Siddall.

Sumario: Introducción. Contexto de los poemas. Rechazo el cuerpo como imagen. Reapropiación de la muerte. Aceptación de la materialidad. Conclusión.

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Siddall is not as resounding a name in the history of English culture as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti or John Ruskin. Yet her presence in Victorian art becomes undeniable as soon as that name is linked to a face. Even those who have never heard of Siddall will no doubt have seen her: she is the model in the celebrated *Ophelia* painted by John Everett Millais, and the face of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*. For anyone familiar with the Victorian period, these works will be immediately recognisable. However, Siddall herself has scarcely been discussed until very recently.

Only recently has Siddall's voice begun to be heard alongside her image. This is in great part thanks to the work of Serena Trowbridge, who in 2018, edited the first full collection of Siddall's poetry. In that edition, her last name is spelled as "Siddall," in contrast to her husband's spelling "Siddal," in an attempt to separate her writing from her role as his muse (Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 8). I will follow the same logic in this paper, which aims to study Siddall as a creative subject, specifically a poet, building upon the work of scholars who have spearheaded a reappraisal and revival of Siddall's writing in the years following Trowbridge's edition. As I will attempt to show, however, a lot of their work has been focused on her poems' rejection of the body in favour of spiritual transcendence.

While Siddall's insistence on the spirit in her writing is certainly a striking feature, which I too intend to examine, it does not necessarily amount to a rejection of materiality, but a transformed relationship with it. This article seeks to demonstrate how Siddall rejects not the body itself, but the body as an image and symbolic object which allows her to simultaneously celebrate the body as a sensing subject. I hope my reading may change our understanding of Siddall's fascination with death, which has always coloured readings of her work, as I will explore in the following sections. Although it remains a haunting feature, it is not always as despairing or morbid as many readers have assumed in the past. Siddall's depiction of death does not present it as an escape from the world and from the body, but as a reconciliation between world, body and spirit.

1. THE CONTEXT OF SIDDALL'S POEMS

In 1865 there was an early attempt, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to publish a small selection of Siddall's poems. He wrote to his sister, asking her to include said pieces in her upcoming book, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*. Christina refused, alleging that they were beautiful, but "almost too hopelessly sad for publication *en masse*" (Rossetti and Hartley 292). This was not necessarily an aesthetic judgment but, as Jan Marsh has pointed out, was probably motivated by social unease surrounding Siddall's "unnatural death" (*The Legend* 13). She had become deeply depressed after giving birth to a still-born child, which only added to her sorrows during a period when she felt emotionally distant from her husband. Some months later, she died from an laudanum overdose. Although her death was cast as accidental, the circumstances might also suggest suicide (Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal* 137–39). This would have been incredibly damning in the mid-19th century, when suicide was criminalised, depriving the deceased of a religious funeral and their descendants of an inheritance (Golden 108). Despite Siddall not having many material goods, it would have been important to her loved ones that her reputation remain unsullied. Besides, the women in Rossetti's family were extremely pious (Marsh, *The Legend* 10) and would have tried by all means to give his wife a Christian burial, rather than the shameful one reserved for suicides. In order to ensure that their narrative about Siddall's "accident" was not called into question, the family had to avoid anything that made her seem overly melancholy, which her verse sometimes does. The fact that it has been used, in later biographies, to illustrate Siddall's unhappy marriage is proof that the Rossettis' worries were not unfounded.

Under different circumstances, themes of despair and sadness would not have been reasons to reject a poem. The Rossettis themselves published rather gloomy work throughout their lives, and in fact, "The Prince's Progress" is a text full of hopelessness, where the hero arrives too late to save his beloved. Melancholy was a common mode in Victorian poetry, but when linked to real-life discussions of suicide, it became taboo. Catherine J. Golden has pointed out how these depictions were always scandalous and tended to be either mocking or melodramatic (111, 114–15). When the suicidal person's state of mind was instead taken seriously, the scandal became more disturbing than interesting for the general public. This was proven about a decade after Siddall's death, with the backlash to Tennyson's poem "Despair," which was inspired by a newspaper report

about a couple trying to drown themselves. The author, then Poet Laureate, faced harsh criticism for portraying the emotions and thought process of a suicidal man (Gates 102). The response could only have been worse to work that instead of imitating a suicidal speaker, possibly revealed one. Not only would Siddall's reputation as a lady have suffered, but her poems would have received rebukes as well.

Concerns about the conditions of Siddall's death would only last as long as its tragedy remained fresh in the public consciousness. However, by the time it was forgotten, her poems were being held back for an entirely different reason. In 1869, Dante Gabriel's friends, with his express authorisation, exhumed Siddall's coffin to retrieve a manuscript of his poetry. This had been placed there by Rossetti himself, who had insisted his work must go to the ground with his wife (Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal* 140–44). The poems, many of which were about love, were published in 1870 and were generally well-received (Marsh, *The Legend* 15). That same year, Rossetti also completed his famous painting *Beata Beatrix*, which depicted Siddall as Dante's lover in spiritual ecstasy—or near death (Fowle). The legacy of both Rossetti's poems and this masterpiece were tied to the public's idea of his relationship with Siddall. As Marsh has observed, an artist's reputation and the sentimental value of his work were very important in the Victorian art market (*The Legend* 33–34). There was, therefore, considerable incentive for the Rossettis and their patrons to cultivate a romanticized image of Dante Gabriel's marriage.

Publishing Siddall's body of poetry, which often reflects on the perils of love, would have been detrimental to Rossetti's market value. Besides, at the end of his life, the artist himself was threatening to throw his reputation out the window. His mental health was extremely delicate and he suffered a nervous collapse, which Marsh suggests might have been caused by a critic's questioning of his love for Siddall (*The Legend* 15–16). His condition was concealed from the art world, so as to preserve his image and buyers' interest. In order not to destabilize him further, it was important not to reopen any wounds connected to his complicated marriage. Apparently, Rossetti had mentioned seeing his wife's ghost and had often tried to communicate with it (Marsh, *The Legend* 10). His mental illness was such that he suffered from auditory hallucinations and delusions of persecution, which his friends interpreted as being linked to Siddall's death (Marsh, *The Legend* 15–16). It seems that not only would his reputation have been harmed, but his mental health also, had her poetry been submitted to public scrutiny. As Rossetti's paintings continued

selling dearly after his passing in 1882, it was still important for his family and supporters to protect his image from rumours about his infidelities and mental illness (Marsh, *The Legend* 34). Thus, Siddall's writing remained unpublished for a few more years. Her fame as the "muse and wife of Rossetti," as an early biography called her (Hunt), prevented her from gaining any repute as a poet herself.

Some of her poems finally saw the light in 1895, when William Michael Rossetti, Dante Gabriel's brother, began publishing selections of the family documents. However, he still followed Christina's advice and refrained from publishing Siddall's poetry *en masse*, scattering it instead across various books throughout eight years (Marsh, *The Legend* 199). As Trowbridge has noted, William Michael framed these writings within the context of Siddall's life, beauty and virtue, presenting his selections more as illustrations of these characteristics than as literary productions in their own right (*My Ladys* 17–18). He also edited Siddall's texts rather heavily, regularizing her spelling, meter and rhyme, and adding his own titles. In some cases, he even deleted several lines from the manuscripts and switched stanzas around (see Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 64, 73). He published all but one of the poems that are commonly considered complete (Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 18). However, there are extensive fragments of Siddall's writing that did not see print until 2018. Since none of the poems were published by their author, it is difficult to tell whether or not they were regarded by her as finished. Thus, what separates a complete piece from a fragment, besides William Michael's judgment, is hard to determine. Several of the so-called "full pieces" contain a couple of illegible or displaced words in their manuscript form. In light of this, it would be possible to place some of the fragments on the same level of importance, especially the fifth one that appears in Trowbridge's book ("Now I see you dying"), which may be seen to offer closure in its last line—the verbal phrase "shading all my tears" (l.14), which follows an enumeration of "shadow" images (ll.11-13), that are presumably the "shading" subjects. The long unavailability of these illuminating fragments has impacted the reception of Siddall's already slim body of work. It is only now, armed with Trowbridge's ground-breaking edition, that we can fully appreciate her literary skill, as several scholars have already begun to do. Her intuitive line breaks and slanted rhymes, which were smoothed out by William Michael Rossetti, show a deep curiosity for the ambiguities of language. Moreover, the considerable fragments that Trowbridge has transcribed help us better understand Siddall's themes and

creative process. Her treatment of nature and female death, I believe, makes her a particularly interesting poet among the Victorians. Finally, this quality and her work as a whole are readily available for interpretation.

2. REJECTING THE BODY AS AN IMAGE

Many of the critics that have so far engaged with Siddall's work have noted her insistence on the soul and her rejection of the body. Some of her poems have a speaker that is dying or already in the grave, whose soul speaks while their body fades or decomposes. For instance, "O mother open the window wide" records the speaker's final words in its last stanza:

> And mother dear when the sun has set
> and the pale kirk grass waves
> Then carry me through the dim twilight
> and hide among the graves (ll.29-32)

In one version of "It is not now a longing year," the speaker seems to be a corpse already:

> I lie among the tall green grass
> That bends above my head
> And covers up my wasted face
> And folds me in its bed (in Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 44)

Other poems, like "Life and night are falling from me," highlight the transient and false nature of our outward appearance, describing "life's stony way" as filled with "hollow hearts" and "soulless eyes" (ll. 9–8, 15). Jill R. Ehnenn suggests that this focus on spirituality is a reaction against the physical limits set on Victorian women, whose work in the material world was merely to exist in relation to their husbands (261–62). Sylvie Thode, on the other hand, has argued that Siddall's insistence on the immaterial is an attempt to forge a mystic union with God, beyond corporeality. In a detailed book about the poet, Anne Woolley has interpreted this attitude of hers as a desire to communicate beyond the limits represented by the body. Serena Trowbridge herself, in a paper examining Siddall's poetics, has insisted on her apparent resistance to the "passive and embodied position" of female voices ("Elizabeth Siddall" 213). I believe that Siddall's work definitely shows a resistance to the body

as a mere object and an intense focus on the spiritual realities that its image obscures. However, I do not think her poetry is quite as dualistic as the critical consensus seems to suggest. What it rejects, as I have hinted, is not the body itself, but its presentation as an image or symbol: the body as it has so often been seen by traditional, often male, art.

One of the poems where Siddall contrasts the physical and the spiritual is "I care not for my Ladys soul." Its speaker, who seems to be a courtly knight, praises his beloved's body, but disregards her soul:

> I care not for my Ladys soul
> Though I worship before her smile
> I care not wheres my Ladys goal
> When her beauty shall [lose its wile] (ll.1–4)

Later on, he describes her in beautiful fragments—her "smile" (l.2), her "feet" (l.5), her "wild eyes" (l.6)—in a way that recalls similar descriptions in male-authored poetry. Keats's knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci", for instance, describes his lady by saying: "Her hair was long, her foot was light, / And her eyes were wild" (ll.14–16). Such descriptions exemplify objectification, where body parts or functions are separated from the person as a whole. The lady's "person" seems more identified in Siddall's poem with her soul, which is linked to and rhymes with her "goal" (l.3), that is, her private hopes and desires. These are overlooked by the male speaker in favour of her physical beauty, which he knows will fade, prompting him to find a new object of adoration (ll.7–8). Siddall inhabits this knight's perspective with great irony, exposing how superficial his "worship" (l.2) of love truly is. Throughout the poem he consumes his lady's looks and young body, alienating them from her and highlighting how she must eventually lose them.

The lady's response to her lover's attitude is to fully identify with the soul instead. Her only actions in the poem are to pray (l.9) and to cry "up to the unknown lands" of heaven (l.16). Although this might seem passive at a first glance, there is a secret triumph in it: while the object of the male speaker's worship—physical beauty—must die, the soul that she cherishes will presumably live on. Furthermore, by identifying with something that the knight does not understand or care for, she reclaims her identity and escapes his limiting view of her. He might consume her beauty by "gazing" (l.6), but the soul within it remains only hers and lasts far longer. In fact, the question in the second stanza of "who shall close my Lady's eyes"

(l.13) suggests, as Trowbridge has noted, that the triumphant gaze, which remains aware after death, is not male but female ("Elizabeth Siddall" 211). What is particularly interesting about this observation though is that the lady's eyes, while no longer "starlike," are still a physical attribute that's connected to her after death. We will return to Siddall's treatment of dead bodies as still-perceiving subjects in the following sections, but it is worth noting that even in Trowbridge's reading, which emphasises the body-soul dychotomy, we see glimpses of the importance that Siddall grants to her characters' physical senses. The reading, after all, depends on us believing that her lady's eyes can *see* after death.

"I care not for my Ladys soul" hints at the reason why women might identify with the spiritual. Their bodies are constantly framed as objects of male desire, separated from their own wills. This objectification affects how women view themselves too. As John Berger has pointed out, men's normalised surveillance makes a woman "continually watch herself," as though "accompanied by her own image" (46). Siddall's identification with the soul is an attempt to detach herself from that image. In many of her poems the female speakers seem to be literally beside themselves, escaping from their visible bodies. In "O grieve not with thy bitter tears," the poem is framed by the voice's transformation from a "life that passes so fast" (l.2) into a "spirit floating" (l.10). In other cases, the woman detaches from her body by becoming completely static, living and speaking to us in the poem, while her form stays motionless. The voice of "Ope not thy lips thou foolish one," for example, states that "all changes pass me like a dream / I neither sing nor pray" (ll.17–18); while in "O silent wood I enter thee," the woman is "frozen like a thing of stone" (l.11). Sylvie Thode has noted how some of Siddall's speakers become transparent, not merely leaving their visible bodies, but effectively erasing them (467). She points specifically to one of the fragments ("The sun is setting"), where the poetic voice declares: "the starry / sun floods through / me the space of / heaven" (ll.10–13).

A similar erasure of the body's image is also seen in poems where the speaker addresses us from beyond the grave. We have already mentioned a version of "It is not now a longing year" that describes the grass covering the speaker's "wasted" face (in Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 44). Her body may be static and its beauty "wasted," but the woman lives on and composes poetry. This idea of death not as an end, but as a triumph, is echoed in the last lines of "To touch the glove upon her tender hand." The speaker in that poem is male and alive, locked away from the experiences of those female

ghosts I have referred to. Yet, as he mourns his dead beloved, he turns to a curiously evocative simile, saying that she is "gone forever like the tender Dove / that left the Ark alone" (ll.12–13). This Biblical image, as Constance Hassett has shown, suggests earthly death, but also a higher immortality, with the ark, like the visible human body, being left behind, while the dove-soul transcends it (460). Besides, a flying bird is a symbol of freedom: the woman in the poem has risen above her previous existence and flown away from her visible body, on the wings of her soul.

It is unclear if the speaker of "To touch the glove . . ." understands the full implications of his final simile. Nonetheless, there is a sense that it both grieves and consoles him. Unlike the knight in "I care not for my Ladys soul," this man is concerned with his beloved's afterlife. That is indeed a possibility in Siddall's poetic work. Although most of her lovers are doomed, some of them are allowed a glimpse of future happiness, if they are able to recognise their immortal souls. As opposed to the false knight of the other poem, the speaker of "To touch the glove . . ." does not fixate on his beloved's body. He does not even touch her, instead cherishing her glove. In the second stanza, he comes into contact not with her frame, but with "her shadow on the sunny grass" (l.5). Shadows are a recurring image in Siddall's work and are often connected to memories and spirits, both of which persist after the visible body is gone. Thus, in "It is not now a longing year," "a shadow falls along the grass / and lingers at [the speaker's] feet" (ll.7–8). This could be her own shadow, appearing though the body is buried, or "the shadow of [her] dear love's face", whose memory she conjures up in line 17. The lover's ability to see and touch his beloved's shadow in "To touch the glove . . ." therefore becomes a metaphor for his ability to recognise her beyond just her former body. This sort of love stands in contrast to the superficial and fleeting adoration of "I care not for my Ladys soul." Yet, Siddall reminds us throughout her work that even these deeper attachments only prosper in the afterlife. In "Oh never weep for love that is dead," she writes: "this is only earth my love / where true love is not given" (ll.16–17). Similarly, the dying woman of "O grieve not with thy bitter tears," reminds her lover that only after they both die and find each other's spirits, will their love be fully verified:

> But true love seek me in the throng
> of spirits floating past
> and I will take thee by the hands
> and know thee mine at last. (ll.9–12)

"True love" is, in fact, a theme in many of Siddall's poems, as well as the only title she herself gave to a text.[1] In that piece, a woman sits by her lover's grave and waits to join him, implying that "True love" is an afterlife affair. All of this suggests that love, for Siddall, must be detached from the beauty of our visible bodies and must be connected to our souls, escaping the relationship of gazer versus gazed-upon that is established in "I care not for my Ladys soul."

3. RECLAIMING DEATH

Siddall is not the only Victorian artist who repeatedly depicted dead and dying women. There are numerous examples of such portrayals in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, some of which Siddall herself was the muse for: Millais' *Ophelia* is the clearest example, but Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix*, as I have mentioned, also depicts a seemingly departing woman, as does Burne-Jones's *Sleeping Beauty*. In poetry, Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" became an undeniable icon, the muse of many illustrations, including one by Siddall herself, which I will later examine. As Bram Dijkstra has noted, the nineteenth century "generally liked to paint their paragons of [female] virtue in an advanced state of physical debility and illness" (23). Elizabeth Bronfen argues that this connection between femininity and death was a consequence of men's objectifying view of women. Male admirers, she claims, made their ladies "non-reciprocal 'dead' figure[s] of imaginary projection, given that, in Lacan's terms, 'the whole of [man's] realization in the sexual relation comes down to fantasy'" (63). Indeed, the dying women in most of the aforementioned works are presented as beautiful objects, bodies for us to look at. Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott" lingers on descriptions of her appearance: "lying robed in snowy white / that loosely flew to left and right" (ll.136–37), "a gleaming shape she floated by, / dead-pale between the houses high" (ll.156–57). In fact, the poem charts the Lady's transformation from living and hidden artist into gazed-at and dead artwork. The final lines are spoken neither by the Lady nor the narrator, but by the male onlooker, Sir Lancelot, who tells us: "she has a lovely face" (l.169). Similarly, Millais's painstakingly detailed *Ophelia* conveys an image of beautiful passivity. We observe the heroine as a

[1] See Siddall's "True love," and Serena Trowbridge's commentary on page 93 of her edition, which clarifies how this manuscript was found with the title already written.

luxuriously dressed body, while her consciousness drifts away and her eyes remain fixed on the sky.

Despite their common subject, these images stand in stark contrast to Siddall's depictions of dying women. This has been observed by other scholars in relation to her sketches, particularly the one portraying the Lady of Shalott (Athmanathan 40). In said drawing (Fig.1), the mirror is cracked, and so "the curse has come upon [the Lady]" ("The Lady of Shalott" l.116) already, and she is bound to lose her life. However, Siddall shows her in a moment of full awareness. Still perfectly conscious, she looks down to Camelot, sealing her fate, as the poem tells us, and greeting death. The focus here is not on the Lady's frail body, which is almost completely hidden by a loose dress, but on her mysterious acceptance of destiny. Like the sketches, Siddall's poems also refuse to fetishise dying women's bodies, offering very few physical descriptions of her heroines. Instead, we often hear their own voices, rising from their deathbeds or graves. The speaker in "O mother open the window wide," for instance, is able to chart her own feelings and sensations while dying, but makes no reference to her appearance, except when she mentions her hands and feet, in order to give directions for her funerary rites (ll.9–10). In "It is not now a longing year," the only mentions of physicality are: "the green leaves touch me on the cheek" (l.3) and, in the alternative version, the speaker's "wasted face" that feels the grass bending over it. The focus here is on the speaker's sensory experience, not the appearance of her face or cheek – which might have been the subject of a line by Tennyson, such as: "then her cheek was pale and thinner than should be for one so young" ("Locksley Hall" l.21). The image of the dove-soul flying from the body, which I have analyzed earlier in my discussion of "To touch the glove . . .," also points to Siddall's focus on the dying soul, aware and free, rather than the dying body, objectified and unconscious. "Ruthless hands have torn her" describes the dying woman as being "up born" by angels (l.3). From her seat in heaven, she is an active subject: not just listening (l.5), but also singing and praying (ll.6 and 11). At no point in that poem is her dead body described, as Siddall does not consider the unconscious corpse a thing of poetry. As opposed to writers like her husband, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she saw the dead woman as fundamentally a spiritual subject. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out how in Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel," the lady's afterlife is "in some sense physical," emphasizing "the impossibility of complete spirituality for any woman" (Gilbert and Gubar 27). Indeed, Rossetti describes his damozel, already

dead and ascended, with meticulous physical detail: her deep eyes (l.3), her long blond hair (ll.11–12), her ungirt robe (l.7), and her bosom, which is imagined as still warm even after death (ll.45–46). These are not details describing her body's sensations as a subject, but its qualities as a visible and tangible object. On the other hand, Siddall rebels against this insistence on the body as an object, suggesting that the real woman, behind man's superficial "worship" of her, is a transcending subject. She reappropriates the image of the dead lady by identifying her with her parting spirit, which forever escapes men's desire, and even their perception. Whenever she does mention the body, it is as the subject of the speaker's sensations, rather than the object of other people's.

Fig. 1. Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, The Lady of Shalott, 1853. Maas Gallery



Over a century after Siddall's lifetime, feminist thinker Iris Marion Young claimed that "women experience the body as a burden" (239). She wrote that the objectification of their bodies, which women are forced to accept and internalize, limits their ability to thrive in the physical world. "As human, [woman] is transcendence and subjectivity, and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus, to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself, but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body" (Young 154). Siddall exemplified this already in the 1800s, not only distancing herself from her body as an object, but fully detaching herself—and her poetic speakers—from it. She leaned on the conventions of Victorian Christianity to identify humanity, but specifically women's humanity, with the soul, shedding their image

and its limitations. In discussing "I care not for my Ladys soul," Serena Trowbridge observes that the lady's appeal to God in line 15 appears after the images of funerary rites. "The structure of the poem means that it is even possible that her cry for help comes after death, permitting the Lady, like several of [Christina Rossetti's] narrators, to speak and act after death, though silenced by convention in life" (Trowbridge, *My Ladys* 38). Not only is Siddall correcting the poetic complex of the "dead woman," refusing to reduce her to a corpse, but she is in fact turning it around. Death, which once made woman the ultimate *object*, taking the soul from her visible body, now makes her at last a free *subject*, taking the visible body from her soul. Millais might paint Ophelia's drowning form, but her true self, in Siddall's poetics, would be rising beyond it, unnoticed by him. This is precisely the imagery of one of Siddall's sketches, which after her death was titled *A Woman and a Spectre* (Fig. 2). I believe it might be more aptly called *A Woman's Soul.* The body that lies at the bottom of the paper assumes the same passive and peaceful posture as Millais's Ophelia (Fig. 3), but from her rises a double, one with a clearly seeing face but no further figure to be seen. Unlike the body below and unlike Ophelia, this phantom looks directly at us. She is a perceiving subject, even though we ourselves cannot perceive her whole silhouette in the objectifying way we are used to. Her expression is one of fright or anger, perhaps at being tethered still to that other prostrate image. To her, Siddall's poetry promises freedom, on the other side of death. This is best conveyed by one of her "fragments," which opens with the rhyme: "Now I see you dying / Now I see you flying" (ll. 1–2).

Fig. 2. Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, *A Woman and a Spectre*, 1850–1862. Ashmolean Museum



Fig. 3. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851–1852. Tate Gallery



4. EMBRACING MATERIALITY

Despite this idea of death as freeing, Siddall's poetics do not fully reject the body. Her poems are not purely abstract, but are in fact strikingly sensual. Although they are no longer linked to their old appearance, Siddall's dying and entranced heroines do not usually transcend into a world of immaterial existence. A perfect example is "It is not now a

longing year," where the speaker feels the spring leaves brushing her cheek (l.3). This complicates our reading of the poems as rejecting the body and reclaiming death, but it also enriches it. I would like to propose that here, death and the loss of the visible body do not entail abandoning the material world or the lived body, as a series of sensations. Instead of consuming Millais's Ophelia, with its intricate view over woman and nature, Siddall's lyrics encourage readers to open their eyes within it, as woman, as nature. "It is not now a longing year" reads as if the Lady of Shalott, "lying robed in snowy white" with "the leaves upon her falling light" (ll.136–38) were to finally transcend not her senses, but her own image, and make us *feel*, rather than watch, the leaves "touch me on the cheek" ("It is not now a longing year" l.3). In her exploration of women's experiences, Iris Marion Young observed that all human bodies are both objects in space and subjects intentionally affecting it. She goes on to argue that women are taught by society to see their bodies as objects at all times (145), constantly aware that they may be looked at or acted upon. This inhibits, Young argues, women's ability to act upon the world freely, for they never experience themselves purely as subjects (148). In Siddall's poems, the detachment from the body as an image coincides with an awakening of the senses, whereby the body becomes an unambiguous subject. Interestingly, most of Siddall's speakers are not moving, however, to act upon other objects around them. They are perceiving subjects, intentionally perceiving the world, but they seem to objectify nothing in it. In these poems, the awakening of the female speaker is often accompanied by an awakening of nature. That is to say, other entities we usually think of as mere objects suddenly become sensing subjects alongside her. It is hardly a coincidence that the woman in "To touch the glove . . ." is compared to a dove. There is a continuity between women and nature in many of Siddall's death-poems. The previously cited fragment, where the speaker "see[s] the starry sun flood through [her]" (ll.10–12), represents not only the loss of her solid image, but also a new unity with the natural "sun," as well as an intensification of her sensory experience ("seeing"), which seems enhanced by the verb "flooded."

Nature in Siddall's poetry is an entity that feels the speakers' souls and engages their senses, away from any eyes scrutinising their bodies. In "O silent wood I enter thee," the wood itself has a symbolically spiritual "shadow" (l.12), under which the speaker is able to leave her body "frozen" (l.11) and indulge her mind, her faith, her memories. The fact that she feels another presence in this shadow (see l.12) could be read as a vivid

memory of past love, but it could also be a reference to nature's own spirit or to God, who is secretly present in it. Thode has convincingly argued that the speaker in this poem turns to the wood in order to connect with divinity (463). But my point is that, regardless of its origin, there is a perceiving sensibility in the wood itself, which gives life to the landscape. This idea of connection with nature is present in many more of Siddall's poems. Society might regard her speakers with "soulless eyes" ("Life and night are falling from me" l.9) and refuse to listen to them, like the knight in "I care not for my Ladys soul;" but nature receives their spirits with sympathy. In "Autumnal leaves are falling," "the tall grass bends" (l.3) protectively over the woman in the grave. It seems alive, "listening" (l.3) to the roaring sea, but perhaps also to her and her still-present consciousness.

Serena Trowbridge has noted how often nature reflects Siddall's speakers. While she reads this as a sorrowful silence on the part of the environment ("Elizabeth Siddall" 220), I believe that it marks instead a certain solidarity and identification between the poetic voice and the world around it. Siddall knows that the beauties of nature are ephemeral and false, like everything outside of heaven; but she recognises the environment's more spiritual aspect, as she recognises her own. She moves nature beyond the status of mere object, into that of perceiving and acting subject. Although it cannot move or dramatically act upon others, it quietly listens, sees, and even protects the poems' speakers. "Life and night are fading from me" equates "life and youth" to "summer weather" (ll.12–13), which is the sort of fleeting quality most people love in the natural world. Like Siddall's speakers, nature is also valued for its changing beauty rather than its depth. Perhaps for this reason, there is a sense of identification between it and her women. In her poems about death, specifically, the prospect of being buried in a patch of earth is not frightening. Instead, there is a sense that nature will embrace the dying speaker and help her leave her previous image behind:

> The river ever running down
> between its grassy bed
> The voices of a thousand birds
> That clang above my head
> Shall bring to me another dream
> When this sad dream is dead ("It is not now a longing year," ll. 19–24)

This attitude to the material world makes Siddall's poetry unique, even within a Victorian tradition of women reclaiming death and spirituality. Her sister-in-law, Christina Rossetti, wrote many celebrated lyrics about death. However, death in her work always implies a separation from nature, as in "When I am dead, my dearest," where the speaker "shall not feel the rain" nor "hear the nightingale" (ll.10–11). Birdsong, which in Siddall's work was part of the spell of death, is locked out by it in Rossetti's. Even when her poetry relishes in natural imagery, as in "Dreamland," Rossetti highlights how her dying speakers lie apart from it: "She cannot see the grain / Ripening on hill and plain" (ll.21–23). In the lyric "After Death," the speaker passes inside a room with a "half-drawn" curtain, mentioning some rushes in the room only briefly (ll.1–2). Conversely, in a similar text about the speaker's deathbed, Siddall has her asking for an open window, through which to see the hills ("O Mother open the window wide" ll.1–4). At the end, even as her sight fails, she conjures the image of her grave in the "waving" "pale kirk grass" (ll.30–32).

Other well-known female poets of the same period, such as Emily Dickinson, also wrote about death and tended to align with Christina Rossetti's representation of it. In "Because I could not stop for death," Dickinson's speaker leaves the world behind to sink into a grave which she describes as a house. Even though it is in the ground, she uses imagery from the Victorian indoors, with its roofs and cornices (ll.17-20). This stands in stark contrast to Siddall's "Now Christ ye save yon bonny shepherd," where imagery of the grave is intimately linked to nature: "My love should have a grey headstone / And green moss at his feet / And clinging grass above his breast / Whereon his lambs could bleat" (ll.7–10). While Siddall insists on her subjects shedding their visible bodies, she keeps them tethered to their lived bodies, their senses and the living earth. Thus, the subject of this poem, for example, will feel the grass cling to his breast from the grave, linking him to the cycle of nature, whereby grass grows on bodies and lambs feed on grass. This experience is imagined not just for her "love," but for the speaker herself, as she hopes they will be buried together: "and I should know the span of earth / where some day I might sleep" (ll.11–12). The effect of these lines is to reconcile the speaker not just with love —which, as we have seen, is truer after death—, but also with nature and her spirit. The two lovers are imagined resting together, embraced by the grass. A similar conclusion can be gleaned, I believe, from the final stanzas of "Many a mile over land and sea:"

> . . . And he came ready to take and bear
> The cross I had carried for many a year
> . . .
> I felt the wind strike chill and cold
> and vapours rise from the red brown mould
> I felt the spell that held my breath
> Bending me down to a living death
> As if hope lie bruised when he had come
> who knew my sorrows one by one
> and until comfort and pity [two illegible words]
> and give me the help of his own right hand (ll.5-6, 17–24)

Trowbridge has pointed out that the imagery used is Gothic ("Elizabeth Siddall" 222), but despite this tone, the poem's vision of death is not necessarily frightening. Instead, I believe that it brings forth a new state of being, where the speaker's troubles are eased and shared with her beloved and the earth. The phrase "a living death," which might have sounded terrifying in a different context, has become almost eye-opening in the midst of Siddall's other work and being connected to the religious, redemptive imagery of the rest of the poem (which as we have seen, invokes the "cross" and speaks of "comfort and pity" in line 23).

There is a precedent for this sympathetic treatment of nature in the ballad genre, which Siddall draws heavily from. In folk ballads, nature is often cast as a witness of human emotion. For instance, Trowbridge has noted that the ballad "Barbara Allen" uses "when the green leaves were a-falling" as a refrain in between the characters' displays of feeling (*My Ladys* 41). A similar phenomenon occurs in the ballad "Erlinton," recorded by Sir Walter Scott, whose collection Siddall herself read (Marsh, *Elizabeth Siddal* 100). In that poem, a young woman is kept from her lover, but escapes to meet him in "the green-wood," which is repeatedly invoked as a guardian of their love and of her active decision. In such ballads, both women and the environment around them become subjects in a way that is unusual in other mainstream poetry, where they are more often described than understood. Siddall's imitation of oral poetry and ballad-rhythms is therefore linked to her connection with nature. I believe that at least seven of her fifteen "complete" poems draw from folk ballads in either their theme, their form, or both. She nonetheless introduces innovations. For instance, "O mother open the window wide" alternates between regular balladic stanzas and irregular ones, imitating the instability of the speaker's voice, while her breath falters and dies. As Wooley has

highlighted, Siddall also breaks with the ballad tradition by having most of her songs be spoken in the first person by a woman, rather than letting their stories be told by a distanced narrator (129), as is the case in "Barbara Allen" and "Erlinton." Siddall thus bends the genre to serve her themes. Not only are her ballads close to nature and far from society, but they also enhance the voices of women and allow them to transcend their objectified bodies.

CONCLUSIONS

When I began this paper, I reminded the reader of Siddall's continuous presence as an image in Victorian art. Had her words been allowed in print, with their original form and content in her own time, they may have combated that objectified version of her. Unfortunately, the circumstances of her death and the popularity of her husband's portraits of her hindered the publication of her own work and allowed her image to take precedence in our cultural consciousness. Accounts of her controversial exhumation, which claimed that her corpse was miraculously preserved, provide a twisted metaphor for our culture's view of her. However, her own poems challenge this sort of objectification and focus on women's voices, their souls and their sensory experiences of the world. By publishing them under the title "My Ladys Soul" Serena Trowbridge has challenged us to correct our collective view of Siddall and begin to look beyond her image, into her soul. This soul, as she presents it in poetry, is the subject of material experiences and can see the world, even when its body is invisible or frozen. Thus, Siddall and her speakers escape their objectified bodies, without devaluing their lived-in bodies or materiality itself.

I believe that Siddall's poetry aligns with current ecofeminist concerns, which reject nature-culture binaries. Patricia Murphy recently contributed to this line of criticism by suggesting an ecofeminist reading of several Victorian women's verse. She convincingly argued that the roots of ecofeminist thought may be traced at least to the late nineteenth century. This could be taken further, drawing a line between the authors Murphy studied and earlier writers like Siddal, whose verse also rejected "the assumed fissure between spirituality and materiality" (Murphy 16). Reading Siddall in these terms is a task finally made possible now, with her full body of poetry in hand. Furthermore, a deeper look at her work from the phenomenological perspective of work like Iris Marion Young's would also be a task worth embarking on in the future. In short, I believe

that Siddall's view of women and the world around them has not yet been exhausted and must be considered from a less dualistic perspective than we have so far assumed. I hope that by arguing this point, my paper may have opened the door to future research along these lines.

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