GRATEFUL DEAD STUDIES

Volume 5 2021/2022

ISSN 2572-7818 (Online) ISSN 2572-7702 (Print)

Wallach, Rick

Disturbing the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal, and “It Must Have Been the Roses”

CITATION INFORMATION

Rick Wallach
“Disturbing the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal, and
“It Must Have Been the Roses”
Grateful Dead Studies
Volume 5 (2021/2022)
Pages: 113–124
URL: https://gratefuldeadstudies.org/GDSv5_Wallach.pdf

Disturbing the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal, and "It must have been the Roses"

RICK WALLACH

One face looks out from all his canvasses …
A saint, an angel; – every canvass means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him …

Christina Rossetti, "In an Artist's Studio," 1856

The Hunter-Garcia composition "It Must Have Been the Roses" is one of the darkest but surely the most macabre of the Grateful Dead's songs, with the possible exception of "China Doll"—with which it shares some unexplored affinities. At the song's diegetic core is the theft of a woman's body from its rose-covered bier by a grief-stricken, crazed lover while its melancholic, even wistful melody partially cloaks from a first-time listener the truth of what is actually going on. Full of mysteries, not the least of which is how such a subject could be treated so beautifully, the song is a knotty skein of assertions about our possible relationships with the dead and with our own affective obsessions. Listening to it is necessarily a process of disentanglement.

Nicholas G. Meriwether has discussed at length Hunter's indebtedness to William Faulkner's 1930 short story "A Rose for Emily," noting that "a look at Faulkner's story as a source, as well as a deeper look at Faulkner's inspiration for 'A Rose for Emily,' casts considerable light on Hunter's construction of this tightly written, moving song" (2007, 57). Since he was first to treat the story as one of Hunter's influences, this essay is necessarily a dialogue with Meriwether's observations. As Meriwether points out, "it is [Hunter's] studied, eclectic and catholic borrowings from a wide range of literary sources across a wide gamut of genres that cements the challenge his work poses for critics" (2007, 52). In that vein, without discounting any of Meriwether's suggestions about where story and song intersect, this essay explores several additional sources of influence.

The narrator of "Roses" would hardly be the first to steal and keep the body of his beloved, replete with delusions of postmortem communication. In a few excerpts from reality Juan Perón, the late Argentine autocrat, took his embalmed wife Evita's body to Spain to share his political exile. He even dressed it up to join him for dinner with guests, exclaiming "Isn't she *beautiful*?" (Raga 2017). In Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God* (1973), published earlier in the same year "Roses" was written, protagonist Lester Ballard collects the bodies of attractive women in an eldritch harem: "A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him?" (McCarthy 1973, 88–89). Of course, we can't forget Norman Bates' submission to the arrogations of his mother's corpse in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho.* Here, however, we are not dealing with "body snatching," a crime affectlessly undertaken for profit or illicit scientific purposes.

Among its literary sources, we can cast a line past Faulkner's story to a strong possible forerunner, Edgar Allan Poe's famous last poem about an act of platonic necrophilia, "Annabelle Lee." Written in 1849, it provides the anxious of influence with plenty of kinships, like its opening stanza:

> It was many and many a year ago,
> In a kingdom by the sea,

That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee ... (Poe 1849)

This verse sets up the *mise-en-scene* of "Roses," since Hunter's opening verse features the arrival of its mariner-narrator from his ten-year excursion, a number we will consult again below. Poe's lyric also gives us something the song does not, an efficient cause for the beloved's death, though the song's line "knowing well how it may blow / in all good company" might allude to it:

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee. (Poe 1849)

Poe's concluding stanza leaves its narrator in much the same disposition as the narrator of Hunter's song:

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea. (Poe 1849)

What may be even more interesting, though, is speculation Poe himself drew upon one of Charleston, South Carolina's many ghost stories for his own work. One local ghost authority speculates the source might have been an old Charleston seafaring tale about a Virginian sailor whose beloved, a patrician Charleston heiress not coincidentally named Annabel Lee, died while he was at sea. He returned to spend much time mourning by her grave, and her ghost haunts Charleston's Unitarian cemetery to this day (Crawford 2021).

Of course it is also possible, if not far more likely, that the story of Annabelle Lee arrives in the Hunter canon courtesy of Faulkner's own familiarity with Poe in his project of reconfiguring the so-called Southern gothic genre. Judith Fetterley, for example, provides a different perspective on the sexual politics violated by Emily Grierson in the course of her necrophilic behavior:

> If, however, one approaches "A Rose for Emily" from a feminist perspective one notices the grotesque aspects of the story are a result of its violation of the expectations generated by the conventions of sexual politics … It is one thing for Poe to spend his nights in the tomb of Annabel Lee and another thing for Miss Emily Grierson to deposit a strand of iron gray hair on the pillow next to the rotting corpse of Homer Barron. (Fetterley 1978, 34)

"It Must Have Been the Roses" is, like Poe's terminal lyric and Faulkner's story, a mythopoetic idyll about thwarted desire, loss, and emotional psychopathology. In most literary and musical expressions of this meme we find imaginary communications between the deceased and the acquisitor; usually, the corpse is not appropriated merely so its keeper can watch it rot. If anything, the delusion of communication with the dead exposes the theft as, finally, less a morbid preoccupation with death than a *denial* of it.

As Meriwether points out, Hunter's style is allusive and ambiguous, citing his attraction to "that haunting feel that certain traditional songs have" to which Hunter and Garcia "added a love for the partly told tale, with all its archetypal resonances" (Meriwether 2007, 55). Within those Brobdingnagian empty spaces in the narrative, the reader or listener's imagination connects the dots our lyricist makes explicitly available as it searches its silences for possible allusive gestures or hidden disclosures. If we have been following the distinctly American roots of the song's narrative, from an old Charleston ghost tale through Edgar Allan Poe and William Faulkner, those empty spaces allow us to consider the potential of Hunter's synthetic explorations of Continental history and literature as well.

Foremost among these are the allusive conjunctions between the unstated or incomplete narrative within "It Must Have Been the Roses" and the tragic, equally macabre tale of Victorian painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his muse, Elizabeth Siddal. If "A Rose for Emily" occupies the metaphorical foreground of the song, the story of the obsessed poet-artist and his muse fills out those silent spaces within. How intriguing it is that Meriwether tells us "As the band got started in 1965 Hunter was writing poetry," but "Sometime in early 1966, Hunter took off

for New Mexico, where writing took a back seat to drawing and sketching" (Meriwether 2007, 54). Moreover, Hunter loved London, and it is easy to imagine him delving into Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art while he was there, given his voracious interest in poetic forms in general (Hunter 1975; cf. Boylan 2019).

In 1848, a year of acute political and cultural turbulence throughout Europe, Rossetti, then an art student, cofounded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. They were a handful of rebellious young London artists and poets whose influence exceeded their numbers and whose anarchic attitudes would surely have appealed to a Bay Area denizen in 1970, when Hunter first visited Britain. Their ideology need not concern us here except for one of their core tenets, "to study nature attentively, so as to know how to express (our ideas)" (Latham 2003, 12). Out of this premise arose their connection to the so-called Victorian language of flowers, a symbolic use of floral imagery sourced from before the Renaissance, as well as a mythico-symbolic floral language of their own devising. According to Debra N. Mancoff:

> The adoption of [art critic John] Ruskin's dictum 'truth to nature' set Pre-Raphaelites apart from conventional art, but at the same time it drew them into one of the most popular trends in Victorian culture. From the early years of the nineteenth century, botanical science and flower cultivation gained popular status in Britain … Based on a French model, first published in Charlotte la Tour's *Le Langage des fleurs* (1819), the floral lexicon became the foundation of ' florigraphy,' flower writing that encoded messages through the colors, positions and combinations of the blooms. (Mancoff 2002, 7)

We shall have more to say about this floral language, and what Rossetti and his colleagues made of it, below.

"Ten years the waves / rolled the ships home from the sea," opens the song's first verse. This ten-year period, as Meriwether has noted (2007, 59), suggests the ten years during which little or nothing was known of Emily's activities by the townsfolk of Jefferson, Mississippi, although we eventually discover the corpse of her lover was meanwhile, shall we say, ripening in the upstairs bedroom she shared with it. In the song, this

chronotope sets up the ripening as well of the loneliness and desire of the narrator. "Knowing well how it may blow / in all good company" follows. Aside from sounding like a maritime idiom lost to usage, these two lines impart a sense of forces—winds and tides—to which, like fate, the narrator feels subject. We might interpret the theft of Annie's body and the undefined dialogue going on between the thief and the corpse as, in part, a response to the feeling of being buffeted by those forces. Taken together, these two stanzas establish the time period of the song's narrative as no more recent than the mid- to late-nineteenth century, when ships still sailed under wind power. Although this chronology would be antecedent to the time frame of Faulkner's story, set in the first decades of the twentieth century, when we apply it to our critique, it deposits us right in the heyday of Rossetti and his brotherhood.

That ten-year motif turns up again, prominently, in the story of Rossetti's courtship of Lizzie Siddal. Walter Deverell, another artist colleague of Rossetti's, discovered the twenty-year-old dressmaker's assistant working in a London hat shop (where among other things she bound ribbons to stylish lady's hats and bonnets) in 1849. In 1851 she posed for John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, which skyrocketed her to fame as the first supermodel, before meeting and committing herself to the young Dante Rossetti. According to Siddal's biographer, Lucinda Hawksley, the pair carried on an extenuated relationship, part artist and model, part lovers, littered with broken engagements and reciprocal emotional abuse. It was only when Siddal became gravely ill in 1859 that Rossetti showed up, marriage license in hand, and finally kept his years-old promise (Hawksley 2004, 159–162).

They married in 1860 but their union lasted barely two more years. Siddal, subject to depression, ill health and a longtime addiction to laudanum (a tincture of opium in alcohol), shortly became pregnant but delivered a stillborn child. More depressed than ever, she sank deeper into addiction and finally committed suicide via a massive overdose of the drug. She left a suicide note Rossetti burned to keep her from being denied a Christian funeral (Marsh 1999, 243). Overcome with grief, her widower—against the admonitions of his friends, who knew he would regret it—placed his handwritten book of poems, his only copy, in the cof-

fin to be buried with her (Marsh 1999, 243–244). In the ensuing months, near a mental breakdown himself, he claimed so many visitations by her ghost he gave up his flat and studio and fled to the home of friends elsewhere in London.

Although he continued to paint for seven years following Lizzie's death and beyond, Rossetti's eyesight was worsening and he often turned back to poetry to rest his eyes. Physically and emotionally ill, close to bankrupt and plagued with failing vision that made painting ever more problematic, he eventually regretted having interred his poems with his late wife. His agent, the opportunistic Charles Augustus Howell, convinced him to petition to exhume her body and retrieve his journal. Howell was doubtless motivated by hopes of financial gain but also wished to alleviate Rossetti's anguish (Hawksley 2004, 209–210).

Rossetti cringed at home while the deed was effectuated. To ease his friend's guilt and horror over what they had done, Howell concocted the story that Lizzie had retained her trademark roseate flush and her hair had grown to fill the coffin. Somehow Howell's story spread, becoming a part of the established mystique of Lizzie Siddal. The book of poems, however, was so rank and riven by worms Howell sent it to a hospital mortuary to be cleaned and disinfected (Hawksley 2004, 210–212). One may only speculate what the poet thought when the book was returned to him, but after its readable poems were transcribed Rossetti destroyed it, in part to hide the ugly facts of its recovery but also to erase from his own tormented mind the visions of her corpse (Marsh 1999, 376–377). Perhaps he hoped thereby to put an end to his nightmares about being pursued by her ghost, Howell's comforting lies notwithstanding.

Following Lizzie's suicide in 1862, but especially after her exhumation seven years later, Rossetti began to paint in the images of the Victorian flower language, surrounding his subsequent models—all of whom stubbornly resembled his departed muse—with coronas or garlands of red roses. In a series of stunning portraits, including *Venus Verticordia* (1864), *La Ghirlandata* (1873), *Lady Lillith* (1873), *Rosa Triplex* (1874), *A Roman Widow* (1874), or finally his late masterpiece *A Vision of Fiametta* (1878), the rose garland or corona is always prominent. Whereas the white lily had been the Virgin Mother's symbol of purity, the rose had

long been a Marian symbol of nurture and sublimity, exemplified by the rose windows of Europe's great medieval cathedrals. As Catholic iconologist Pauly Fongemie writes:

> The mystic rose symbolizes Mary's mystical participation in the Holy Trinity as Heaven's Rose or Mystical Rose … an actual rose called Mystic Rose [was] developed in her honor. In medieval times the mystic rose symbol was drawn with four petals on a stained glass background or on a multi-colored background like a popular quilt pattern which is still stitched today. (Fongemie 2020)

The rose had also been valorized as symbol of erotic love in such medieval poems as *The Romance of the Rose*, so the bloom represented not only mystical love but erotic attraction as well. It was thus a complex yet ideal symbol with which to invest Annie's body in "It Must Have Been the Roses."

The funereal tradition of laying wreaths on the coffin most likely originated in an attempt to hide the odor of decay of the corpse, a matter which figures into the fourth verse of the song, which we will address below. Funereal roses have traditionally been not red but white or peach. In fact, white lilies, those traditional attributes of the Virgin Mary, were the original European funereal flower, but with the emergence of Victorian horticulture white roses, with the same symbolism of spiritual purity and restored innocence, eventually supplanted them (Elliott 2013, 38). Let us also keep in mind the mother of Mary was St. Anne. The two names were earlier linked by Hunter in the lyrics to "Friend of the Devil" (1970): "Got two reasons why I cry / away each lonely night / First one's named sweet Ann Marie / and she's my heart's delight" (Trist and Dodd 2005, 112).

In "It Must Have Been the Roses," the song tells us in active voice "Annie *lay* [emphasis mine] her head down in the roses," as if under her own power. There is in this volitional impression, I think, a suggestion of suicide insofar as she has committed herself to her own coffin. This further links the song to the Lizzie Siddal tragedy. Meriwether describes the enigmatic lines "If I tell another what your own lips told to me / Let me lay 'neath the roses and my eyes no longer see" as the narrator's promise, at the pledge of his own life, to keep Annie's secret (2007, 61). Following

Siddal's death, her widower's destruction of her suicide note—to assure her burial in sanctified ground—is another way of accommodating this lyric. His incineration of the telltale journal to hide from others as well, we suspect, as from himself the dread he felt about the exhumation might well be another. We could say that whereas the narrator of "Roses" took the body, Rossetti, in taking back his poems—encrusted with mold and bacteria generated by Lizzie's decomposing corpse—performed his own version of grave robbery. Ironically, after rumors of her suicide and exhumation escaped the Pre-Raphaelites' tight circle of confidants, Rossetti's eyesight did indeed begin to fail him (McGann 2008).

Having reviewed some alternative backgrounds and sources of imagery of this song, let's remember that behind his subterfuge of sentimental yearning, so perfectly established by the song's plangent melody,[1] our narrator is distraught to the point of insanity. The lyric's underlying premise is that our interlocutor has stolen a woman's body from her coffin and now keeps her in his home where her decomposition causes him to knock out most of the glass from his window. His disconnect from reality forces us to question every assertion he makes, some of them more urgently than others, but all are suspect. Those concluding lines, "and it's strange how no one comes 'round anymore", are darkly funny and bitterly ironic, since we must conclude that no one visits because of the stench, but we must also ask, why would a civilized community tolerate the theft of the girl's body in the first place?

As Meriwether has noted, the townsfolk in "A Rose from Emily" tolerated the miasma of Emily's murdered lover not because they were too proper to question her, but mainly because they had no idea what was causing it (2007, 63). However, in a comedy of discretion, Hunter's narrator invites at least one narratee to "come in and shut the door," while pointing out to his guest that "faded is the crimson from the ribbons that she wore." This is an ironic moment in the narrative, precursive to an even more ironic one: the denial of death implicit in the theft and imaginary communication with Annie's body seems, for a moment, to give way to a tentative acceptance of reality. The fading ribbon reminds us of the passage of time and the likely condition of the corpse, which also recalls one of the grimmer moments of the Rossetti-Siddal saga, the return of the

poet's book of poems (Cock-Starkey 2018). However, in keeping with Hunter's Mephistophelian impulse to subvert the certainties of his characters' pronouncements, that lugubrious closing lyric reasserts the demented lover's reluctance to let go of his delusions and his inability to reconcile what he has done to the behavior of those around him.

As a constellating image, the rose, in addition to all of its other meanings, stands for secrecy. "Let me lay 'neath the roses" on one hand conveys the lover's pledge of his life to keep Annie's secret but, understood as a translation of "sub rosa," it also conveys his possession of a secret. Rose images are often placed above confessionals to express the promised secrecy of the penitent's disclosures and the priest's hearing of them. Our narrator thereby has constructed Annie as a sibyl and himself as both penitent and acolyte. But, we must remember, she is dead—and he is crazed. How, for example, should we consider his pledge at all? Did Annie in fact actually tell him anything? Was she alive or already in her bier? We do not know, but we surely suspect the testimony of anyone so obsessed with a corpse. More likely all the narrator actually heard was the unraveling of his own mind confronting the persistent silence of death itself, much as we, as listeners, invite ourselves to fill the silences of the narrative with our imaginations.

This conundrum is a logical extension of the first verse of "China Doll," written and first performed a year earlier than "Roses"—February 1973 and February 1974, respectively (Scott, Dolgushkin, and Nixon 1999, 162; 205). In the earlier lyric, the narrator carries on an extended conversation with the self-dispatched narratee, whereas in "Roses," the narrator claims a conversation to which we are never made privy but from which we are, in fact, explicitly shut out. "Tell me what you done it for / No I won't tell you a thing," begins the dialogue between the survivor and the suicide, which mainly structures the lyric. The suicide's imagined refusal to explain inflects the awful shock and silence survivors face when questioning why someone would take their own life. The mysterious conversation reported by the narrator of "Roses" can be interpreted as a simultaneous extension, and contraction, of the same ghostly imaginings, and a disclosure of Hunter's poetic concerns with the relations between the living and the dead.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was given as "Disturbing the Dead: Pre-Raphaelite Allusions in 'It Must Have Been the Roses'," Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference, Albuquerque, NM, February 21, 2020.

1. In November 1977, Hunter commented that he originally wrote the song for a California-based bluegrass band, Butch Waller and High Country (Gans 2002, 25).

Works Cited

Boylan, Jennifer Finney. 2019. "The Genius Behind the Grateful Dead." *New York Times*, October 16, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/16/opinion/grateful-dead-robert-hunter.html.

Cherry, Deborah. 2012. "Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall (1829–1862)." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, edited by Elizabeth Prettejohn, 183–195. 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cock-Starkey, Claire. 2018. "The Exhumation of Elizabeth Siddal." *Nonfictioness*. Blog. https://nonfictioness.com/2018/04/19/the-exhumation-of-elizabeth-siddal/#_ftn3.

Crawford, Tom. 2021. "The Ghost by the Sea." *Ghost Source*. http://www.ghost-source.com/hauntings/hauntings_ghostbythesea.php.

Elliott, Brent. 2013. "The Victorian Language of Flowers." *Occasional Papers from the RHS Lindley Library* 10: 3–94.

Fetterley, Judith. 1978. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fongemie, Pauly. 2020. "The Symbols of Mary." *Catholic Tradition*. http://www.catholictradition.org/Mary/marys-symbols.htm.

Gans, David. 2002. *Conversations With the Dead: The Grateful Dead Interview Book*. Revised ed., Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Hawksley, Lucinda. 2004. *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of A Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel*. London: Andre Deutsch/Carlton.

Hunter, Robert. 1975. "Dark Star." *Crawdaddy* 44 (January 1975): 50–53.

Latham, David, ed. 2003. *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mancoff, Debra N. 2018. *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers*. Reprint, Munich: Prestel.

Marsh, Jan. 1999. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter and Poet*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

McCarthy, Cormac. 1973. *Child of God*. New York: Random House.

McGann, Jerome J., ed. 2008. *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. http://www.rossettiarchive.org/

Meriwether, Nicholas G. 2007. "Robert Hunter, William Faulkner, and 'It Must Have Been the Roses'." In *All Graceful Instruments: The Contexts of the Grateful Dead Phenomenon*, edited by Nicholas G. Meriwether, 52–71. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Poe, Edgar Allan. 1849. "Annabelle Lee." *The Poetry Foundation*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44885/annabel-lee.

Raga, Suzanne. 2017. "13 Things You Might Not Know About Eva Perón." *Mental Floss*, May 7, 2017. https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/78738/13-things-you-might-not-know-about-eva-peron.

Rossetti, Christina. 1856. "In an Artist's Studio." *The Poetry Foundation*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/146804/in-an-artist39s-studio.

Scott, John, Mike Dolgushkin, and Stu Nixon. 1999. *DeadBase: The Complete Guide to Grateful Dead Song Lists.* 11th ed., Cornish, NH: DeadBase.

RICK WALLACH taught literature, film, and American Studies at the University of Miami for fourteen years and has lectured worldwide on a range of literary subjects. He is editor of the Cormac McCarthy Society casebook series and author of numerous articles on literature, film, and music. He retired from teaching in 2016 to focus on writing and research.