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Review Article

A Neglected Voice: Elizabeth Siddal

Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal. Edited by Roger C. Lewis and Mark Samuels Lasner. Wolfville, N.S.: Wombat Press, 1978. Pp. xii. 26. \$42.00

This is the first Collected Edition of the poems of Elizabeth Siddal, containing fifteen reproductions of her paintings and drawings which are extremely difficult to find elsewhere. Although Miss Siddal figures prominently in all biographies of Rossetti as his pupil (and later his wife) her work has received almost no attention. Perhaps because of preoccupation with the biographical details of her relationship with Rossetti, but certainly also because of the unavailability of her work, critics have not hitherto accounted for Elizabeth Siddal in either literary or artistic assessments of Pre-Raphaelitism. This is therefore an extremely important contribution to Pre-Raphaelite scholarship.

Her poetry is certainly superior to other peripheral Pre-Raphaelites who have received far greater attention. Had she begun writing earlier, she would almost certainly have been invited to contribute to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's propagandist journal, *The Germ*, since her poetry, perhaps more than any other which appears there, answers to William Rossetti's definition of its major critical criterion:

A writer ought to think out his subject honestly and personally, not imitatively, and ought to express it with directness and precision; if he does this, we should respect his performance as truthful. . . .¹

The text of *The Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal*, based on the author's own manuscripts, differs substantively from William Rossetti's previously published versions. In this Collected Edition the protagonist of the *Shepherd Turned Sailor* addresses Christ rather than the lover, making the poem more sophisticated, and dispelling the obscurity of the earlier publication; the new arrangement of *Fragment of a Ballad* into stanzas similarly renders it artistically superior to William's *Speechless*.

These poems are simple, direct manifestations of both Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite preoccupations: expressing alienation, despair, and a tenuous hold on an increasingly demythologised religion. Their major concern is with what Patricia Ball calls "the dramatic actuality of a relationship",² charac-

teristic of Victorian (as opposed to Romantic) treatments of love. Here the intense idealisation of love, with its concomitant sense of failure and of ultimate aloneness, may be seen from the female viewpoint.

Oswald Doughty is inordinately derogatory when he describes Miss Siddal's "plaintive little lock-sick verses, all pathos and self-pity".³ Many of the poems share Rossetti's guilt about personal inadequacy. *A Year and a Day* describes a new face obliterating the shadow of a former love, and like Rossetti's sonnets, is haunted by indistinct guilt:

Dim phantoms of an unknown ill
Float through my tired brain;
The unformed visions of my life
Pass by in ghostly train;
Some pause to touch me on the cheek
Some scatter tears like rain. (p. 16)

The poetic anthropomorphism which is also found throughout Rossetti's *House of Life* emphasises the protagonist as a victim of her own emotions. In *Fragment of a Ballad* the inability to respond to the lover who had come "ready to take and bear/The cross I had carried for many a year", is excruciating:

I felt the spell that held my breath
Bending me down to a living death. (p. 13)

It is impossible not to read Elizabeth Siddal's poetry as a response to Rossetti's vision of her as Dante's Beatrice or as his own 'Blessed Damozel'. The self-dramatisation of this rôle sometimes has surprising results: if the poetry endorses Rossetti's conception of the beloved as a symbol of his soul, it is by frequently representing the voice of his conscience: *The Lust of the Eyes* employs a male protagonist to expose the potential shallowness of Rossetti's poetic pose. I cannot agree with John Dixon Hunt that this poem illustrates the minor Pre-Raphaelites' reliance on the conventions of the 'dolce stil nuova' in order to avoid "having to do anything original themselves"⁴. *The Lust of The Eyes* utilises these conventions for ironic purposes, so that the attitude of the protagonist is antithetical to that of the neo-Platonic lover who regards worship of a beautiful woman as the path to union with the divine. The woman is regarded purely as a sex-object, anathema to the amatory conventions:

I care not for my Lady's soul
Though I workship before her smile;
I care not where be my Lady's goal
When her beauty shall lose its wile.

The wholly 'aesthetic' attitude of the lover anticipates the school of Oscar Wilde and Swinburne, both of whom were admirers of Miss Siddal's work.

The conclusion, however, belies the non-sentiment of the preceding stanzas:

Then who shall close my Lady's eyes
 And who shall fold her hands?
 Who shall hearken if she cries
 Up to the unknown lands? (p. 14)

The opening line "I care not for my Lady's soul" is echoed in a letter from Rossetti to William Allingham which expresses a radical conception of creativity evidently shared by Miss Siddal: she seems to have concurred with Rossetti's belief in salvation through art: the latter assumes that Miss Siddal's suppressed creativity is tantamount to the imprisonment, and hence the degradation of her soul:

I wish, and she wishes, that something should be done by her to make a beginning, and set her mind a little at ease about her pursuit of art . . . It seems hard to me when I look at her sometimes, working or too ill to work, and think how many without one tith of her genius or greatness of spirit have granted them abundant health and opportunity to labour through the little they can do or will do, while perhaps her soul is never to bloom, nor her bright hair to fade, but after hardly escaping from degradation and corruption, all that she might have been must sink out unprofitably in that dark house where she was born. How truly she may say 'No man cared for my soul'.⁵

Despite the abundance of religious imagery in the verse, William Rossetti claims that Miss Siddal "had no religion", though he admits it is difficult to be sure, since:

. . . Dante Rossetti, undefined as his faith was, had no sort of liking for irreligion in women. He had even a certain marked degree of prejudice against women who would not believe.⁶

It seems unlikely, however, that Miss Siddal would have professed faith as a concession to Rossetti. The poem *Lord May I Come?* questions Rossetti's realistic, Dantesque conception of Heaven in order to appeal for Faith. As in *The Lust of the Eyes* the conventions are used ambivalently:

How is it in the unknown land?
 Do the dead wander hand in hand?
 God, give me trust in thee.

Do we clasp dead hands and quiver
 With an endless joy for ever?
 Do tall white angels gaze and wend
 Along the banks where lilies bend?
 Lord, we know not how this may be:
 Good lord we put our faith in thee-
 O God, remember me. (p. 7.)

Although *He and She and Angels Three* is probably the weakest in the collection, it interestingly recalls Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel*, not merely in the theme of the dead woman as "one of God's choristers" yearning for reunion with her lover before God's shrine, but also in its specification of number of angels, a symbolic device derived from Dante, congenial to the Pre-Raphaelite attention to minutiae.

Although I share Christina Rossetti's admiration for the poem *Dead Love*, I cannot concur with her assessment quoted in the annotations that it is "Piquant . . . with cool bitter sarcasm" (p. 23) because again the tone is ambivalent; this is not an unequivocal accusation, since the woman potentially shares the man's grief about love's failure. Although her acquiescence lends a slightly patronising note, there is no reason to disbelieve the assertion that love is not realisable on earth:

O never weep for love that's dead
 Since love is seldom true
 But changes his fashion from blue to red
 From brightest red to blue, . . .

Sweet, never weep for what cannot be,
 For this God has not given.
 If the merest dream of love were true
 Then, sweet, we should be in heaven,
 And this is only earth, my dear,
 Where true love is not given. (p. 10).

The tension between the form and the content of the poem creates an ironic attitude of grim pity.

Encouraged by Rossetti, and by the patronage of John Ruskin, Elizabeth Siddal was a prodigious artist. Between fifty and sixty of her paintings and drawings were located by the editors, who selected those which illustrate her range of aptitude for Pre-Raphaelite literary and religious subjects, portrait, self-portrait, landscape and architectural design. William Rossetti claims that although his brother gave Miss Siddal "some instruction" in painting, she had almost no "systematic training of the ordinary kind",⁷ in which case her self-portrait, forming the frontispiece to the book, is remarkable. William Rossetti confirms that it is "an absolute likeness". The two colour-prints of *Lady Clare* and *The Holy Family* share Rossetti's vivid colour, the rejection of conventional perspective for a flat conception of space, the pattern-like surface, and the quaint awkward postures of the figures, all reminiscent of medieval manuscript illumination. The most interesting illustration is a pen and ink drawing of the *Lady of Shallot* which employs the accidents of the medieval setting for symbolic purposes. The grotesque carving on the chair contrasts starkly with the crucifix at the window; the young girl turns to look into the street almost wistfully, oblivious to her fate, while the bird perched on her loom strains towards the open window, symbolising

the imprisonment of her spirit. The standing figure among the ladies by the sea-shore in the illustration to the Ballad of *Sir Patrick Spens* is clearly a self-portrait, whose dignified bearing is reminiscent of Beatrice in Rossetti's *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage-Feast Denies Him Her Salutation*.

Elizabeth Siddal's paintings were admired by critics as different as John Ruskin and Ford Madox Brown. One day in March of 1854 Rossetti wrote that Ruskin had

... bought on the spot every scrap of designs hitherto produced by Miss Siddal. He declared that they were far better than mine, or almost than anyone's and seemed quite wild with delight at getting them.⁸

Hearing of this, Ford Madox Brown wrote in his diary "This is like Ruskin, the incarnation of exaggeration", but added "However, he is right to admire them".⁹

Subsequent assessments of Pre-Raphaelitism cannot ignore this book of *Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal*, if only because they represent the voice of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal. Although the themes of world-weariness, early death, and frustrated love which regards Heaven as union with the loved-one are all typically Pre-Raphaelite, and the guilt and lack of commitment to the religious imagery are Rossettian, these poems nevertheless derive originality from their manifestly personal nature: the Pre-Raphaelite motifs do not conceal vacuousness as in so much minor Pre-Raphaelite verse: they are the inevitable expressions of genuine emotion. In view of William Fredeman's remark in 1965, this Collected Edition of Elizabeth Siddal is not before its time:

It is tempting to say that Elizabeth Siddal was, after all, the only Pre-Raphaelite. In a grim way, she stood for what it all meant; and she combined in her fragile beauty and in her tragic life the legendary aspect that inspires the movement's art and poetry.¹⁰

NOTES

1. William Michael Rossetti ed. *The Germ: Thoughts Toward Nature—Poetry, Literature & Art: being a facsimile Reprint of the Literary Organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Published—1850* (1901, rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965), p. 16.
2. Patricia M. Ball, *The Heat's Events: The Victorian Poetry of Relationships* (London: University of London, the Athlone Press, 1976), p. 1.
3. Oswald Doughty, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Victorian Romantic* (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), p. 129.
4. John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination 1848-1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 92.
5. *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965-7), p. 209.
6. William Michael Rossetti, ed. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir* 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Evey, 1895), I, 174.

7. Rossetti, *Letters and Memoir*, I, 175.
8. *DGR Letters*, pp. 244-5.
9. William Rossetti, ed. *Ruskin: Rossetti: Pre-Raphaelitism: Papers 1854 to 1862* (London: George Allen, 1899) p. 33.
10. William Fredeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Biblio-critical Guide* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965) p. 210.