Elizabeth Siddal was sewing hats, in a milliner’s workshop near Leicester Square, in London in 1850, when the mother of a painter came looking for her. Elizabeth would have been about 20 years old then. She was from a poor family, living in Southwark, and the visit surprised her. Walter Deverell, a painter who was close to the Pre-Raphaelites, had her in his sights; she was the redhead whom a friend of his had settled on in the street, the woman who would make “a splendid Viola” in the painting on which he was working, *Twelfth Night*, based on Shakespeare’s play. On being approached by Deverell’s mother, Elisabeth’s family gave her permission to do so, and she posed, with a mixture of ease and containment. In the second session Dante Gabriel Rossetti – who worked on the canvas as a painter and was also the model for Feste, the jester – was also present, together with John Everett Millais. The latter was impressed by the model’s movement and dedication and felt he ought to paint her lying in a river, in a greenish atmosphere. For this famous painting, *Ophelia* (1851-1852), undertaken in Millais’ home, Elizabeth slid into the improvised bathtub, wearing a dress “of decadent luxury”, and once again performed in accordance with her will to “enter into that world and cross it, without getting burned by it” (p.49). While concentrating on her pose, immersed in water which was getting colder by the minute, she decided she was not going back to the millinery. At that very moment she was “being cleansed of her previous life. Ophelia got under her skin, almost as if the water had some power of osmosis and took with it, as it emptied out, the episode of the little seamstress” (p.68). Millais, in turn, found himself painting “that which he had never intended to paint: an incitement to necrophiliac emotions” (p.60).

The quotations above are from *Adoecer* (2010) by Hélia Correia [1], a book emerging from the writer’s extensive research focused on the life of Elizabeth Siddal (Lizzie, from here on in), from the time she became close to the pre-Raphaelites until her death in February 1862. It includes the time she spent in a relationship with Gabriel Rossetti, as a common law wife, as part of a couple who to the outside world were “pupil” and “master”, he being just a year older than she was. Gabriel grew up in an arts-connected family in which Italian was spoken, studied in the most distinguished art schools in London, was a writer, translated *Vita Nuova*, and combined being an extrovert with a certain mysticism. Lizzie was poor, had artistic
inclinations, and “an arrogance which dissuaded and frightened those around her a little” (p.72), but at the same time drew people towards her. Her excessive thinness and long red hair are said to have had a powerful impact on Gabriel Rossetti, as if she were taking up a place which had already been prepared by his imagination. He who was the soul of the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as a man of extremes – he was lazy, but also a hard worker; opposed to property, but dominating; took advantage of others, but was generous – knew that only one force would shake him: “destiny”. While still very young, Hélia Correia writes, Gabriel started a short story which he only finished much later, in which the narrator tells of his passion for a “beauty which was the incarnation of the Italian painter’s muse”. It was his own imagination which was best at welcoming destiny and fatality, that “almost divine faculty which perceives immediately and without philosophical methods the inner and secret relations of things, the correspondences and analogies”, in Baudelaire’s 1857 definition [2]. André Breton too entered into this game of revealing magical correspondences and correlations, speaking jubilantly of the force of chance, which turned the “imaginary adventure”, which he described in an old poem (Sunflower), into the realization “impressive in its rigor (…) of this adventure in life itself”, when he met the one who seemed “swathed in mist” and would become his wife [3].

The many drawings which Gabriel did of Lizzie, and the more rare artworks by Lizzie herself, bear witness to their intimacy and complicity. They lived together initially so that Lizzie might herself become an artist, drawing, painting and writing poetry. In Victorian England a woman like her, who had a polished air yet was poor, was fertile ground for charity. The nation was at the height of its power, but suffered from a societal crisis which demanded new forms of social organization, and reforms which might help to mitigate the shock of the industrial revolution. John Ruskin, the historian and collector who dictated English taste and was essentially an educator, gave Lizzie various directions for improvement and provided financial support, because helping the ‘pupil’ Lizzie meant helping the ‘master’ Gabriel Rossetti too. Charity was offensive to her, however, and did nothing to mitigate her constant social unease: apart from the times she was alone with Gabriel, “the human landscape was nothing more than a threatening maelstrom” (p.94). Melancholy would take hold of her, she would fall ill, then disappear to convalesce and call to Gabriel from afar, asking him to join her, and he would follow. Marriage, in 1860, and their stillborn baby in the following year, and even a struggle for space, would rekindle the tensions in this couple, with her helplessness overwhelming their union. Her appeals were no longer imperatives he accepted,
they tended to be seen as summons; and Gabriel did not want to be owned, any more than he wanted to be the owner of any single type of property, including female company.

Amongst the more attractive poorer women, Lizzie upset and upended established social class roles, including the role in which lower class women were used for the sexual initiation and socialization of upper class men. Her contained appearance, her always self-protective way of moving, and her fragile air – which impressed Gabriel’s refined circles of acquaintance, who had no idea of how strong was the fibre in her, the fibre of rage –, distanced her from the type of “cheerful women” (p.244), sought after and desired by painters in the streets of well-known districts, who then followed them to their studios, where their work as models and sexual intercourse followed each other as if by mechanical arrangement. Lizzie, who came into the art world as a model, fled from having to survive by such mechanical means; she had saved it up, perhaps, for her intimacy with Gabriel.

A visit to the world of Gabriel Rossetti – his drawings, watercolours and paintings – provides clear evidence of Lizzie’s overwhelming presence. She is continuously on the artist’s stage, where he draws and sculpts her. A notable example is the watercolour entitled The Return of Tibullus to Delia [4] inspired by the poems of Tibullus, a Latin lyric poet, in which he implores his lover to wait for him until he returns. In the watercolour, Delia (Lizzie) hears music with her eyes closed, becomes absorbed, and in that state of suspension she too escapes. This figure appears again, larger still and with even greater fervour, in the painting called Beata Beatrix, produced in the last month of Lizzie’s life, in which the painter saw his wife “totally fused with Beatrix, seeing the heightened beauty which he had always glimpsed in Lizzie but which eluded him, because it was not part of a living body. (…) and thus appeared the painting of Beata Beatrix, that portrait of the beloved wife, taken in ecstasy by an excess of poppies” (p.279). A particular resemblance has already been noted between Beata Beatrix and Julia Margaret Cameron’s photograph of 1867, Call, I follow; I follow, Let me die (1867), but it is not known to what extent that photograph may also have influenced him; it is highly likely that he knew of Cameron’s photographs, because the Autotype Company’s publication was widely disseminated [5]. The painting and the photograph were part of the exhibition entitled Painting with Light. Art and Photography from the Pre-Raphaelites to the modern age, curated by Carol Jacobi (Tate Britain, 11 May – 25 September 2016).

In focusing on some scenes from the art world of Britain in the nineteenth century, Hélia Correia’s book is a gentle instructional for those who would investigate that world, it being
perhaps better to enjoy the party and live with lucidity, rather than get stuck in
disenchantment. For the art world is not immune to competition and the laws of the group,
and choices are made out of sympathy and admiration often interwoven with ricochets and
settling of scores. In the period covered by the book, John Ruskin, for example, “dictated who
could and who couldn’t be on the list of acquisitions”. Ruskin wrote to at least one baroness
who was inclined to patronage and charity, forbidding her the works of the painter Ford
Madox Brown, who was one of the closest friends of Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris,
even though he was not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. All because John
Ruskin, who was at one time regarded as “a kind of Jay Jopling of his time” [6], thought that
“he, being as he was, a high-level educator, did not have to value anyone. Like a father, he
punished with his eyes” (p.144). It is told that Ruskin asked Ford Madox Brown, in
connection with his painting An English Autumn Afternoon (1852-1853), why he had done
such an “ugly” view of the roofs of the already celebrated area of Hampstead. Madox Brown
replied that he had painted it from a window which gave out on to the backs of the buildings,
and walked off in the opposite direction [7].

The festive and gregarious side of the art world is visible in particular in the Red House
project, in Kent, which was the brainchild of William Morris and Philip Webb, the artist and
the architect who designed a red house inside and out, with nooks of castle and cathedral,
habited by people connected in a brotherhood of tastes, affections and utopias. Here too,
where the pre-Raphaelites and those close to them spent many spells from 1859 onwards,
Lizzie felt ill at ease, not least because she had to live with the game of attraction between
Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris, the woman who even today casts her eyes in only one
direction, her own, who came out of poverty to be a model and a companion to artists. It was
also said that Lizzie caught the contagion of the utopian spirit which lent its flavour to the
group at that time. In Clevedon, by the sea, a boy asked her if, in the land where she lived,
boys like him had to work; she straight away answered no, they didn’t, and “set about
describing a utopia, a land of gold in which lions at night would drink from the lakes in the
gardens and would allow the children to put garlands of magnolias around their necks. She
explained to him that magnolias were enormous flowers, made as if out of velvet” (p. 190).

In a 1984 exhibition at the Tate Gallery of 250 Pre-Raphaelite works, Elizabeth Siddal was
the only woman represented. Seven years later, the Ruskin Gallery, in Sheffield, hosted a
retrospective of her work. In an article written for the exhibition, Jan Marsh argued that the
work of Elizabeth Siddal may be small in size and scope, but even so, because it was
“serious-minded” and “modestly successful”, it deserved a significant place in the history of Pre-Raphaelite art [8]. And speaking of recognition, the year 1857 brought Lizzie good and bad news. In an exhibition in Russell Square, in which she was the only Pre-Raphaelite woman represented, her work received positive reviews, and she even sold a painting to an American, giving her “glimpses of independence” (p.226). But an Exhibition of English painting, organized “on the other side of the Atlantic” by the gallery owner Ernest Gambart, brought disappointment. America, “which could not handle subtleties, treated her badly”. Alongside scenes painted by Jemina Blackburn, an observer and painter of the minute detail of birds, the “childish works of Lizzie Siddal attracted no-one” (p.148). In her favour, the writer narrates that she “had that which precedes time, a certain inaugural roughness, an unrealized eloquence. She had the power of the great primitives, those who generate the new thanks to the suggestiveness of their failures” (p.148). But there were more practical issues at hand, like space to work, for example. In the house at Chatham Place, “Lizzie’s works competed for space with the ‘Guggums’ (Gabriel’s works), shining in the pale light with the sadness which belongs to the figures of ghosts” (p.277).

A strong admixture of laudanum and exhaustion prevented Elizabeth Siddal in July 1862 from attaining her 33rd birthday. Had she lived for two or three decades longer, she might have developed eloquence and even, who knows, been able to combine drifting, work and autonomy. The foundations for a time of greater encouragement of freedom for women and the discovery of individual happiness were beginning to be laid down. Three voices, among many others, heralded the willingness for change. In English, in 1869, a clear male voice was dismantling the custom of centuries which distorted the relationship of women to men: “All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.” (John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women) [9]. From France in 1871, came the enthusiastic voice of a boy who wrote like one who opens his arms and speaks loudly, while around him others lower their eyes: “When woman’s endless servitude is broken, when she lives for and through herself, when man – previously abominable – has granted her freedom, she too will be a poet! Women will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? – She will discover strange things, unfathomable; repulsive, delicious: we will take them to us, we will
understand them.” (Arthur Rimbaud, “Letter to Paul Demeny” [10]). Later on, a female voice would say that how “baleful” was the desire of human beings to merge, the will to be grafted onto another, all in the name of love; when the path is a different one: “each human being should be rooted in a particular ground, so as to become a whole world for the other” (Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Intimate Notebooks from the Final Years* [11]).

Acknowledgments:

This text was translated with the support of FCT, through its strategical project UID/SOC/50013/2013.

Notes:

[1] Hélia Correia (1949) is the author of novels, novels, short stories, theatre and poetry and was awarded the Camões Prize in 2015, which is considered the most important literary prize for Portuguese-speaking authors (among the winners are Vergílio Ferreira, Agustina Bessa-Luis and Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen).


* This text is the English version of “Arte, Amor e Crise na Londres Vitoriana. O livro Adoecer, de Hélia Correia“, originally written in Portuguese and published at: https://www.artecapital.net/opiniao-162-teresa-duarte-martinho-arte-amor-e-crise-na-londres-vitoriana-o-livro-i-adoecer-i-de-helia-correia