

COMMUNICATION WITH THE DEAD: THE SÉANCE DIARY OF W.M. ROSSETTI

J.B. Bullen and Rosalind White

Communication with the dead is not characteristically associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. However, lodged in the Rare Books Collection of the University of British Columbia is a remarkable diary kept by William Michael Rossetti. It consists of a small series of 27 hand-written folios entitled simply “Memoranda by himself.” This diary is a meticulous record of twenty spiritualist séances that took place between 1865 and 1868, séances that attracted a number of Pre-Raphaelite artists, their friends, and family members.

By 1865 spiritualism was practised widely throughout Britain. Though summoning the dead was by no means a recent preoccupation, it appeared in its modern form in America in the late 1840s, was brought simultaneously to England and the Continent in the early 1850s, and was widely disseminated by the 1860s. It was a highly controversial practice and drew in many famous names, for and against. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was an early convert, Charles Dickens a vigorous opponent, but its adherents ranged from Queen Victoria at one end of the social spectrum to Mary Marshall – poor, vulgar, but hugely eminent as the “washerwoman medium” – at the other. Séances, both public and private, took place throughout the country. Some were spectacular displays of showmanship involving large audiences; some were intimate, devout gatherings, while others took the form of after-dinner entertainment. The social, anthropological, and religious status of spiritualism has been much debated, but one important factor drove people to the darkened room of the medium: the desire to contact a dead loved-one. It was this motive that lay behind the séances in William Michael Rossetti’s diary, since many of them were driven by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s desire to reach out to the dead Elizabeth Siddal. Though William was of course present at all the séances, not all were attended by his brother, and the “spirit” of Elizabeth Sid-

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dal appeared at only seven. But it is clear, from internal evidence, that Dante Rossetti had been communicating with his dead wife before the first recorded séance on 11 November 1865. In fact, he had been attending séances many years before this, but his predilection for the occult was intensified by the death of Siddal in 1862.

Though he seemed to possess no orthodox Christian beliefs, Dante Rossetti's fascination with the life of the spirit goes back to his early experiences with the poetry of Dante Alighieri in the scholarly work of his father Gabriele. Gabriele came to Britain from Italy as a political exile in 1824 and set himself up as a Dante scholar and teacher of Italian. Though his work was controversial he obtained a chair in Italian at King's College, London writing a number of interpretative works including *La Beatrice di Dante* (1842) which served to introduce his son to a life-long preoccupation with Beatrice and the *Vita Nuova*. In the course of his work on palingenesis for this book, Gabriele Rossetti frequently invoked the authority of the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, who claimed personal experience of the afterlife. In his considerable writings Swedenborg described that world as a heightened version of life on earth. Dante Rossetti's understanding of the occult was extended through his admiration for the work of Edgar Allen Poe. As a young man in the 1840s he illustrated several of Poe's works which dealt specifically with the death of a female lover and the relay between heaven and earth. The first fruit of this was the poem "The Blessed Damozel" which, he told Hall Caine, was a direct response to Poe's "The Raven" (Caine 284, 234).

In the early 1850s it was probably through his friendship with William and Mary Howitt, and their daughter Anna Mary that Rossetti came to learn about spiritualism. The unorthodox mode of the Howitts must have been congenial to him. They were prolific writers who lived by journalism, publishing essays on history, translations, travel literature, and nature writing. Their politics were radical, and they frequently wrote broadsides in favour of minority causes. Rossetti had known Anna Mary since they were fellow students at Sass's Academy in 1846. Each member of the family had a curiosity about unorthodox beliefs and one by one they were converted to spiritualism.

In the early 1850s Mary watched with interest the rising tide of spiritualist enthusiasm in Britain. She wrote of it to her husband who had gone temporarily to Australia. Unbeknownst to her, however, he was already experimenting with séances in the bush. Ultimately it was their daughter Anna Mary who became the most committed to the spiritualist cause. In 1856 she had some kind of psychic breakdown, and, on travelling to France to recover, wrote long and impassioned letters to Rossetti about her experiences. One of those extant letters is now in the special collections at the University of

British Columbia. It is a curious mixture of conventional prose and inspired, decorative “spirit writing.” In December of 1856 Rossetti visited the Highgate home of the Howitts and was amazed by what he found there. He was disturbed by the strange state of Anna Mary’s mind and surprised to learn that Elizabeth Barrett Browning had thrown herself wholeheartedly into the spiritualist cause.

Not many months later, in 1858, Rossetti himself began to take part in his first séances. His friend Thomas Woolner was dismayed. He wrote to several correspondents saying that Rossetti had “gone into spiritual rapping and says he can call up ghosts (Woolner 93). But with the death of Elizabeth Siddal in 1862 Rossetti’s interest took on a new seriousness. Almost immediately, he saw her nightly at the foot of his bed, and promptly set out in an attempt to contact her in the spirit world. In October 1862 he moved into 62 Cheyne Walk, and began séances accompanied by his new friend James McNeill Whistler. Many years later Whistler spoke of the “strange things that happened when he went to séances at Rossetti’s” (Pennell 1:115), and Luke Ionides, a close friend of Whistler, remembered that they “often had table-turning at Jimmy’s.” He recalled an incident when “when Rossetti joined us,” and how he “broke up the seance after a time by saying, ‘You’d better stop that, otherwise you will go mad’” (Ionides 12). In spite of his own apprehensions, Rossetti was, according to Helen Rossetti Angeli, “anxious to get some message” from Lizzie so much so (206) that his assistant Henry Treffrey Dunn said that he “went to all the private séances to which he happened to be invited” (Dunn 65).

During this period both Rossetti and Whistler created pictures with an occult significance. Rossetti’s drawing *How They Met Themselves* was a *doppelganger* image of a young couple meeting their ghostly double in a dense wood. It was completed in its first version during his honeymoon in 1860 and reworked as a coloured version in 1864. Writing of what Rossetti called his “bogie picture,” his brother William said: “To meet one’s wraith is ominous of death, and to figure Lizzie as meeting her wraith might well have struck her bridegroom as uncanny in a high degree. In less than two years the weird was woefully fulfilled” (W.M. Rossetti, *Family Letters* 1: 207). Then in 1863, both Whistler and Rossetti embarked on paintings with links to spiritualist experience: Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl* has a contemporary setting and Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix* a medieval one. Like *How they met Themselves*, Whistler’s painting is also a *doppelganger* work. In it, the model Jo Hiffernan and her mirror image look down towards a lacquered Japanese box which Whistler employed in séances.

Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix* was begun at about the same time. Its original title was *Beatrice in a Death Trance*, a Dantean image which linked the death

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of Beatrice Pontinari beside the Arno with Siddal's beside the Thames. The painting was based on a long-abandoned and unfinished portrait of Siddal and returns to the moment of palingenesis that so interested Rossetti in the 1840s. In its unfinished state it came to the notice of the prominent spiritualists William and Georgina Cowper-Temple who offered to buy it. William Cowper-Temple was President of the Board of Trade, and he and Georgina presided over séances in their family home Broadlands with the most famous mediums of the day. In September 1865 they began to take an interest in Rossetti's work. They frequently visited his studio where he was working on *Beata Beatrix*, the very same studio in which he was trying, through séances, to conjure up the spirit of Siddal.

By the time William Rossetti began his séance diary in 1865 he was, according to William Bell Scott, already a firm believer in spiritualist communications. He had read Swedenborg "with delight and wonder" back in 1857 (W.M. Rossetti, *Selected Letters* 91; letter to Scott, 5 December 1857), and had been convinced by the authenticity of his brother's recent successful contacts with Elizabeth Siddal. Though there were more séances in Pre-Raphaelite circles than those noted by William, within the twenty he recorded there was a total of thirty-nine independent participants. The séances took place in ten separate locations with six in Dante Rossetti's studio in Cheyne Walk. The timing of the séances was very irregular. They began in November 1865 with seven in that year. There were nine in the following year, 1866, plus one that took place in Naples. There were none in 1867, then finally three took place in 1868. William offers no explanation for this pattern nor for why he decided to keep a diary.

The success of the séances varied considerably. The most productive were those under the auspices of professional mediums. The least successful were those involving no obvious medium or where skeptics were present. The most dramatic were those in which the "spirit" of Siddall was invoked.

The spirits of dead artists feature prominently. In the very first one, the history painter John Cross, who had died in 1861, announced correctly that they had a common friend in Thomas Woolner. The glass painter Frank Oliphant appeared in two séances and accurately told his old friend Bell Scott that he had met him in Newcastle and that he had died in the Alban Hills outside Rome. Thomas Seddon, who died in 1856 and was friendly with Ford Maddox Brown and Holman Hunt, was asked whether he would give the group a drawing. He said that his drawing power had deserted him after death, and he could not comply. This disturbed Dante Rossetti, who asked if he too would lose his skill as a draughtsman after death. The spirit reassured him that he would not.

The richest and most dynamic of the séances took place under the

mediumship of two professionals, Mary Marshall and Elizabeth Guppy. One of the first of these took place on 25 November 1865 at the home of Mary Marshall. William Rossetti was accompanied by William Bell Scott. The two men, who were certain that the Marshalls had no knowledge of them, discussed the idea of trying to make contact with two dead friends – Spencer Boyd and Thomas Sibson. The information that emerged from this séance was striking. The spirit of Spencer Boyd (Alice Boyd's brother) was summoned. He stated, correctly, that he had died in Scott's home and that he had heard of, but never met, William Rossetti. Then a spirit communicated with William. A New Zealand chief by the name of "Hemi" claimed that three years previously he had seen William in Newcastle when he had been on a British tour exhibiting Maori dances. William confirmed this was indeed the case, and external evidence supports the fact that William and a New Zealand troupe of Maoris were both in Newcastle on the date of the performances.

At the same time as these séances were taking place, Mary Marshall was acting as a medium for the famous naturalist, explorer, and biologist Alfred Russell Wallace who became a life-long champion of spiritualism. In 1866 the baton passed to Elizabeth Guppy (née Nicol), who went on to convert many well-known individuals to the spiritualist cause. Elizabeth Guppy and her husband Samuel were known to the Rossetti's friend Henry Vertue Tebbs; Tebbs organized a séance in his home and invited the Rossetti brothers. This turned out to be one of the most rumbustious events in the diary. Eau-de-cologne and water showered out of nowhere, books were thrown from the bookcases, and flowers, roses, ferns, and jonquils (all requested by the members of the group) arrived on participants' laps. Dante Rossetti invited Jane Morris to two of these séances where she saw unexpected lights and cold draughts of air passed over her hands.

The most moving and dramatic séances were those that featured the spirit of Elizabeth Siddal. In the second séance recorded by William, his brother spoke to her with clear reference to the past. "You used to give me clear & significant answers," he said, "but of late the reverse: can you tell me why?" She had no answer. In a later séance she confessed that she knew William Bell Scott and thought that William Rossetti had been a very affectionate brother to Dante Gabriel; later at the home of Thomas Keightley, historian, mythographer, and folklorist, she told the participants that she knew William Morris, and correctly informed them of his London address. One of the most mysterious séances occurred on 25 February 1866. Fanny Cornforth and William Michael Rossetti sat at a table in Dante Rossetti's studio with Dante Rossetti working to one side on a watercolour of Hamlet and Ophelia. The spirit of Siddal appeared almost immediately. Dante Gabriel moved to the table taking the place of William. He tested the spirit by asking unspoken

“mental” questions in the form of initial letters. Most were incorrect but he then asked if it had been she who had been making raps in the bedroom of the house. She confessed that it was indeed her. William then posed a series of questions about a painting *The Beloved*, which his brother had recently sent to the Liverpool banker George Rae. The questions about Rae’s appearance and that of his wife were answered accurately (though they had both visited Cheyne Walk to see the work in progress) and the spirit was questioned about aspects of Rae’s house. On being asked how many pictures by Rossetti were now in Rae’s possession the spirit returned the correct answer, eleven, and then Siddal’s spirit told William about the reception of *The Beloved* in Birkenhead. She correctly said that five people were present when it arrived, and was able to identify most of them except Frederick Leyland, who came with the painter John Miller.

The most intensive cross-questioning of the spirit of Siddal took place in the very last séance William recorded (fig. 1). In this, the spirit was asked about the Rossettis’ father Gabriel in the afterlife, about the nature of Christ, and about the nature of the manifestations that they had recently witnessed from Elizabeth Guppy. The most touching exchange came between William and Dante Gabriel and Siddal’s spirit. This opened with communication between Siddal and William. “Did you know Gabriel? Yes – Me? Yes – F[anny]? Yes – [Treffry] Dunn? No.” “This,” William comments, “is correct, except that she did not know F[anny] personally.” Dante Gabriel then took his place. Gabriel: “Are you my wife? Yes – Are you now happy? Yes – Happier than on earth? Yes – If I were now to join you, should I be happy? Yes – Should I see you at once? No – Quite soon? – No.” Finally, when asked by William, “who is the medium at this table – is it Fanny?” The spirit returned the answer “yes,” and the diary concludes: “F[anny] after this answer withdrew her hands for a while from the table & the manifest[atio]ns came to a stand-still.” Thus, thanks to William Michael Rossetti’s careful records, these twenty séances allow us a glimpse into an unusual and intimate aspect of Pre-Raphaelite life in the 1860s.

The hitherto unpublished text of the “Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti,” from the Rare Books Collection of the University of British Columbia, will be published next year (2021) by Peter Lang as *The Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World*, edited with an introduction, commentary, and explanatory notes by J.B. Bullen and Rosalind White, with assistance from Lenore A. Beaky. The edition will include an appendix containing a substantial letter from Anna Mary Howitt to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

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in soon afterwards, & joined in the se-
ance at a very near its close. (Recor-
ded 15 Aug.)
We 3 had scarcely settled ourselves at the
table when it began tilting & rapping, but
without yielding any very definite re-
sponse to any questions. On asking for
a name, all I got at first was Mon-
nori. Afterw. came Er, wh. the imper-
fect in itself, seemed from the sequel
to stand for Elia, Raffaelli. Nothing be-
yond strong motions &c. (I think the re-
sult & strongest I ever saw in a mi-
nute seance) had occurred up to the
time when Gab. joined. Both before & af-
ter, that point various attempts to get
messages spelled out were made, but
all unsuccessfully; the answers re-
turned being merely by affirmative or
negative tilts &c. to questions.
Q. Are you my wife? Yes - Are
you now happy? Yes - Happier than on
earth? Yes - If I were now to join
you, shd I be happy? Yes - Shd I see
you at once? No - But pretty soon? No.
Till the table & the person you like best:
it came D. Do you now like? Yes -
But some while ago you used not to like
her? No - Did you pull her hair on
a partic. occasion [I was present at
it]? Yes - Will you pull her hair now?
Yes [but no such thing was actually
done]. Before these last q. no I had
asked: Did you know Gabriel? Yes -
He? Yes - F? Yes - Dunn? No -

Fig. 1. William Michael Rossetti. [Diary of Séances], 1865-1868. Angeli-Dennis Collection, Box 17, File 3, folio 50. University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, B.C.



Fig. 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Found*, c.1854, unfinished, oil on canvas, 92 x 81 cm; Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.