

SPEAKING WITH THE DEAD:
THE SÉANCE DIARY OF WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI,
1865-68

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When did Dante Gabriel Rossetti begin speaking with the dead? The question takes us to the heart of his imaginative practices: their synthesis of Dante and Poe, their devotions paid to Beatrice variations and lost Lenores. When, in one of his first poems (begun in 1846), his damozel “lean[s] out / From the gold bar of Heaven,” her earthbound lover feels that “Surely she leaned o’er me – her hair / Fell all about my face” (“Blessed Damozel” 1-2; 21-22) – he verbalizes a kinetic dramatization of the mutual longing between the living and the dead, and the fitful yet powerful communicative circuit that might still connect them. Rossetti imagines such a connection as at once spiritual and embodied, partaking of heavenly grace and yet reliant on an abiding carnality: the damozel’s “bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm” (45-46). Crossing the bar, the damozel has gone to paradise; leaning back over it, she confirms her loiterer’s status in a sub-heavenly mezzanine from which she just might send a desiring lament back to earth: “(I heard her tears)” (144). From this earliest work through the production of the 1870 *Poems* and beyond, Rossetti explores the aesthetic, erotic, and spiritual possibilities of haunting and possession. Even as he does so, his own mind becomes more shadowy and ghost-ridden – particularly after the laudanum-induced death of his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, in 1862 and the subsequent exhumation of her coffin in 1869 to retrieve key poetic manuscripts Rossetti had placed there out of grief and contrition. Indeed, Rossetti told William Bell Scott that for two whole years after her death, he saw Siddal every night “upon the bed as she died” (qtd in Marsh 302). At times it seems as if his entire career was an ongoing conversation – by turns glorious, banal, and terrifying – with the departed.

Two representative early drawings underscore the spiritualist bent of Rossetti’s imagination: first, his startling 1848 illustration of a scene from Poe’s “The Raven,” entitled “Angel Footfalls,” meant to accompany the lines, “Then, methought the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer / Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor” (79-80). In