

PUNCH ON NINEVEH, CATHOLICS, AND THE P.R.B.

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In the 1856 version of “The Burden of Nineveh,” a poem which records his reaction to seeing an immense, human-headed, winged bull being hauled into the British Museum (fig. 1), Dante Gabriel Rossetti imagines art students lounging amidst the new Assyrian collection and debating “whether Punch / Is right about the P.R.B.” (74-75). The lines feel offhanded and humorous, but they evoke a complex mid-Victorian cultural scene, involving perceived connections among Assyrian sculpture, Catholicism, and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. For a brief period in the early 1850s, the Nineveh bulls and the P.R.B. were both targets of anxious, anti-Catholic parody in the pages of *Punch*, and “The Burden of Nineveh” addresses this conjunction. The Assyrian artefacts were associated with Catholicism by a Protestant English culture that read Babylon as a figure for Rome, and connected Ninevite idolatry with Catholic veneration of sacred images. During this period, the P.R.B. was viewed through a similar lens. Critics have called “The Burden of Nineveh” a curiously divided poem, in which Rossetti oscillates between reverence and satire for the Assyrian bull-god. For example, Florence Boos finds that “Rossetti’s bull seems a form of compromise between Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ image and Keats’ urn, simultaneously a sign of the transience of corrupt glory and an artifact inspiring meditation on past life” (213). My contention is that this split-consciousness depends upon Rossetti’s choice of the Nineveh bull as a subject, in that it represents both prideful imperialism and persecuted Catholicism in his mind. Furthermore, insofar as it is associated with the latter, the bull also had affinities with the Pre-Raphaelites and their work, further complicating Rossetti’s satiric response. However, as the decade wore on, *Punch* dropped the anti-Catholic satire, found things to admire in Pre-Raphaelite painting, and began using the Assyrian bulls for parodies much closer in spirit to Rossetti’s own in “The Burden of Nineveh.” This shifting cultural scene remains embedded in the bibliographical record of the poem.

First of all, it is not immediately clear what Rossetti meant by asking “whether Punch / Is right about the P.R.B.,” since *Punch* had both disparaged and