

DANTE ROSSETTI'S "THE BURDEN OF NINEVEH": FURTHER EXCAVATIONS

Andrew M. Stauffer

In a recent article in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, I made what I thought was an interesting point about Dante Gabriel Rossetti's revisions to a particular passage in "The Burden of Nineveh," a poem (probably written in 1850) about a monumental sculpture of an Assyrian bull-god being hauled into the British Museum. In the first published version (1856), the narrator observes that "Some colour'd Arab straw-matting, / Half-ripp'd, was still upon the thing" (21-22). Rossetti revised the poem extensively prior to its re-publication in his 1870 *Poems*, and I wrote that, in a poem about an excavated thing that Rossetti calls "the mummy of a buried faith," this passage would likely have evoked the manuscripts exhumed from Elizabeth Siddal's grave, those

"half-ripp'd" texts that had been disinfected, copied into type, and destroyed after their emergence from the coffin.... In revising this stanza in 1869, Rossetti changed only the first two lines, which became, "The print of its first rush-wrapping, / Wound ere it dried, still ribbed the thing" (1870; lines 21-22). At one level, he seems to have realized that "straw-matting" or "rush-wrapping" would not have survived from antiquity.... In the revised version, then, all that remains is the "print," now that the textile has disintegrated – a situation mirroring Rossetti's own in looking over the printed pages made from the disinterred, destroyed manuscripts. His revision makes a ghost of material once buried. (387-88)

Such a reading might stand as representative of a large class of literary interpretations that draw on textual history in more or less serious ways, and yet which are bound to collide with new data to be revealed by our burgeoning electronic resources. These resources include not only (in this case) Jerome McGann's *Rossetti Archive* (www.rossettiarchive.org), but the Networked Interface for Nineteenth-century Electronic Scholarship (www.nines.org) and

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 16 (Spring 2007)