

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

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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 Siddal 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