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J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky, eds,
Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World: The Séance Diary of William Michael Rossetti,
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About a week before I sat down to read *Pre-Raphaelites in the Spirit World*, an edited version of William Michael Rossetti's 'séance diary', I had a Zoom appointment with an Indigenous Two-Spirit tarot reader for an ancestral reading. The first thing to note is that, despite my Zoom working fine a couple of weeks earlier, when the Zoom call began, I couldn't hear a word the tarot reader was saying. We tried again and again; nothing worked. Eventually, frustrated, I said that I had to bow out, and the reader called me on my cell phone and asked if I had been 'blocked' lately, turning technological difficulties into something metaphysical and, you'll note, my 'fault'. The person also said that the night before a 'maternal figure holding a white lily' had appeared to them, trying to communicate with me, then they asked if my mother had 'passed'. When I said no, they quickly changed gears and said that sometimes living people appear in visions in order to communicate with other living people. I begin this review with a personal anecdote because William Michael Rossetti's séance journal is full of these moments: for believers (such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning), certain words and names and images resonated, suggesting contact from the spirit world. For non-believers (such as Robert Browning, apparently), all spiritualists were scam artists preying on vulnerable people who missed their loved ones. Admittedly, I did make the appointment for an ancestral reading, but even at the time of the ill-fated Zoom call (I cancelled the follow-up appointment; feel free to psychoanalyze me as you will) it struck me that 'a maternal figure holding a white lily', a flower that can symbolize purity or love or loss, depending on how you wish to interpret it, is a pretty textbook example of something that would likely resonate with a lot of people, if not the majority of people who have booked an ancestral reading. My personal beliefs are, of course, likely of little interest to my readers, but this experience was in the back of

my mind as I read Rossetti's séance diary, sometimes frustrated with the willingness to believe (ostensible) spiritualists when one is racked with sadness and/or guilt, as was the case for William Michael's brother, the painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, after his wife Elizabeth Siddal died of an opium overdose. Indeed, Rossetti's guilt-infused mourning for Siddal is what led William Rossetti to begin attending séances (sometimes with Dante Gabriel, sometimes without him), and recording the sessions.

It is in part because Dante Gabriel Rossetti plays such a central role in William Michael's notes, that the book, which is edited by J. B. Bullen, Rosalind White, and Lenore A. Beaky, will, perhaps, be of more interest to historians of British art than literary scholars. Historians concerned with spiritualism and the occult, particularly the intersections between decadence, spiritualism, and occultism, will also find the slim volume useful. The text includes a list of figures (which includes artworks by Dante Gabriel, and importantly for feminist art historians, by Siddal as well), and an introduction written by Bullen and White. After the introduction an annotated version of the séance diary from 1865 until 1868 takes up the majority of the pages, but there is also a Part II, which includes a, it must be said, extremely strange letter (part of which was apparently comprised of automatic writing) from artist-turned-spiritualist Anna Mary Howitt to Dante Gabriel. Beaky has written a helpful introduction to the letter, which will, like many of the annotations for the séance diary, be of interest to feminist art historians, given that Beaky makes it very clear that a vicious critique in 1856 from Pre-Raphaelite champion and famous misogynist John Ruskin impacted Howitt so intensely that she gave up artmaking and turned to spiritualism (p. 17). There is evidence here for scholars interested in affect and psychology to engage with, considering the emotional and psychological consequences of sexist criticism on female artists as well as possible motivations for women in particular to turn to spiritualism, one of the few areas in the Victorian period in which they would be listened to with seriousness and respect, at least by believers. Dennis Denisoff makes this important point in his recent book *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (2022), and his chapter 'Occult Ecology and the

Decadent Feminism of Moina Mathers and Florence Farr' can be productively put in dialogue with Howitt's letter. As Denisoff remarks: 'the popular occulture so tightly interwoven with decadence readily encouraged female authority, incorporated affirmations of womanhood into its structures, and offered the most complex models of pagan feminist empowerment from the period' (p. 141).

Bullen and White's introduction to William Michael Rossetti's diary, which is now held in the University of British Columbia's Special Collections, is clear, chronological, and helpful for understanding the context and background of Rossetti's text. The editors observe that '[i]n the 1860s, personal collections of spiritualist experiences abounded, mediums both British and American flourished, and spiritualist journals were widely read and highly popular' (p. 3). The approximately twenty private séances that William Michael recorded took place between November 1865 and August 1868. Siddal died on 11 February 1862. Apparently, Dante Gabriel's attendance at séances began in 1858, but after his wife's death, his interest in séances took on a new intensity. It is worth noting that the editors acknowledge important work written by feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock, Jan Marsh, and Deborah Cherry, noting that Pollock and Cherry argued in a 1988 article that Siddal's last name should be spelled 'Siddall' (p. 4). Bullen and White observe in a note that they have used the spelling 'Siddal' because that is the spelling the artist used on several of her own artworks. While the introduction is, at times, repetitive, it lays a sturdy foundation for the séance diary that follows. The introduction also includes several relevant illustrations, including Dante Gabriel's *Portrait Sketch of Elizabeth Siddal* (1850-1860, n.d.), a pen and brown ink drawing, which depicts an apparently ill Siddal seated and holding her head, her eyes closed, and his *How They Met Themselves* (c. 1850-1860), a metaphysical pen-and-ink drawing on paper that is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum's collection in Cambridge (UK). The editors have also reproduced in colour Siddal's gouache on paper entitled *The Haunted Wood* (1856), which is possibly a scene from a ghost story or, perhaps, a kind of metaphysical self-portrait depicting the artist with long blonde hair, haunted by illness, if not death.

The Rossetti brothers frequently called upon Siddal during séances, and sometimes she appeared, according to William Michael's diary, as in Séance no. 8, which was held on 4 January 1866. Interestingly, Dante Gabriel's mistress and muse Fanny Cornforth sometimes acted as the medium during these séances. Alas, we don't have any indication of how Cornforth felt about being asked repeatedly to summon her partner's dead wife. The first séance that William Michael documented took place on Saturday 11 November 1865 (but was recorded on 15 November) at 7 Bristol Gardens, Maida Hill. One of the most interesting things about that first séance is that the medium was a Mrs Marshall, who William Michael describes as 'the washerwoman medium late of Holborn' (p. 58). This comment raises the spectre of class in the context of spiritualism, indicating that some working-class women made extra income doing séances for middle-upper class and artistic social circles. In a helpful note, the editors write that Mary Marshall (1801-1875) was born in Shadwell 'of very humble origins', and they observe that '[a]ccounts of her mediumship frequently interpreted her coarseness and social class as proof of her powers' (p. 57 n. 2). Marshall's 'otherness' and exoticness as a poor woman did not shield her from classist insults such as the one that appeared in *Reynold's Newspaper* on 30 September 1860. The author described her as a 'great, stout, coarse, vulgar-looking woman, with a countenance utterly deficient in intellectuality'. The Royal Society likewise perceived her as 'vulgar, low-bred, [and] illiterate' (p. 57 n. 2).

The last séance that William Michael recorded took place on 14 August 1868 at Dante Gabriel's studio in Cheyne Walk. According to Bullen and White: 'Fanny Cornforth appears to have been the medium' (p. 55). The séance diary ends not with a bang (despite some rapping and table movements), but with a whimper, as there were only 'muddled responses' (p. 55), and when a name of the spirit was asked for, 'Er' was the response. The editors write that "'Er" for Elizabeth Rossetti' came back', which seems like a stretch but was certainly what Dante Gabriel was hoping for: 'Dante Gabriel then began a substantial exchange with the spirit asking if it was his wife. "Yes". If she was happy: "Yes". And whether he would see her immediately should he join her in the afterlife. "No"'. The introduction ends quite abruptly with this last séance, with the authors

summarizing: ‘Gabriel then asked whether Fanny was the medium at this séance, and receiving the answer “Yes”, Fanny withdrew her hands and the manifestations came to a standstill’ (p. 55). A final paragraph from the editors indicating what eventually became of not only Dante Gabriel and William Michael but also Fanny would have wrapped up the introduction nicely. The séances described by William Michael become tedious after a while, but the notes that the editors provide, identifying the various participants and clarifying their relationships to the Rossetti brothers, are the true value of the text.

The book is fleshed out by including Anna Mary Howitt’s odd letter to Dante Gabriel that the artist *manquée* wrote in multiple sittings over three days in late 1856 while she was in Rouen. As Beaky tells us in her introduction to Part II, the letter ‘informed Rossetti that her spirit guides’, including artists Fra Angelico and Michelangelo, had declared Rossetti ‘one of the greatest painters ever yet born’ (p. 117). Rossetti knew Howitt and her family, but it still seems strange that Howitt wrote such a long and enigmatic, and indeed contradictory, letter to the artist. The letter was written before Siddal died, and although early in the letter Howitt says to share the letter’s contents with Siddal, later she warns Rossetti against showing it to his wife, but there is nothing obviously untoward in the letter. The letter, which is now in the Special Collections at the University of British Columbia, includes what Beaky calls ‘a vitriolic outburst of automatic writing dictated by a spirit guide’, as well as hieroglyphs and different styles of writing. As Beaky notes, ‘the letter is a visual artifact’, and it is highly significant that Howitt writes at one point that she ‘will be one of the greatest women of the age’, given the letter was written after Ruskin’s evisceration of Howitt’s art (p. 118). The letter, then, suggests that spiritualism helped Howitt cope with the affective fallout of Ruskin’s criticism (p. 124), and helped her regain her confidence. Indeed, Howitt’s descriptions of her communion with her spirit guides recalls the ecstasy of St. Theresa, suggesting both a spiritual experience and embodied, sexual pleasure:

I felt frequently as if enveloped in an atmosphere which sent through my whole frame warm streams of electricity in waving spirals from the crown of my head to the soles of

my feet; and occasionally, generally at midnight, I was seized with twitchings and convulsive movements of my whole body... (quoted in Beaky, 126).

That is certainly a serviceable description of sexual ecstasy. Beaky concludes her introduction by observing that '[i]n early 1856, Anna Mary Howitt had received Ruskin's devastating response to *Boadicea* and, directed by spirits, she covered her paintings over with snakes' (p. 136). Iconographically, this is fascinating. Howitt, who described herself as going into a period of 'darkness' (depression?) after Ruskin's critique of her depiction of a powerful woman, then covered that female subject with the symbol of another powerful, threatening *femme fatale*, Medusa, and in doing so, experienced a kind of catharsis that helped her experience self-actualization, turning from the art form of painting to the art form of spiritualism. On the whole, read as literary texts as well as personal memoirs, William Michael Rossetti's séance diary and Howitt's letter provide many glimpses into the fragile but resilient human psyche, whether the reader is a believer in spirits or not.