



The Skeptics SA guide to Automatic writing

Automatic writing is to some degree an equivalent to Glossolalia (q.v.) in the written mode (although there are also other differences). The following is a typical statement made by an automatic writer (this particular quote comes from the 19th Century):

“My right arm was seized with a convulsive tremor and then in a ‘positive condition’ it refuses obedience to my will... A pencil and paper were lying on the table. The pencil came into my hand: my fingers were clenched on it! An unseen iron grasp compressed the tendons of my arm: my hand was flung violently forward on the paper and I wrote meaning sentences, without any intention or knowing what they were to be...”

The term automatic when applied to writing, painting and drawing refers to the notion that the hand of the individual producing the work is not consciously directed by that person’s mind.

One very salient early case of automatic writing involved the ‘spirit language’ Enochian, which was allegedly channelled to the Elizabethan mystic John Dee via the ‘automotist’ Edward Kelley. The late Don Laycock carried out a very careful analysis of this material.

Automatic writing was very commonly reported in the 19th Century, chiefly but not exclusively as a salient aspect of some of the performances of spiritualist mediums (then very popular and widely accepted as genuine). The phenomenon was also ‘adopted’ by followers of Mesmer. When the spiritualist movement gathered momentum in the 1850s it incorporated many of the beliefs and practices popular with the Mesmeric movement, among them those of speaking and writing while in a trance. Most of the resulting manuscripts dealt with aspects of life after death. The celebrated American medium and automatist Mrs Lenora Piper was studied and supervised by prominent psychical researchers over a period of thirty years around the turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries, and despite being introduced to persons unknown to her, was allegedly able, by means of automatic painting or speaking, to give correct information about the strangers’ deceased friends and relatives.

At one stage automatic writing was intensively investigated by various psychical research societies. Many complicated, ingenuous and celebrated experiments have been conducted by the British and American Societies for Psychical Research (1882 – 1993), and it has been argued by many of their members that the

concordance between the writings of the various automatists can only be attributed to the plans and activities of deceased persons.

Although automatic writing is less often reported today, there are still alleged cases from time to time. While normally the province of psychics and mediums, the ability is not confined to such people.

In both linguistic and literary terms, the narratives produced by means of automatic writing often appear to require skills surpassing the known skills of the automotist herself. In some cases complex and impressive drawings and paintings may also be produced; see for instance the complicated symbolic drawings described in two early British works, Wilkinson’s *Spirit Drawings* (1858) and de Morgan’s *From Matter to Spirit* (1863). In fact, some automatists come to exhibit extraordinary skills, reporting events and information of which they could not possibly have had prior knowledge or producing drawings or paintings far superior to anything that they could accomplish in their normal state.

In all such cases, the writing or other material is said to be generated not by the medium (the automotist) who physically performs it but by another living person (by means of telepathy

or the like), by the spirit of a deceased person or by a supernatural or extraterrestrial being. The material produced (whether fragmentary or extended) may be in a language normally used by the medium, or in a language which she has apparently never learned (as in Xenoglossia; sometimes, as with Glossolalia, a completely unknown one; see also both of these brochures). Where in a known language, the messages are mostly moral or religious texts, accounts of life after death (as in the 19th Century material) or historical romances purportedly dictated by those who participated in the events of the relevant time during their earthly lives.

One might ask whether the 'automatic' production of such works is a paranormal phenomenon, or whether the psychologists' explanation that it is a manifestation of the subconscious personality is more plausible. With the advance of science in the latter half of the 19th Century, these more prosaic psychological explanations began to be sought. Experiments in hypnosis and observations made in mental institutions and hospitals of brain damaged patients indicated that intelligent activities of which a person may not be cognisant may be exhibited in unexpected ways. These less startling explanations led to a demand for more proof of the identity of the alleged guiding spirits, by seeking correct information from them about themselves which could not have been known to the automatist.

One of the earliest mediums who attempted to produce evidence of this kind was W Stainton

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Moses, whose spirit 'controls' would 'drop in' and occasionally give information about themselves which was later verified as being correct. The problem with these 'drop-in communicators', as they came to be known, was that there could be no certainty that the information was not already known to the medium.

In their preoccupation with seeking proof that communication with the spirit world was possible, the British Society for Psychological Research (SPR) evolved an ingenious way of demonstrating survival, known as 'cross correspondences', in which messages purporting to be coming from the same source were recorded by different people in widely separated locations. Three members of the society, Mrs Verrall, who was in Cambridge, Mrs Piper in Boston and Mrs Fleming in India, practised automatic writing and received messages purporting to come from two late former presidents of the SPR, FWH Myers and Henry Sidgwick, as well as Edmund Gurney, a co-founder of the society. Taken separately, the scripts appeared to be the incoherent ramblings of classical scholars; together, however, they sometimes interrelated. While cross-correspondence seemed to indicate a single source intelligence, the evidence was far from conclusive. It may well be that, in view of the automatists' prior and intimate knowledge of all three past members' scholarly interests and literary forms, and the fact that the related works were readily accessible in libraries, they were unconsciously imposing recently memorised materials, together with their own images of the deceased characters.

Fraud, trickery and hoaxes have permeated the whole field of spiritualism both in the 19th Century and in the 20th, and automatic writing is no exception. One common type of fraud involved messages appearing on slates which were alleged to have been written by spirits. When an opportunity allowed investigation, this phenomenon always emerged as a magic trick. Deceptions such as this have become less frequent due to the exposés of trickery by magicians of the calibre of Houdini and the confessions of those once thought to possess psychic powers. Many famous mediums have found the pressure of pretence and fraud too much for them, their double standards becoming an insupportable burden and leading to a confession of their phoniness. The Fox sisters, the Davenport brothers, Helen Duncan, Henry Slade, and Smith and Blackburn, all of whom claimed to have psychical powers, finally admitted their deceptions and confessed to fraud. Another major focus of attention involves the degree to which messages supposedly produced by characters from earlier periods appear authentic in respect of linguistic form. Stylistic analysis can also be performed with a view to determining the likelihood that material produced in this way really might be associated with deceased persons whose written work is available for comparison.

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