

## Automatic Writing.

ASTRA.

IN taking up the subject of automatic writing and dealing with it from a scientific point, I have no wish to cast any odium upon the vast body of spiritualists who have made use of this method to communicate with the supposed spirits of departed relatives and friends. The investigator who sees in the supernormal action of the Planchette a something which he can explain on the basis of a dual mentality or personality, should never be too ready to raise a question of either fraud or imbecility on the part of those who believe the writing to be of supernatural origin; rather let the question raised be one of observation and correct interpretation. But supernormal phenomena, whatever their explanation may be, have no tendency to occur in the presence of persons specially qualified to observe them. It is no wonder, therefore, that the descriptions given of them have been of a character little likely to interest the world at large, while those who witnessed them, deeply impressed with what they saw, and rushing to some hasty conclusion, have been unable even to understand the essential need in such experiments of exactness, repetition and control.

Telepathy being an established fact, it will be well to use that phenomenon as a basic theory. In so doing we may press the theory farther than subsequent knowledge will justify, but it is only by endeavoring to ascertain how many phenomena, inexplicable by generally recognized laws of nature, may be explained by this new *vera causa* that we shall learn at what point other, as yet unknown, causes (if any) begin to intervene.

In the article on telepathy lately published in this magazine a survey was made from the telepathic standpoint of previously recorded phenomena—namely, the inquiry made into the nature of apparitions and other phantasms of living persons. We have seen reason to connect many of these with telep-

athy; and we are pressing that explanation as far as it will go, though without prejudice to any other explanation which certain apparitions may hereafter seem to require.

In this same way I now propose, as well as the limited space of this paper will permit, to consider how far the already recorded phenomena of automatic writing may be explained by telepathy, but without prejudice to any other yet unknown causes which may afterwards show claim to acceptance.

To begin with, let us take the simplest of all telepathic experiments, the "willing game," in which one child thinks of a thing and another seeks its hiding place. In this we find an automatic motion directed by the brain of another personality. The writing of numbers on bank notes, as done in certain public performances, is another example, though if there is any physical contact between the agent and the percipient it at once vitiates these as telepathic experiments; the result in this case might well be attributed to muscle-reading.

There is no action more automatic than handwriting. The business man dashes off his signature without a single thought as to its formation, and often in the abstraction of business matters, writes a letter, the contents of which he is scarcely conscious of when finished.

First, let us consider the rationale of automatic writing from the ordinary physiological point of view. It is simply the extension of the tricks of unconscious action, which, to some extent, are common to everyone, and which in nervous and excitable persons often attain an extraordinary degree of complexity. It is, of course, well known that in moments of vivid emotion the surplus nervous energy escapes in involuntary channels, which often bear some traceable connection with the habitual modes of thought or action of the person concerned. To take a typical case, an accomplished pianist, if stirred by some sudden emotion while seated at the piano, will sometimes play a long passage without any consciousness of having done so; and, moreover, the passage thus unwittingly selected will be one which is in vague general harmony with the new current of emotion. Now the act of writing being one of the commonest of the more complex acquired acts, we shall natu-

rally expect that many half-conscious or unconscious tricks will be connected with it.

And this is notoriously the case. Persons seated with pens or pencils in their hands around a table where discussion is going on will generally sketch or scrawl on the paper before them; while if that paper was suddenly withdrawn, and they were asked what words they had written thereon, most of them would be unable to reply. Students of language are, as might be expected, particularly liable to this trick; and many an old Greek word, oozing its way, so to speak, from some recess of memory, has been unconsciously scribbled on the edge of composition papers in the nervousness of examination. In this case it is the strong concentration of attention elsewhere which allows the writing faculty to manifest itself automatically—permits, that is to say, the unconscious cerebral action to discharge itself along the well worn track which leads to the formation of written words. And something of the same kind also takes place when the current of attention, instead of being concentrated in a narrow channel, is scattered and leaves the subconscious mind in possession of the field; the actions not being guided, or not wholly guided by conscious will. There are many varieties of this morbid automatism. We find this condition often in persons afflicted with slight melancholia. Such a person might write a word, say, "man," without any consciousness of writing at all; or he might write "man," where "boy" is intended and not perceive his error; or he might write "boy" for "man" although he perceives his error as he is in the act of committing it. Now, in both these classes of cases, in the graphic automatism of mental abstraction and the graphic automatism of cerebral disease, the passages written are usually very short; in the first place because the abstraction is transitory, in the second place because the writing impulse is feeble. The anxious classical honor man could not scribble down a whole ode of Pindar without becoming aware of what he was doing. And in the morbid cases there is nothing but a residual impetus, soon exhausted, or a painful effort of the imperfect will. Let us consider, however, whether there are any cases which indicate that the graphic impulse may be prolonged and

in a sense systematic. We find that precisely such cases are afforded by somnambulists, who not unfrequently write long compositions with much manual rapidity and accuracy. Sometimes these compositions are a kind of written dream, rambling and incoherent; sometimes they are on the level of waking thought; sometimes they seem to surpass it, as when the solution of a baffling problem is written out during sleep.

We see, then, that automatic writing is a phenomenon liable to be originated in various ways in the human organism. And we shall not, therefore, be surprised to find that certain human beings are very much more liable to its occurrence than their neighbors. For we are gradually learning (what was, of course, antecedently probable,) that the gamut of natural capacity is just as far reaching when we deal with things trifling and useless, as when we deal with the most important things. The differences in human faculty were noted first in matters important to human welfare; but they exist just as markedly in the obscurest corners of our constitution. We can set no limit beforehand to any of the veins of unexplored faculty which crop up at intervals from the subterranean realms of our being.

It will, therefore, by no means surprise us to learn that there are certain persons who occasionally feel an impulse to write automatically when they are merely sitting quiet with a pencil in their hands. This is not really much more odd than that there should be persons who occasionally feel an impulse to imagine a tune inwardly when they are merely sitting quiet with nothing to do. The imagined tune often externalizes itself, so to speak, in rhythmical movements of the head and body, involving a good deal of muscular action, of which the person is nearly or quite unconscious. The case of automatic writing, however, differs in this way from the dumbly imagined tune,—in that the written words, falling immediately under the writer's eye, tend to arrest his attention and to evoke a conscious train of thought,—an anticipation of what is coming next, which strongly tends to check the automatic flow. The little instrument called *Planchette* is mainly useful in precluding this kind of interruption. It is, of course, simply a piece of board

supported on three legs, one of which legs is a pencil, so that if a hand be placed flat on the board, and if that hand be moved as though tracing letters, the board will move accordingly, and the pencil will trace out in a rude fashion the letters which the hand's movements figures. Of course it is easy to write consciously with the Planchette, and, to be aware of each letter which the pencil is shaping. But the point is that if there is a tendency already existing to automatic writing, it is much easier to write automatically or unconsciously with the Planchette than without it. A slight tremor of the hand will set the Planchette running; and the scrawled characters are generally too rough and too confused to catch the operator's eye, and suggest conscious anticipations. The Ouija board, now so much in vogue among spiritualists, is very unreliable on account of the very distinct lettering which invariably catches the operator's eye and brings a conscious anticipation of words or portions of words.

Now suppose I am writing with a Planchette. Let us consider what theories are logically possible as to the source of what I write. The words I am writing may conceivably be:

1. Consciously written in the ordinary way, and chosen by my deliberate will.
2. Automatically written, and supplied by my own unconscious cerebration, as in dreams.
3. Automatically written, but supplied by some higher unconscious intelligence or faculty of my own, as in clairvoyance.
4. Automatically written, but supplied by telepathic impact from other minds.
5. Automatically written, and supplied by "spirits" or extra-human intelligence.

We are all agreed as to the first hypothesis. It is perfectly easy to write consciously with Planchette and to look as though you were writing unconsciously. The proof (to others than the actual writer) that the writing is automatic can only lie in the production of names and facts unknown to the writer. But it is easy for competent observers, under certain circumstances, to satisfy themselves that what they write, although con-



taining no facts new to them, has not passed through their consciousness. This will refer to cases where one person alone is writing, either with or without Planchette.

The simplest form of automatism is that in which the writer fixes his attention on a word and then without any conscious volitional effort, we find the word traced out by Planchette. Here we have thought taking form in action, and an intermediate step between writing which is wholly voluntary and writing which is wholly automatic. It seems probable that there might be a point where consciousness extended to the idea related with the movement, but not to the movement itself, at which there was still attention, but not voluntary muscular action. We have next to find an example wholly automatic, indicating if possible by its very substance that it has not consciously passed through the writer's mind. It is naturally not very easy to fix on written matter of which we can affirm both that it is such as the writer's unconscious cerebration might have produced, and that it is such that his conscious cerebration had no share in modifying. There are frequent cases in which the writer affirms that he is not aware of the letters he is writing until he is in the act of writing them or until they are written. In such cases the nervous process which causes the act of writing would seem to be unconscious; although the mental act required to produce the formation of a letter is so simple and rapid that it is hard to be sure that there was not a semi-consciousness of it almost immediately forgotten.

Sometimes, however, in the midst of writing of this kind the result of the involuntary movement of the pen is altogether puzzling to the writer—is something which he has to make out with difficulty as if it were the product of another brain—and in such cases we have to suppose that a rather complex process of unconscious cerebration has taken place. Mr. F. W. H. Myers, in his able papers read before the Society for Psychical Research, gives an instance where the replies of Planchette were given in anagrams, which gave the conscious mind quite a little difficulty in interpreting.

There is a strange fascination in experiments where the

writer receives an impression from the sub-conscious mind of another. It is to this form of experiment we look to demonstrate the truth of automatic writing, as in most cases there are written words giving information which was not in the possession of the writer. Mr. Myers cites a case of this kind. A chemical manufacturer, of Birmingham, asked a young lady, of whose complete ignorance of the facts of his business he felt sure, for the name of a waste product occurring on a large scale in his factory. He meant the answer to be "gypsum," but "chloride of calcium" was written, and this was also true; although, had he thought of this substance, he would have thought of it by its trade name of "muriate of lime." Again, he asked what was his firm's port of importation. He meant the answer to be "Gloucester," but "Wales" was written; and this again was true at the time, for he was just then importing through Cardiff. These answers startled him so disagreeably that he refused to make further experiments. The case is of unusual interest in the fact that it points out that no insuperable difficulty is presented by the fact that the answers, while substantially known to the inquirer, were not those on which his mind was consciously fixed. We can thus see how ideas latent in the mind may sometimes react telepathically in preference to ideas which the conscious attention is keeping uppermost. Our consciousness gives us very little clue to the real massing and proportion of the mental pictures within us.

The capricious pranks of Planchette may be easily attributed to this same cause. Sometimes when sentimental or sporting questions are asked, the secret apprehensions of the questioner externalize themselves before his (or her) astonished eyes and the pencil is thrown aside in indignation or disgust. Or sometimes people solemnly inquire "whether it is wicked to hold communion with Planchette?" Their own brain inspires and their fingers write some alarming monitory reply, and they then seriously inform one that "Planchette itself" (or Planchette herself," as some people phrase it), has pronounced the inquiry impious. One smiles at finding Philip sober thus appealing to Philip drunk—the waking man guiding his judgment by the capricious utterance of his own unconscious brain. But the

true lesson of such an incident is the foolishness of condemning or ignoring phenomena just because they look as if they were made for some foolish faith, the unwisdom of leaving strange facts to become the nucleus of a superstition instead of the groundwork of a science. Many and many a fine experiment has been ruined by the superstition that "whatever Planchette says must be true."

Professor Henry Sidgwick supplied a case where a friend reached a rather extraordinary stage of development in automatic writing. At first the writing came in an abrupt, jerky, irregular way, and he rarely knew what he had written till he looked at it. But after the first few trials, the flow of unconscious action became even and steady, like that of ordinary conscious handwriting; and then he generally—though not always—knew just before each word was written what it would be; so that when the statements made were entirely contrary to expectations—as was often the case—his surprise used to come just before the word was actually written. Such cases as this, however, are not exceptional, nor are they extreme, but they represent a degree of dual action to which but only about one person in a hundred could attain, and that by persistent effort. It must be admitted that this view is far from the accredited view as to the extent of the brain's unconscious action. A secondary self—one might say—is thus gradually postulated,—a latent capacity, at any rate, in an appreciable fraction of mankind, of developing or manifesting a second focus of cerebral energy which is apparently neither fugitive nor incidental merely—a dream or a delirium—but may possess, for a time at least, a kind of continuous individuality, a purposive activity of its own.

The discussion of automatism, even as thus far pursued, has suggested so many problems that it is not easy to say in what direction the general argument should incite us to attempt our next forward step. From one point of view the answer to this question would be easy. If like previous writers of this topic, I were to treat automatic writing from the spiritualistic point of view alone, as affording a greater or less degree of presumption of the communication with us of departed souls,



it would be my business to pass at once to an analysis of facts contained in messages which have been automatically written. Some of the facts thus found I should be able to refer to telepathy; to the influence of minds still in the flesh. And I should have to discuss whether any items of the messages were not so referable; whether they pointed to the influence or communication of a "departed soul."

All this will sooner or later have to be done in detail. But we should be anxious to defer rather than to hasten the moment of attempting it. And I say this from no aversion to the spiritualistic theory, a theory which, if it can be sustained, will obviously be more interesting, to say the least, than any other.

But in so complex a matter nothing but confusion can ensue if we attempt to decide on what I might call the advanced questions without some rather fuller knowledge of the preliminary questions than we have as yet gained. Let it be said at once that the extreme theory—the spiritualistic theory—of some of these communications is not to be dispelled with a breath. The evidence for it—though it is soon seen to be scantier than certain loose assertions would have us suppose—is, as we shall perceive, of a nature to perplex a candid inquirer. Stated nakedly, indeed, it might beget in a cautious mind nothing beyond perplexity. The canons by which it should be judged are as yet undetermined. If it is to be profitably approached, this must be after attempt shall have been made to frame such canons, or at least to turn some of the simpler cases over and over, and to try to bring them into some sort of relation with more familiar physiological or pathological facts.

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Our chief want in life, is somebody who shall make us do what we can. This is the service of a friend. With him we are easily great. There is a sublime attraction in him to whatever virtue is in us. How he flings wide the doors of existence! What questions we ask of him! What an understanding we have! How few words are needed! It is the only real society.

—EMERSON.