

The Automatic Hand: Spiritualism, Psychoanalysis, Surrealism

RACHEL LEAH THOMPSON

‘An Unseen Iron Grasp’

In March 1848, in Hydesville, New York, the two young Fox sisters began to communicate with the spirits. They would later move with their family to Rochester where they would begin the occult communications with the deceased that originate the American Spiritualist movement.¹ Initially, the spirits simply announced their presence through mysterious rapping sounds (later revealed to be produced by the cracking of the girls’ toe joints against the floor), which seemed to shower down from the eaves; soon, the spirits began to answer complex questions through an alphabetic – or as one observer noted, “typtological” – code utilizing between one and twenty-six raps.² Although no pen and paper were used, the so-called “Rochester Rappings,” may perhaps be cited as the first incidence of automatic writing.³ As the Spiritualist movement swept across the nation, mediums developed mechanical means of receiving spiritual messages, including the planchette, oijai board, and more complex devices such as the psychorbrette and Pytho Thought Reader; just as the term automatic implies, such devices sutured human and machine, transforming author/subject into mere text-generating device.⁴ It is no coincidence that the devel-

¹ For a discussion of the Fox sisters, see Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 1983); Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and Ernest Isaacs, “The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism” in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, eds. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

² See Albert von Schrenk-Notzing, *Phenomena of Materialisation* (New York, Arno Press; 1975) for a discussion of “typtology” in automatic writing.

³ The work of eighteenth-century self-proclaimed prophet Emanuel Swedenborg provides some evidence for an older lineage for automatic writing; some have also claimed that Joseph Smith’s *Book of Mormon* was authored automatically. However, to my knowledge, the use of the term “automatic” and the trope of the mechanical-writing body emerge only within the context of the Spiritualist movement.

⁴ For further discussion of automatic writing machines, see Lawrence Rainey, “Taking Dictation” *Modernism/Modernity* 5, no. 2 (1998): pg 123-153. For visual examples of writing

opment of telegraphy coincides with the Spiritualist movement, for both kinds of mediumship envision the usually female body as machinic conduit for “messages” communicated across vast distances.⁵

The automatic discourse of mediumship disrupts subjectivity, agency, and intentionality; in trance, the writing medium becomes mere passive receptacle for a surging, seething, authoritative spectral fluid. As one medium writes of her experiences with automatic writing during séance:

. . . the table we surrounded soon began to oscillate rapidly. My right arm was seized with a convulsive tremor, and then in a ‘positive condition’ it refused 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[ful]* sentences, without any intention, or knowing what they were to be . . . my hand rested on a cloud, while my guardian-spirit . . . dictated to me.⁶

How might we begin to frame an interrogation of automatic discourse? In this paper I would like to think through the possibility of textuality without authorship – the possibility of a text which “writes itself” or is merely dictated, transforming the corporeal body, in this example, into lurching, convulsive machine. While traditional theories of authorship tend to suture body and subject, hand and text, psychical desire and embodied action, thus allying authorship with a notion of agency, this evocation of a disembodied hand refigures textuality as a mere mechanical practice performed by animatronic limbs.⁷ This automatic hand can neither think nor represent, but rather only write, inscribe, trace, record.

machines on the internet, see John Buescher, Ephemera, www.spirithistory.com and The Museum of Talking Boards, www.museumoftalkingboards.com.

⁵ See Jeffery Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000) for a discussion of the relationship between telegraphy and Spiritual mediumship.

⁶ John S. Adams, *Answers to Seventeen Objections Against Spiritual Intercourse and Inquiries Relating to the Manifestations of the Present Time* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1853), 11-12.

⁷ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *The Rustle of Language*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 49-55. Barthes re-envisioned authorship as merely a hand which writes, “detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression) [which] traces a field without origin – or at least with no origin but language itself”(52). However, after putting forth the intriguing notion that all writing is author-less and automatic, Barthes returns to a traditional notion of embodied agency by refocusing attention on the reader, impossibly the coherent locus of all agency and desire deployed by the text. See also Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Critical Theory*

While the notion of textuality without authorship seems apolitical in its bloodless, formalistic elision of that body which writes, within Spiritualism automativity functioned as radical authorial/corporeal/political/semiotic practice. Spiritualists tended to describe automativity as an ecstatic state in which psychic intimacy could be achieved with a spectral Other – often a painfully mourned child or beloved. By bringing the Other inside, transforming Subjectivity into permeable membrane, Spiritualism’s possession narrative provided comfort and strength for the bereaved. As several historians have pointed out, the possession of the Spiritualist’s body could also function to enable the articulation of radical politics as diverse as women’s rights, abolition, suffrage, the rights of the working class and of prostitutes, and vegetarianism.⁸ Because it was not the Spiritualist herself who was seen to speak or write, spirit-possession tended to legitimize even politically marginal discourse.

Writing was not the only automatic discourse practiced by Spiritualists. Many mediums sang, danced, performed, healed the sick, gave public lectures, moved inanimate objects, or produced “manifestations” – extruded “ectoplasm” or phantom limbs and heads – all while under the possession of spirit entities.⁹ Indeed, the spirits seemed to encourage socially transgressive, unfeminine, and even downright bizarre behavior among their followers. As Emma Hardinge, who would later go on to champion the rights of New York City prostitutes while in trance, explains in her 1887 “Guide to Mediumship”: “if a strong impression to write, speak, sing, dance, or gesticulate possess any mind present, follow it out faithfully. It has a meaning if you cannot at first realize it.”¹⁰

Automatism permitted radical speech and transgressive behavior because both were seen to originate from a spiritually elevated “elsewhere” and not from the flawed feminine body of the Spiritualist herself.¹¹ As Jefferey Sconce writes, “Spiritualism empowered women to speak out in public, often about very controversial issues facing the nation, but only because all understood that the women were not the ones actually speaking.” As a result, radical politics could be smuggled into public discourse under the aegis of supernatural possession. This transfiguration of

Since 1965, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986). Like Barthes, Foucault obliterates the embodied agency of the author only to reanimate its corpse in the guise of “initiators of discursive practices.” In this paper, I tentatively map the possibilities of agency without bodies and of bodies without agency.

⁸ On the relationship between radical politics, feminism, and Spiritualism, see Braude, *Radi- cal Spirits* and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

⁹ On the manifestation of “ectoplasm”, see Rolf Krauss, *Beyond Light and Shadow* (Munich: Nazraeli Press, 1995) and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *Phenomena of Materialization*.

¹⁰ Emma Hardinge, “Guide to Mediumship,” excerpted at www.spirithistory.com.

¹¹ One observer noted: “[i]t may be observed that ordinarily the feminine mind possesses, in a higher degree than the masculine, two important requisites of elevated mediumship: first, it is more religious; and secondly, it is more plastic.” Quoted in Sconce, 26.

female body into ethereal spiritual conduit appealed to the Spiritualists' male contemporaries as it seemed to index the essentially passive nature of feminine subjectivity. But we can also surmise that disembodiment would have allowed the Spiritualist herself to practice masquerade, canny deception, and empowered and mobile subjectivity.^{12 13}

'He Robs Me of My Thought, He Writes What I Think'

To the contemporary reader, Spiritualist automatic practice seems uncannily similar to the psychoanalytic notion of hysteria – for both hysteria and automativity, disassociation transforms the body itself into a kind of text, which is allowed to “speak” of things far removed from polite society – feminist empowerment and radical politics, and the traumatic memories of abuse, respectively.¹⁴ But rather than undiagnosed sufferers of hysteria, as some critics of Spiritualism have insisted, Spiritualists may have in fact vitally contributed to the development of psychoanalysis.¹⁵

Pre-Freudian psychoanalyst Pierre Janet was particularly fond of automatic writing, “crystal gazing”, and trance, writing in *The Mental State of Hystericals*: “[i]t is useless to go back to the description of [automatic] writing discovered by the spiritualists; if it has to-day no longer the religious character . . . it may in many circumstances subserve a medical purpose.”¹⁶ For Janet, the scientific reappropriation of Spiritualist possession enabled the development of clinical tools for the treatment of hysteric patients. Janet even designed his own “writing machine” modeled upon the planchette devices of the Spiritualists; his “stem device” as he called it:

¹² Ibid., 49.

¹³ It should also be noted that Spiritualists often profited handsomely from such masquerades. A Spiritualist could build a lucrative career out of séance, the performance of possession, and public trance speaking.

¹⁴ For the official etiology of hysteria, see Sigmund Freud, “Studies in Hysteria,” in James Strachey, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (S.E.), 24 vols. Hogarth, 1953-73. vol. 2, pp. 189-221.

¹⁵ Even contemporary writers on Spiritualism tend to conflate Spiritualism and hysteria; see, for example, Brandon, 145.

¹⁶ Pierre Janet, *The Mental State of Hystericals* (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, 1977), 281. In “Taking Dictation,” Rainey argues that Janet was entirely unaware of Spiritualism during the early stages of his investigation. However, in “The Autobiography of Pierre Janet,” in *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, ed. Carl Murchison (Worcester, Mass.: Clark University Press., 1930). Janet writes that his uncle was a “spiritualist metaphysician.” A doctor he did early work under also studied animal magnetism, hypnosis, and clairvoyance. Thus, I would argue that Spiritualism is the primary, though disavowed, source of Janet’s theoretical and clinical use of automatism.

. . . is first of all a long stem, suspended Cardan fashion, and movable in every direction. The subject holds the stem by the middle as he would hold a penholder, and after having caused him to look away, we take hold of this same stem by the lower part, and follow with its point a word written on paper. The hand of the subject, if it is sensitive, will feel all the delicate movements in writing this word; the apparatus has enabled us to cause him to feel all those little delicate sensations and to retain, so to say, the graphic of the word we have written. But Margaret tells us that she has felt nothing at all. We know what that means: she has not had any personal perception of anything . . . we put a pencil in her right hand, which is entirely insensible, and make her look away. We see her fingers take hold of the pencil and the hand write. How could this delicate movement take place, when but a moment ago the subject could not move without looking? . . . The hand wrote the name John, which was the same word with the same form of letters we wrote ourselves.¹⁷

Automatic writing functioned for Janet to prove the persistence of memory in the amnesiac patient. Janet theorized two discrete layers of consciousness (which often separated completely in the hysteric patient, producing a condition known as *dédoublement*).¹⁸ Automatic writing bridged the gap, often allowing the patient “to perceive and express ideas [she] could not account for previously.”¹⁹ But with this new expression came estrangement, a disturbing sense of decorporealization, and a loss of ownership for the analysand. As his patient Birtha reports:

When I want to write, I find that I have nothing to say; my head is empty, I must let my hand write what it pleases; it thus fills four pages; I cannot help it if it is all absurd trash . . . My ideas are no longer comprehensible to myself; they come of themselves; one might say that they are written on a big

¹⁷ Janet, *The Mental State of Hystericals*, 46. There are no extant images of Janet’s “stem device,” but we can imagine that it might consist of two long shafts connected by a flexible joint (Janet makes reference to sixteenth-century mathematician Girolamo Cardano, inventor of a double-sided joint). Although such a “stem device” would have been structurally dissimilar to Spiritualist automatic writing machines, the rotating castors featured on many Spiritualist planchettes, as well as the floating needles suspended by wheels and pulleys on Dial Plate Talking Boards functioned similarly to harness ideomotor responses from the user. See The Museum of Talking Boards (www.museumoftalkingboards.com) for examples of planchettes and Dial Plate Talking Boards.

¹⁸ *Dédoublement*, literally defined as a splitting or doubling of consciousness, is related to Freud’s work on disassociation. However, while Freud insisted that subjectivity is a coherent whole, with consciousness and unconsciousness forming opposite sides of a single surface, Janet suggested that a single body might contain multiple selves.

¹⁹ Janet, 281.

roll which unrolls before me. . . . I am nothing more than a puppet held by a string . . . I am here only to stand for something.²⁰

Janet's work on split subjectivity, which would later influence Sigmund Freud, Henry James, and Carl Jung, among others, can be considered instrumental in the development of the Freudian unconscious. Developed through the observation of Spiritualist automatism, Janet's understanding of split subjectivity is undergirded by a theory of authorial intentionality. The intentional act, he writes, occurs when:

[i]t is I, we say, who, before executing it, have foreseen this act; it is I who, at the moment of accomplishing it, feel that I am performing this action; it is again I who later keep the remembrance of it. I connect it in every respect with my character, with my sentiments and with my ideas; I consider it henceforth as an integral part of my personality.²¹

For Janet's patients, the denial of authorial agency is also the loss of what it means to be human and of what it means to be whole. Fragmented, Birtha watches her hand write with a sense of detachment, describing herself as mere object – a roll of paper, a puppet on a string.

Although there is no way of knowing whether any of his patients were former Spiritualists, it is clear that for Janet the spiritualist and the hysteric were one and the same. "Lucy, Marguerite, and many others," he writes of his patients, "present in a complete way the automatic writing, and would make the fortune of a spiritualist circle."²² In another passage: "[a]n American author pointed out recently [the] phenomena of achromatopsia which came upon a medium at spiritualistic séance. Where will you find such characteristics if not in hysteria?"²³

For Janet, Spiritualists are crazed, demon-possessed harlots, always resisting psychotherapy, always attempting to derail his construction of a theory of mind through their insidious attempts at deception. But what Janet seems to have repressed is precisely the occult origin of his work on subjectivity. Like Freud, whose secularized occultism transformed demon possession into neuroses, spirits into ego introjects, and exorcism into psychoanalysis, Janet's work made use of essentially occult methodologies – automatic writing, trance, and the discourse of possession – for the purposes of bringing the occult into the clinic and under control.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 147.

²¹ Ibid., 249.

²² Ibid., 427.

²³ Ibid., 450.

²⁴ In "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis" (SE 19:73, pg. 72), Freud writes: "[t]he states of possession correspond to our neuroses, for the explanation of which we once more have recourse to psychical powers. In our eyes, the demons are bad and reprehensible wishes, derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed. We merely eliminate the projection of these mental entities into the external world . . . instead,

One of Janet's patients writes, "[i]t is not I that walk; it is my legs which walk quite alone. . . . [W]hen I think of some object, it seems as if someone took me by the hand to look for it; I go to it without knowing why; I ask myself who is this person. . . . He robs me of my thought, he writes what I think. . . ." ²⁵ Within psychoanalysis, automativity becomes a discourse of dispossession for the female analysand. Although enlisted in the service of psychic healing, clinical automatic writing ultimately figures the "hysteric" subject as prey to invisible forces beyond her control, rather than, as contemporary feminist scholars have argued, a dissident subject of patriarchal oppression. ²⁶ One wonders whether the one who "robs me of my thought . . . writes what I think" is precisely the analyst himself.

'I Was Pregnant With My Subject'

In 1922 a group of artists and writers led by André Breton began to conduct a series of experiments into what Breton called "psychic automatism." Writing, speaking, or drawing in a state avoiding "any control exercised by reason [and] exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern," psychic automatism would be credited to Freud, both by Breton himself, and by his commentators. ²⁷ But if "the period of the sleeping fits," as the Surrealists would later call this ecstatic time, was simply a project in lay analysis, why did Man Ray title his photographs of automatist dictation *Waking Dream Séance*? ²⁸ And why do these proto-surrealists seem to attempt to converse with the dead and prophesize the future?

we regard them as having arisen in the patient's internal life, where they have their abode." Although it is my argument that Janet's work is an attempt to control the irruptive discourse of the occult, other authors have noted that psychoanalysis (usually conceived narrowly as Freudian) can be read as a form of secularized occultism. See B. J. Gibbons, *Spirituality and the Occult: From the Renaissance to the Modern Age* (London: Routledge, 2001).

²⁵ Janet, 262.

²⁶ In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), Elaine Showalter argues that "epidemic hysteria exists on one extreme of a continuum with feminism, as a body language of women's rebellion against patriarchal oppression, [and] is a desperate, and ultimately self-destructive, form of protest" (10). See also Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) for a reading of hysteria as symptom of cultural dissidence.

²⁷ André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," (1924) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, ed. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

²⁸ For Breton's crediting of automatism to Freud, see *ibid.*, 10, in which Breton writes that "a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer – and, in my opinion by far the most important part – has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. On the basis of these discoveries a current of opinion is finally forming by means of which the human explorer will be able to carry his investigations much further, authorized as he will henceforth be not to confine himself solely to the most summary realities. The imagination is perhaps on the point of

What do you see?

Death.

He draws a hanged woman at the side of a path.

Written: *Near the fern go two* (the rest is lost on the tabletop).

At that moment, I place my hand over his left hand.

Q: *Desnos, it's Breton here. Tell us what you see for him.*

A: *The equator* (he draws a circle and a horizontal diameter).

...

Q: *What do you know about Peret?*

A: *He will die in a crowded train car.*

Q: *Will he be killed?*

A: *Yes.*

Q: *By whom?*

A: (He draws a train, with a man falling from its door.) *By an animal.*²⁹

Breton would later claim vociferously and repeatedly that he believed no contact was possible between the living and the dead, and that mysticism was simply a flight of fancy. In doing so, Breton attempted to remake Surrealism a secular and rational exploration of the forces of the unconscious mind.

Freud was clearly not the only influence on these proto-surrealists. Indeed, René Crevel, one of the founding circle, had learned the fine art of séance from a girlfriend's Spiritualist mother the prior summer. Like Spiritualist automatism, psychic automatism functioned as a technique for producing creatively fertile psychic disassociation and communion with a kind of force or voice that seemed radically *other*. No longer "authors," no longer the originators of discourse, Surrealist practitioners of automatism envisioned themselves as conduits for a kind of "magical dictation," as "modest recording instruments."³⁰ At a time when literature and art seemed at an impasse, the imagination locked in a deplorable "state of slavery," and the possibilities of new experiences and sensations "increasingly circumscribed," the Modern subject was left pacing "back and forth in a cage from which it [had become] more and more difficult to . . . emerge." Automatism seemed capable of ejecting its practitioners from the realm of mundane experience and appeared the only way out.³¹ Yet automatism was not an easy way out. Since it involved a release

reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights." See the website *kicking giants* <http://www.kalin.lm.com/despho3z.html> for Man Ray's *Waking Dream Séance*.

²⁹ André Breton, "The Mediums Enter," in *The Lost Steps* trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 93-94.

³⁰ André Breton, "The Automatic Message" (1933), in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad, 1978), 100.

³¹ Breton, "The Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), 4, 10.

of responsibility over textual production, automatism functioned as a site of dispossession and a violent loss of authorial control, one that was specifically figured as devirilizing by Surrealists. As I will argue in my final section, automatism's threat to authorship is projected specifically onto women's bodies within Surrealist automatic texts.³² Breton cites a conversation with another writer in which he describes exactly such a moment:

. . . all of a sudden I found, quite by chance, beautiful phrases, *phrases such as I had never written*. I repeated them to myself slowly, word by word; they were excellent. And there were still more coming. I got up and picked up a pencil and some paper that were on a table behind my bed. It was as though some vein had burst within me, one word followed another, found its proper place, adapted itself to the situation, scene piled upon scene, the action unfolded, one retort after another welled up in my mind . . . my pencil could not keep up with them, and yet I went as fast as I could, my hand in constant motion, I did not lose a minute. The sentences continued to well up within me. I was pregnant with my subject.³³

The result of this traversal of the interior is a radical othering culminating in the production of "phrases such as I had never written," channeled through the threshold of the physical body. The text seems to write itself, to happen or unfold; rather than written by, it writes on, coursing through and spilling out of the body like a hemorrhage, invading the interior like a fetus. It is not by accident that the autographic process is described in terms of violence – childbirth and hemorrhage are of course equally bloody – for what is obliterated in automatic discourse is the Author-God as origin of meaning and sense.³⁴ The result of automatism is thus the relocation of author or artist to the margins, transforming her/him into merely a hand that writes, merely a body that secretes words; the text itself, literally automatic, perhaps even autonomous, enters the light of the center.

What is left of the author is a corporeal shell enfolding the detritus of subjectivity, a seeping discharge, an unstemmable flow of semi-incoherence which is as much grotesque as ecstatic. Breton writes later of his disconcerting inability to "capture" the autographic flow on paper. It exceeds him, exceeds the structure of textuality, the physical materiality of paper, and emerges from his interiority only to cause him to drown in his own fluids: "[t]he control I had . . . exercised upon myself seemed to me illusory and all I could think of was putting an end to the interminable quarrel raging within me."³⁵

³² Ibid., 27-28.

³³ Ibid., 22-23. My emphasis.

³⁴ For a discussion of the term "Author-God," see Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 53.

³⁵ Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), 21-22.

The period of sleeping-fits was terminated abruptly in the first weeks of 1923 for reasons that were not entirely made clear in subsequent Surrealist writings. We do know that automatism seemed to impel certain members of the group toward a psychotic break. Aragon's description of the events is perhaps most resonant:

. . . there were some seven or eight of us who now lived only for those moments of oblivion when, with the lights turned out, they spoke without consciousness, like men drowning in the open air. Every day they wanted to sleep more. They became intoxicated on their own words . . . They went into trances everywhere . . . In a café, amid all the voices, the bright lights, and the bustle, Robert Desnos need only close his eyes, and he talks, and among the books, the saucers, the whole ocean collapses with its prophetic racket, its vapours decorated with long oriflames. However little he is encouraged by those who interrogate him, prophesy, the tone of magic, of revelation, of the French Revolution, the tone of the fanatic and the apostle, immediately follow. Under other conditions, Desnos, were he to maintain this delirium, would become the leader of a religion, the founder of a city, the tribune of a people in revolt.³⁶

Desnos and Crevel found themselves consumed by trance, unable to fully awake, losing weight day by day. Desnos became convinced that he was possessed by "Rose Selavy," Duchamp's own irrepressible alter ego, channeling her voice like an oracle. There were episodes of violence, and finally, during one "séance," several members of the group were discovered in a coat closet in the midst of a group suicide attempt.³⁷

Within a few short years, Breton himself would seem to abandon psychic automatism, at least in his own literary practice. As for the "sleeping fits," Breton would later describe them as merely diversionary or experimental. An examination of his *Manifestos* and other writings on the subject of automatism reveals a profound ambivalence, an oscillation between the desire for the "luminous phenomenon" of the "pure" psychic text of automativity and a nebulous sense of fear com-

³⁶ Louis Aragon, *A Wave of Dreams* (1924), trans. Adam Cornford. Available online at Duration Press (<http://www.durationpress.com/authors/aragon/home.html>).

³⁷ It is difficult to know how to interpret the violence and psychic unraveling of the final days of the sleeping fits. Certainly, we know that the Surrealist movement was always suffering from internal strife of one sort or another, which may have emerged in the form of textual and interpersonal rupture. In *Surreal Lives* (New York: Grove Press, 1999), Ruth Brandon has argued that the Sleeping Fits became violent due to an escalating "duel of psychics" (202) between Desnos and Crevel, both being over-eager to impress Breton. However, as I am suggesting, automatism itself can be seen as a textual practice which does violence to subjectivity and authorship. The events that took place during the final days of the Sleeping Fits, as well as its subsequent abandonment, can thus be read as symptomatic of this violence.

bined with a defensive attempt to exert control and mastery over the automatic text.³⁸

In the *Second Manifesto* (1924) Breton noted only that automatic writing involves a “rampant carelessness” of authors who “let their pens run rampant over the paper without making the least effort to observe what was going on inside themselves – this disassociation being nonetheless easier to grasp and more interesting to consider than that of reflected writing.”³⁹ Although disassociation, revision, reflection, and rationality are diametrically opposed to the process of automatism, by the time of the writing of the *Second Manifesto*, Breton wanted desperately to reinstate the virile protagonist of the drama of authorship. He writes: “[i]f the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them, then, if need be, to *submit them to the control of our reason*.”⁴⁰

While automatism initially provided Surrealism with a method of “liberating” both textuality and subjectivity, it ultimately eluded the Surrealists’ control, thus proving profoundly dangerous for artists and writers who were attempting to stamp their names upon a new creative movement.

‘It is When She is Asleep that She Truly Belongs to Me’

As I have argued, automatism originated in what can be posited as a proto-feminist discourse within the context of the Spiritualist movement; by the time of its reappropriation by Surrealism, automatism begins to be figured as potentially devirilizing. The production of an automatic text entails a relaxation of authorial control and an entrance into a passive trance state in which language is described as invading or impregnating the writing-body. For the purposes of a self-proclaimed, highly masculinist, revolutionary avant-garde movement, automatism seemed to gleefully rupture artistic tradition, yet simultaneously threaten the very existence of art’s production. For Surrealism, automatism can thus only be rendered as deeply ambivalent. In this section, I would like to examine the ways in which this ambivalence is marked upon the figure of the woman through a reading of André Breton’s and Philippe Soupault’s key automatist text, “Soluble Fish” (1924).⁴¹

³⁸ See André Breton’s “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 117-195.

³⁹ Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 158.

⁴⁰ Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 10. In the “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), however, Breton had written that automatism “constantly and vigorously [opposes] any effort to retouch or correct, however slightly, any passage ... which seemed ... unfortunate” (24).

⁴¹ The “reading” of any automatic text is perhaps an inherently difficult practice. In my reading, I have attempted to be particularly attentive to textual slippage, complex metaphor, intertextuality, rhizomatic logic, and word association. See Andrew Rothwell, “Incoherence

A locus of multiple and conflicting tropes, *woman* is overdetermined in Surrealist automatism. As *mystery*, she represents radical Otherness and the “forbidden territory” of the unconscious.⁴² As *body*, she stands for spaces – castles, roads, passageways, penetratable places. As *object*, she is eminently possessable, the site of a “mastery” within the anarchic discourse of the automatic. In lieu of such mastery over automatic textuality, it seems that the Surrealists settled for mastery over women’s bodies and psyches. Women are simultaneously seen as both closer to the site of the unconscious and as functioning as pressure valve for the uncanny/feminine aspects of automativity.⁴³ Such a logic of substitution drives Breton and Soupault’s second automatic text, “Soluble Fish,” which they had intended to publish simultaneously with the *First Manifesto*. Women surface persistently in “Soluble Fish,” written onto the landscape in the form of bottomless oceans, labyrinthine passageways, mysterious shipping crates, rivers of blood that “nothing can dry up,” a woman’s discarded veil from which flows milk and flowers; embodied as monstrous woman-animal hybrids, stinging insects, torture machines, the torso of a statue discovered floating out to sea.⁴⁴ Fishermen and police enthusiastically pursue “[t]he beautiful palpitating white breasts [of the torso which] had never belonged to a living creature of the sort that still haunts our desires,” but she eludes them, drifting ever-further from shore.⁴⁵ While women’s bodies seem to corporeally and abjectively power the twists and turns of the automatic textual flow, there is little sense of denouement, the “narrative” is, as it were, structured around a sequence of failed sexual encounters. Of the elusive torso, “[s]he was beyond our desires.”⁴⁶

Although woman is the site of an attempted mastery, she always slips away; she is always already lost. Of another nameless woman, Breton and Soupault write in “Soluble Fish”:

She is sleeping now, facing the boundlessness of my loves, in front of this mirror that earthly breathes cloud. It is when she is asleep that she truly belongs to me; I enter her dream like a thief and I truly lose her as one loses a crown.⁴⁷

and Allegory,” *Paris Dada: The Barbarians Storm the Gates*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Group, 2001) for a discussion of the process of reading an automatic text.

⁴² For a discussion of the “forbidden territory,” see Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” (1924), 16-18.

⁴³ See Briony Fer, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) for a discussion of the ways in which Surrealism figures women as bearers of access to the unconscious.

⁴⁴ André Breton, “Soluble Fish,” in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, eds. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 64.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ Breton, “Soluble Fish,” 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

As Briony Fer writes, “the mythology that Surrealism constructed for itself both focused on woman as other as closer to the unconscious than men, and attempted to inhabit the world of otherness, of the unconscious, from beyond its boundaries, in order to question what it saw as a morally bankrupt world.”⁴⁸ This inhabitation from beyond the boundaries was of course always destined for failure. We are reminded of Magritte’s photomontage *I do not see the woman hidden in the forest* (1929), in which photographs of male surrealists, their eyes closed (reminiscent of Man Ray’s photographs of the sleeping-fits) surround a painting of a nude woman’s body. Text above and below the nude read: *I do not see the* and *hidden in the forest*. In her very centrality to their discourse, she is of course doubly invisible – invisible because language itself seems inadequate facing the void of her psyche, the mass of her corporeality; invisible to their closed lids, she can enter only along the registers of fantasy. Reduced to weightless image, always already posited as mystery (“What do women really want?” asked Freud) she will be forever unseeable, unsignifiable, infinite, deadly – and the territory she harbors utterly impenetrable.

But although *Soluble Fish* envisions woman as a site of uneasy slippage, within its closing pages it enacts a grim narrative solution in order to gain mastery over her body and psyche. The story’s narrator begins an intimate relationship with a woman named Solange; while their waking hours together seem blissful (“[t]here was a call button for the realization of each of our desires and there was a time for everything,”) she seems to disappear in her sleep “between midnight and one o’clock.”⁴⁹ After one of these mysterious absences, the narrator discovers in her place the body of a woman “whose last convulsion I was able to witness by chance and who, by the time I had reached her, had ceased to breathe” lying in Solange’s place in bed.⁵⁰ It is not altogether clear whether the corpse belongs to the elusive Solange or someone else entirely – “Solange had not appeared all night, and yet this woman did not look like her, except for the little white shoes whose sole, where the toes went in, had imperceptible scratches like those of dancers.”⁵¹

Like the folktale from which it perhaps unconsciously derives (*The Twelve Dancing Princesses* and related tales) this is a story of unruly women who, through the dream, absent themselves from the lives of men. These women disappear from their beds and descend into an interior space to which men have no access (figured as an invisible castle beneath the earth in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*); their absence is traceable only through the “imperceptible scratches” on their shoes.⁵²

⁴⁸ Fer, 180.

⁴⁹ Breton, “Soluble Fish,” 107.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁵¹ Ibid., 109.

⁵² See “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* (available at Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.net/index.shtml>). This tale is analogous to the closing pages of “Soluble Fish” on many levels.

While the soldier-hero of the *Dancing Princesses* penetrates the dream through clever trickery in order to end the princesses' oneirical nighttime habits, the narrator of "Soluble Fish" penetrates Solange's psychical text only through her death, through an act of thievery ("I enter her dream like a thief") by which doppelgänger/corpse is substituted for living woman.⁵³

It is in fact only through this necrophiliac substitution that the narrator "escapes" and the story ends. Through an examination of Solange's waxen, splay-legged body, the narrator discovers a way out of the chamber within which he and the corpse are trapped – in the typical dream-logic of "Soluble Fish," "[m]y inspection had lasted only a few seconds, and I knew what I wanted to know. The walls of Paris, what is more, had been covered with posters showing a man masked with a black domino, holding in his left hand the key of the fields: this man was myself."⁵⁴ At the close of the automatic text, "man" has found his way into the dream, safely out of its forbidden territory, and back to himself as both "man" and "author." It is of course woman who functions as conduit for this alchemical dialectic, and her (dead) flesh its medium.

As one final note, we might reflect upon the way in which *the practice* of surrealist automatic writing was literally written upon and through women's bodies. In one of Man Ray's photographs of the sleeping fits, *Waking Dream Séance* (1924), Breton's wife, Simone, sits at the typewriter, taking dictation of the sleeping-fits, surrounded by the anxious faces of the Surrealists. Like many of the wives and lovers of Surrealists, she is both at the center of the autographic process and utterly unacknowledged. Her body, her hands at the typewriter, function as conduit for the automatic text; and thus literally she becomes "modest recording instrument." For all three vicissitudes of automatic writing I have mapped in this essay, Spiritualism, psychoanalysis, and surrealism, woman is situated at the center of a kind of discourse which ultimately does not belong to her. She can function only as automatic hand, only as mediator/medium, a telegraphic operator for textual producing machines.

Rachel Leah Thompson is a graduate student in the Ph.D. Program in Visual Studies at the University of California at Irvine. She is beginning work on a dissertation on crises of agency and authorship in literary and artistic practice within Modernity.

⁵³ See Bliss Cua Lim, "Serial Time: Bluebeard in Stepford," forthcoming in *Film and Literature: A Reader*, ed. Robert Stam (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Press, 2003) for a discussion of such folkloric substitutions.

⁵⁴ Breton, "Soluble Fish," 109.