

III. AUTOMATIC SPEAKING AND WRITING: – A STUDY

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III. Automatic Speaking and Writing: — A Study by Edward T. Bennett

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EDWARD T. BENNETT

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III. Automatic Speaking and
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AUTOMATIC SPEAKING AND WRITING:—A STUDY

BY C

EDWARD T. BENNETT

Assistant-Secretary to the Society for Psychical Research, 1882-1902

“Do ye know our Voices
Chanting down the Golden?
Do ye guess our Choice is
Being un beholden,
To be harkened by you yet again?”

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



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Automatic Speaking and Writing:—A Study.

CHAPTER I.

AUTOMATIC SPEAKING AND WRITING.

WE propose to start from the assumption that Automatic Speaking and Writing are ascertained facts. That is to say, that under certain circumstances, the human mouth will speak, and the human hand will write, without any conscious exercise of will power. By far the greater part of what is thus spoken and written has manifestly an intelligent source. The first great problem to be solved is—Who, or what, is the intelligence at the back of the phenomena? No one who has made even a superficial study of the subject will be disposed to question the fairness of the above statement of the case.

Among the great variety of phenomena broadly classed as psychical, there is no other that appears to be so easily elicited as that of automatic writing. It would be rare to find a group of five or six persons in which a moderate amount of patience and perseverance would not develop the "faculty" or "gift" in one or more. Hence it affords great facility for study. The simplest plan is for a person to take a pencil and a sheet of paper, and sit down as if going to write a letter, but to sit passively, and see whether the hand begins to move, apparently of itself. The most frequent experience is that illegible scribbles, or endless convolutions, are made, often with considerable energy. It is as if a new force was trying to control the hand. After a few trials, definite letters, words and sentences are frequently evolved out of the chaos. A commencement is often facilitated by the hand of another person being gently laid on the hand of the person holding the pencil. Planchette, and various other mechanical contrivances, are merely

means and devices for development, and possess no virtue in themselves. The present writer has seen far more interesting results from the use of the pencil alone than from any of these helps. The automatic writer who has once fairly started is generally soon convinced that his own unaided normal intelligence is not sufficient to explain all that flows from his hand. Though whether the intelligence springs from some hidden and unsuspected source in his own being, or whether its origin must be looked for outside, is a question which may remain unanswered for many a long day.

Automatic writing, when it can be practised with facility, is a very fascinating pursuit. In this direction some danger lies. In every fascinating pursuit there is the danger of practice being carried to excess, and of time and attention being absorbed which ought to be devoted to other matters. The well-balanced mind must always be on the watch for this, in regard to a variety of studies and recreations. But there is a further and special danger in automatic writing, and here a word of warning is necessary. It is exceedingly common for automatic writing to take the form of messages and communications from deceased relatives and friends, signed with the names of the professed communicators. The question whether such messages are what they profess to be is not now under consideration. But if the automatist believes them to be so, and if, under the influence of such belief, he allows them to obtain an influence over him, a situation is produced which may lead to serious results. Even granting that such messages emanate from their professed source, their intrinsic value is still another question. An almost irresistible impulse arises to invest what is said or advised with authority. Whereas a great and gratuitous assumption is involved in concluding that the advice given is necessarily sound, and ought to be implicitly followed. Judgment should be as much exercised as in receiving advice from any ordinary friend or relative. We would say plainly, that if the automatist finds himself getting to look upon the messages as being in any sense infallibly inspired, he is in a dangerous position, and his only safe course is to give up the practice of automatic writing, at all events for a time. In one or two recent books a grossly exaggerated view of the danger attendant on investigations of this kind has been put forward. To counteract such, the two following opinions are quoted. The first is from Mr. F. W. H. Myers, and the second is from an automatic, or, as the spiritualists would say, a "trance" speaker of much experience.

During twenty-seven years I have personally observed at least fifty cases where there was every reason to suppose that the writing was genuinely automatic. . . . This number is sufficient to enable me to generalise as to the effects of this practice on healthy persons, rather less inadequately than writers who generalise from mere hearsay, or from observations of hospital patients. In two cases, I think that the habit of automatic writing (carried on in spite of my warning) by persons over whom I had no influence, may have done some little harm owing to the obstinate belief of the writers that the obvious trash which they wrote was necessarily true and authoritative. In the remaining cases no apparent harm was done; nor, so far as I know, was there any ill-health or disturbance in connection with the practice. Several of the writers were persons both physically and mentally above the average level. . . . So far as my experience goes, I do not see that planchette-writing has any connection with disease of mind or body, or any tendency to evil of any kind, except in a few cases of great credulity—which it is to be hoped—is now becoming somewhat less common.*

The other writer says:—

My advice has been sought regarding a sensitive, who has developed as an automatic writer, and has become so absorbed in the exercise of her powers that she seems to think of hardly anything else. Ordinary duties are performed in a perfunctory and absent-minded way, and little interest is shown in other people, or the affairs of daily life. Naturally her friends are becoming anxious. . . . If I could speak to the lady I should probably say to her:—

You are acting unwisely in devoting so much time and thought to your writing, and your spirit-friends must be either thoughtless or indifferent, or unaware of the effect of their influence upon you. In any case it is your duty to others as well as to yourself to act more discreetly and temperately, and not to shut yourself off from *this* world, and your friends here, as you are doing. . . . In future, more definite, regular, and limited periods of time for the seances must be agreed upon. Except at such times, there must be no writing. . . . Let your intercourse with your friends "over there" be a series of happy interludes in the doings of this life, and do not seek to make it continuous. . . . This is God's world as much as the next. . . . He calls us to service. . . . Use your mediumship temperately, and it will bless you. Further developments will come as the result of conserving your energies, and working understandingly and wisely. Something of the sweeter spiritual life will glorify this world, and round out your spirit in joy, so that you will not take less but more—because deeper and truer—interest in everything and everybody here. Life will then be full of delight, for you will be strengthened to fulfil its duties by ministering spirits who seek to help you to be "faithful over a few things" here and now, that they may welcome you into the fuller life of usefulness in the beyond.†

* "Human Personality," Vol. ii. pp. 118 and 423.

† *Light*, July 16th, 1904. (110 St. Martin's Lane, London, W.C.)