The Undead Author: Spiritualism, Technology and Authorship

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In 1903, while attempting to argue that the poem ‘Leonainie’ was not an imitation of Poe but had actually been written by Poe himself, Alfred Russel Wallace compared the poem favourably to several of Poe’s later works, including ‘The Streets of Baltimore’ and ‘Farewell to Earth’. What is puzzling about this comparison is that neither of these poems is included in Poe’s collected works, as they were allegedly dictated to a spiritual medium thirteen years after Poe’s death, but according to Wallace these ‘spirit-poems’ are ‘finer and deeper and grander poems than any written by him in the earth-life’.¹ Shawn Rosenheim argues that these ‘spirit-poems’ represent an act of ‘plagiarism not of a text but of a cultural space Poe’s texts inhabit, of the ideogram of literary and social values summed up in his name’.² Rosenheim thus concludes that these poems threaten the stability of Poe’s literary identity, which prefigures a contemporary shift in our cultural definition of the literary artefact brought about by the development of new information technologies and the rise of telecommunications. The following chapter will extend this argument by examining the parallels between spiritualist writing practices, the development of new writing machines and changing notions of authorship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the modern spiritualist movement introduced a wide range of writing practices designed to enable communication with the dead. Because spiritual mediums were primarily engaged in the act of taking dictation from disembodied spirits during séances, stenography was considered a requisite skill, and spiritualist periodicals often included advertisements for stenography lessons. An advertisement in Medium and Daybreak, for example, claimed: ‘Everyone may learn SHORTHAND and be

enabled to take down the Valuable Communications received at Spirit-Circles. In order to increase the speed at which written information could be transmitted and recorded, spiritual mediums also employed a variety of new writing machines, including telegraphs and typewriters. Spiritualist writing practices thus revealed the degree to which spiritual mediums functioned as relays in the new circuits of technological communication. Just as switchboard operators were referred to as ‘automata’ around the turn of the century, so too were spiritual mediums conceived as human machines that enabled communication across vast distances. The rise of spiritual mediumship as a new occupation predominantly for women thus prefigured the late nineteenth-century shift that transformed clerical labour into women’s work.

The paradox of spiritualistic writing practices, is that the written word was still considered an expression of the author’s individual identity and agency, yet the writer was no longer the controlling consciousness of the text. These practices can be understood as a direct response to the rise of new writing machines in the nineteenth century, as they represented an attempt to preserve the authority of the written ‘I’ at the very moment when these new technologies were threatening to displace the autonomy and integrity of the writing subject. Through a close examination of the connections between the writing practices employed by spiritual mediums and the development of new writing machines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this chapter will thus approach the history of spiritualist writing practices as one of the earliest attempts to address the impact of mechanical writing on subjectivity and authorship.

The Death of the Author in the Age of Mechanical Writing

The history of spiritualist writing practices is particularly significant because it reveals fundamental parallels between the rise of mechanical writing and the poststructuralist critique of the metaphysical self-presence of the writing subject. Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay ‘The Death of the Author’, for example, argues that the writer’s subjectivity is essentially absent from the text: ‘Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.’ Barthes adds that modern writers openly acknowledge this absence by rejecting the antiquated notion of the text as a form of self-expression:

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3 ‘Phonography and Spiritualism’, Medium and Daybreak (15 February 1878): 110.
Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe ... that his hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently ... he must emphasize this delay and indefinitely ‘polish’ his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself.6

According to Barthes, therefore, the concept of the ‘Author’ is a product of a temporal delay between thought and inscription, which distances the writer from the text and allows for the illusion that the text represents an ‘expression’ of a unique individual. The ‘modern scriptor’, on the other hand, recognizes that writing is ‘a pure gesture of inscription’ whose origin is ‘language itself’; in other words, the act of writing is simply a function of the interface between language and an inscription technology. In his 1969 essay ‘What Is an Author?’, Michel Foucault similarly argues that the individual characteristics of the writer are absent from the text:

Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.7

For both Barthes and Foucault, therefore, the ‘death of the author’ signals the absence of the author’s unique identity and individuality. Gilles Deleuze formulates a similar theory by distinguishing between authors and writers: whereas an author is associated with the classical notion of writing as a form of self-expression, a writer simply ‘invents assemblages from the assemblages which invented him’.8 Like Barthes, therefore, Deleuze describes the writer as nothing more than a machine for processing written information.

Although the concept of the ‘death of the author’ was largely inspired by a new appreciation for the ways in which readers actively participate in the construction of meaning, it was also closely linked to the rise of mechanical writing. The notion that writing machines threaten authorial control is perhaps best expressed in Martin Heidegger’s lectures on Parmenides, in which he argues that handwriting alone is capable of expressing ‘the essence of man’: ‘Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this “advantage,” that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes

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6 Ibid., p. 146.
everyone look the same.’ According to Heidegger, in other words, mechanical writing effaces the identity of the writer by accelerating the speed of composition, transforming the text into a form of communication rather than an aesthetic experience, and eliminating the unique characteristics of handwriting. Friedrich Kittler similarly argues that mechanical writing effaces a writer’s individual personality, yet he maintains that the notion of handwriting as an expression of ‘the essence of man’ was simply an illusion. Echoing Eric Havelock’s assertion that ‘the concept of selfhood ... was inspired by a technological change, as the inscribed language and thought and the person who spoke it became separated from each other’, Kittler claims that ‘[t]he soul, the inner self, the individual ... were only the effects of an illusion, neutralized through the hallucination of reading and widespread literacy’. Writing machines dispelled this illusion of ‘the soul’, ‘the inner self’ and ‘the individual’ by separating the movement of the hand and the position of the eye from the place where the letters appear on the page. As a result, ‘the act of writing stops being an act of reading that is produced by the grace of a human subject’. Kittler supports this claim by pointing out that it was not until the 1890s that under-stroke or ‘blind’ typewriters were replaced by front-stroke machines that allowed typists to see the printed characters, yet this ‘innovation did not change the fact that typewriting can and must remain a blind activity’. Mark Seltzer similarly argues that the notion of writing as an expression of a subject’s interiority was dependent on the union of hand, eye and letter:

The linking of hand, eye and letter in the act of writing by hand intimates the translation from mind to hand to eye and hence from the inward and invisible and spiritual to the outward and visible and physical ... The typewriter, like the telegraph, replaces, or pressures, that fantasy of continuous transition with recalcitrantly visible and material systems of difference: with the standardized spacing of keys and letters; with the dislocation of where the hands work, where the letters strike and appear, where the eyes look, if they look at all.

By accelerating the speed of writing, severing the unity of hand, eye and letter, and introducing uniform letter-spacing, writing machines thus threatened the notion of writing as the expression of a writer’s inner thoughts.

The history of spiritualist writing practices provides a vivid illustration of the poststructuralist concept of the ‘death of the author’. By distinguishing between

10 Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, 1986), p. 120.
12 Ibid., pp. 203–4.
13 Ibid., p. 203.
the spirits who transmit written information and the mediums who transcribe it, spiritualist séances clearly support Deleuze’s distinction between authors and writers. The belief that these transcripts were dictated by famous literary figures who were continuing to produce literary works from beyond the grave also supports Foucault’s claim that the author has assumed ‘the role of the dead man in the game of writing’; in effect, these spirits were nothing more than a reification of the ‘author function’, which was entirely divorced from any actual person. The fact that the spiritual mediums who transcribed these posthumous works were seen as nothing more than relays in a telecommunication system also supports Barthes’ concept of the writer as a ‘modern scribe’ who transcribes texts without conscious mediation. Most importantly, the history of spiritualist writing practices illustrates how the concept of the ‘death of the author’ was linked to the rise of mechanical writing, as these practices were dependent on new writing machines that increased the speed of composition and separated the movement of the hand, the position of the eye and the place where the letters appeared on the page. Although spiritualists privileged the written word as proof of the continued survival of the author after death, their practices actually provide the earliest evidence of the death of the author in the age of mechanical writing.

**Spiritualist Writing Machines**

The origin of modern spiritualism is often identified as the famous ‘Hydesville rappings’ in 1848, when Margaret and Kate Fox began channelling spirits who answered questions by ‘rapping’ or ‘knocking’ on furniture. Their mother described the event as follows:

> My youngest child, Cathie, said: ‘Mr Splitfoot, do as I do,’ clapping her hands. The sound instantly followed her with the same number of raps ... I then asked: ‘Is this a human being that answers my questions so correctly?’ There was no rap. I asked: ‘Is it a spirit? If it is, make two raps.’ Two sounds were given as soon as the request was made. I then said: ‘If it was an injured spirit, make two raps,’ which were instantly made, causing the house to tremble. I asked: ‘Were you injured in this house?’ The answer was given as before. ‘Is the person living that injured you?’ Answered by raps in the same manner. I ascertained by the same method that it was a man, aged thirty-one years, that he had been murdered in this house, and his remains were buried in the cellar; that his family consisted of a wife and five children, two sons and three daughters, all living at the time of his death, but that his wife had since died.\(^{\text{15}}\)

The practice of ‘rapping’ actually pre-dates this event, as similar phenomena were reported as early as 1762 when Elizabeth Parsons claimed to have received messages

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from the spirit of a woman who died in her home on Cock Lane in London.\textsuperscript{16} However, the spiritualists were the first to recognize this practice as a new kinetic language, which they called ‘typtology’, a word coined from the Greek ‘tupto’ or ‘I strike’. Spiritual mediums who practised ‘rapping’ or ‘table-tipping’ were also commonly known as ‘typters’, a word that foreshadowed the term ‘typist’.

The practice of ‘typtology’ was directly inspired by the invention of the electrical telegraph. The ‘Hydesville rappings’ occurred only four years after the first successful telegraph link had been established between Baltimore and Washington, and the connection between Hydesville and the spirit world was initially described as a ‘spiritual telegraph’ between this world and the next. The spirits even claimed that the Fox household was ‘peculiarly suited to their purpose from the fact of its being charged with the aura requisite to make it a battery for the working of the telegraph’.\textsuperscript{17} Spiritualists also described mediumship as an improved form of electrical telegraphy. In 1849, for example, the Reverend Ashahel H. Jervis claimed that spirits notified him of the death of a friend’s son just hours before the actual telegram arrived. As if in response to Samuel Morse’s first telegraphic message, ‘What hath God wrought’, Jervis proclaimed that ‘God’s telegraph has outdone Morse’s altogether’.\textsuperscript{18} Nathaniel Draper also reported that the Fox sisters channelled the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, who enabled them to establish communication between two distant points by means of rapping.\textsuperscript{19} S.B. Brittan’s spiritualist newspaper, the aptly named \textit{Spiritual Telegraph}, provides numerous examples of such phenomena, such as a Mr West who successfully sent a message via spirits from New York to Philadelphia\textsuperscript{20} and an instance when spirits accurately reported the arrival of a steamer.\textsuperscript{21} These accounts were so convincing that in the 1850s Horace Greeley, editor of the \textit{New York Tribune}, offered $2,500 a year ‘to any “medium” or “spirit” who will furnish him with the Daily London news every night, so that it may appear in the “Tribune” next morning’.\textsuperscript{22} W.W. Aber’s 1906 \textit{Guide to Mediumship} claims that spirits were also capable of communicating through regular telegraph keys,\textsuperscript{23} and some mediums even opened their own telegraph offices, such as W.S. Rowley’s ‘Occult Telegraph’, which was reportedly

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\textsuperscript{16} See Andrew Lang, \textit{Cock Lane and Common-Sense} (London, 1894).
\textsuperscript{17} Emma Hardinge Britten, \textit{Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years’ Record of the Communion between Earth and the World of the Spirits} (New York, 1870), p. 29, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp. 91–5.
in daily use in Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 1880s. The notion that spiritualists had established a ‘spiritual telegraph’ with the dead was thus understood as more than a simple metaphor.

The notion that spirits could potentially serve as a valuable source of inexpensive labour clearly parallels the rise of telegraphists and typists as a newly emerging workforce, yet spiritualist writing practices were also linked to the rise of the so-called ‘electronic age’, when ‘the view of the machine as a benevolent superhuman which increased leisure and physical comfort became more compelling and more explicit’. The concept of the ‘spiritual telegraph’ was part of a utopian vision of a future in which labour would eventually become unnecessary, as spirits could provide a virtually inexhaustible source of energy. As one spiritualist proclaimed, ‘We live in a progressive age, and if the mind can revolve a disk, or write without human contact with the agents employed, we may yet develop its powers to a state wherein we can enjoy our *otium cum dignitate* in our easy chairs, and direct insensate matter to perform our manual labor’. In his essay ‘Post-Mortuum Soiree’, which recounts an early séance with the Fox sisters, Nathaniel Willis similarly predicted that humans would eventually find a way to harness the energy of the spirits:

*If we are all to have spirits at our command, such as are already proved to be able to shake chairs and move tables, there will soon come a Fulton or a Morse, who will put this ghost-power into harness, and it will follow Steam and Electricity in doing man’s work for him.*

The notion that spirits represented a potential energy reserve that could be accessed through media technologies thus prefigured Karl Marx’s famous description of machinery as ‘dead labour’.

Although their communication was initially limited to ‘yes or no’ questions, the Fox sisters’ older brother David introduced the idea of reciting the alphabet and having the spirits knock when the appropriate letter was reached. This practice, which became known as ‘alphabetical typtology’, was remarkably similar to the number-word code that Morse employed prior to the development of Morse code in 1838. In a memorandum sent to Levi Woodbury in 1837, for example, Morse describes a similar process of translating letters into numbers:

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The fullest and most precise information can be almost instantaneously transmitted between any two or more points, between which a wire conductor is laid: that is to say, no other time is consumed than is necessary to write the intelligence to be conveyed and to convert the words into the telegraphic numbers. The numbers are then transmitted nearly instantaneously ... to any distance, where the numbers are immediately recognised and reconverted into the words of the intelligence.\textsuperscript{30}

This was the original code that Morse devised in 1832, in which dots represented a quantity of one and dashes represented a quantity of five.\textsuperscript{31} One of the key similarities between alphabetical typtology and telegraphy, therefore, was the translation of letters into numbers, which fundamentally altered the nature of written communication by transforming the writer into a relay in a telecommunication system.

Although it was extremely time-consuming, alphabetical typtology allowed spirits to dictate full-text messages or even entire books. Aber’s 1906 \textit{Guide to Mediumship}, for example, describes how ‘a book of beautiful poems purporting to come from different well known poets, now in spirit life, was all given by this slow process’.\textsuperscript{32} The notion that pieces of furniture were potentially capable of generating literary texts also introduced a degree of confusion concerning the attribution of authorship. Michel Eugène Chevreul’s 1854 book \textit{De la baguette divinatoire}, for example, reported that a chair on the island of Guadeloupe was allegedly capable of composing works of poetry and prose, and he provided a copy of the following advertisement for one of the chair’s literary products: ‘JUANITA, a Novel, by a Chair, followed by a Proverb and some Select Pieces of the same Author ... The literary productions of the Chair are merely the preface of a mystic book, which it will unroll, page by page, before the dazzled eyes of the believers.’\textsuperscript{33} By emphasizing that the book ‘will unroll, page by page’ from the chair, this advertisement clearly represents the creation of literary texts through alphabetical typtology as a mechanical and automatic process of literary mass production that functions in the absence of an author.

Allen Kardec’s 1861 book \textit{The Book of Mediums} describes a wide range of methods used to accelerate the speed of information exchange with the spirit world. In another form of alphabetical typtology, for example, letters were written on the surface of a table and the sitter’s hand would pass over them until the spirits knocked:

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{30} Alfred Vail, \textit{The American Electro Magnetic Telegraph: With the Reports of Congress and a Description of All Telegraphs Known} (Philadelphia, 1845), p. 70, emphasis in original.
\item\textsuperscript{31} Carleton Mabee, \textit{The American Leonardo: A Life of Samuel F.B. Morse} (Fleischmanns, 2000), p. 203.
\item\textsuperscript{32} Aber, \textit{A Guide to Mediumship}, pp. 44–5.
\item\textsuperscript{33} Michel Eugène Chevreul, \textit{De la baguette divinatoire, du pendule dit explorateur et des tables tournantes, au point de vue de l’histoire, de la critique et de la méthode expérimentale} (Paris, 1854), p. 3.
\end{itemize}
Through practice one attempts to find the simplest means, which permits one to proceed with a certain rapidity. The one most commonly used consists in having an alphabet written out before oneself, as well as a series of numbers. While the medium is at the table, another person runs over the letters of the alphabet in succession, if a word is in question, or the numbers, if a number is in question; when the necessary letter is reached, the table knocks, and the letter is written down; then the process continues for the 2nd, the 3rd, and so forth.\textsuperscript{34}

By allowing each knock to signify a different character, this practice eliminated the need for a number-word code, which paralleled the telegraphic innovations introduced by David Edward Hughes’s ‘printing telegraph’ in 1855. Kardec also describes séances employing dial plates with letters inscribed along their circumference. A moveable needle, set in motion by the medium’s influence, points to letters in rapid succession:

\begin{quote}
In order to assure more independence from the thoughts of the medium, one can imagine various instruments consisting of dials with letters traced on them in the manner of the electric telegraph. A moving pointer, set in motion by the influence of the medium with the help of a conducting wire and a pulley indicates the letters.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Kardec thus compared these devices to the dial telegraph, which was developed by Charles Wheatstone in 1839. This connection was made even more explicit in Isaac T. Pease’s ‘spiritual telegraph dial’, which appeared in 1854:

\begin{quote}
The apparatus is contrived with a dial-face, on which are marked the letters of the alphabet, the numerals, the words ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ and other convenient signs. A moveable hand, or pointer, is fixed in the centre; ‘and when a ghost wants to communicate with its pupils and friends in the body, all that is requisite is, for it to give a gentle twitch to the pointer, and the revelation is accomplished.’ Mr. Pease states, ‘that with a good tipping medium to facilitate the movements of the pointer by agitating the table, letters will be indicated to the dial as fast as an amanuensis can write it down.’\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Many similar devices were marketed in the late nineteenth century, such as Hudson Tuttle’s ‘psychograph’, which was small, easy to mail and highly affordable.

These dials inspired several scientists to conduct their own experiments. One of the most prominent scientists to investigate spiritualist writing phenomena was Robert Hare, who was a chemistry professor at the University of Pennsylvania, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and an honorary member

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\textsuperscript{34} Allen Kardec [Léon Hippolyte Denisart Rivail], \textit{Le Livre des Médiums} (Paris, 1922), pp. 178–9, author’s translation.  \\
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 180.  \\
\end{flushright}
of the Smithsonian Institution. In his 1855 book *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations*, Hare describes a séance during which spirit messages continued to be received by the medium even after she had directed her eyes away. He then devised his own test apparatus, which he called the ‘spiritoscope’, by adding various pulleys and weights to Pease’s ‘spiritual telegraph dial’ and reversing the face of the dial such that the medium could not ‘see the index or the letters, and consequently cannot control the spelling of spirits, so as to give results from her own mind instead of theirs’. Hare’s experiment represents perhaps the most extreme example of how mechanical writing severed the connection between hand, eye and letter, and his findings corroborated the spiritualists’ distinction between the author of a text and its writer.

Alphabetical typtology was soon followed by other writing practices, such as ‘planchette writing’, which emerged in France in the early 1850s. Planchette writing began in the form of a small basket with a pencil attached, which would be placed on a sheet of paper. When sitters touched the basket, it would move independently and the pencil would allegedly transcribe messages from the spirits. The basket was later replaced by a small, triangular piece of wood supported by two wheels and a pencil, which was known as a ‘planchette’ (French for ‘little board’). The planchette was essentially a miniature table that replicated the ‘table-turning’ phenomena that traditionally occurred during spiritualist séances. It may have also been inspired by the electrical telegraph, as Morse’s original prototype similarly employed a pencil fastened to a magnet that inscribed marks on a moving paper ribbon. Unlike the telegraph, however, the planchette recorded information in the form of a continuous line that more closely resembled handwriting, and the identity of spirit authors could be verified through an analysis of either content or handwriting style. In 1853, for example, Governor Nathaniel P. Tallmadge of Wisconsin attended a séance during which he was contacted by a spirit friend, the late South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, who induced the planchette to write ‘I’m with you still’. Tallmadge claimed that this message was not only an exact ‘facsimile’ of Calhoun’s handwriting, but the contraction ‘I’m’ was so distinctive of Calhoun’s personal writing style that the message could not have been forged. The practice of planchette writing thus illustrates the paradox of spiritualist writing experiments: by reflecting the personal style of the author, while at the same time eliminating any trace of the medium who physically composed the message, planchette writing simultaneously reaffirmed and disavowed the notion that the act of writing represented a form of self-expression. This paradox was further emphasized by the fact that the planchette was typically operated by several people at the same time, yet the text was seen as the product of a single controlling intelligence.

In the 1880s the practice of planchette writing was combined with alphabetical typtology to form the ‘new planchette’, which was patented in 1891 as the ‘Ouija’

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board – the most famous spiritualist writing machine ever invented. This ‘talking board’ employed the same triangular piece of wood, yet it functioned as a pointer rather than a pencil-holder. When sitters placed their hands on the device, it slid across a wooden board with letters and numbers printed on it, spelling out words or even complete sentences. The Ouija board thus combined the practices of planchette writing and alphabetical typtology by replacing the aura of handwriting with the transmission of discrete letters.

The practice of ‘slate writing’ was similarly based on the notion that spirits could manipulate writing instruments and compose full-text messages in their own distinctive handwriting, and the authenticity of these messages was determined either by their content or, more often, by comparing the handwriting style with documents written by the alleged authors during their lifetimes. One of the leading exponents of slate writing was William Eglinton, whose sittings became the subject of considerable debate within the Society for Psychical Research in the 1880s. Eglinton often convinced sitters that the practice of slate writing was genuine by placing his slates face down on a table or by pressing the slates against table-leaves, yet Ronald Pearsall notes a variety of methods he employed to distract or misdirect the sitters’ attention so that the slates could be switched or messages could be surreptitiously inscribed by the medium himself without the sitters’ awareness. Some mediums also employed trick tables containing secret sliding pieces that allowed the medium to write messages from underneath.  

The practice of ‘spirit typewriting’ first emerged in the 1890s. In 1893, for example, a spiritualist newspaper reported that during a séance with the medium Lizzie Bangs a Smith Premier typewriter started to write by itself:

*I feel confident in saying the medium does not touch the typewriter at all; it is used independent of or without contact from the medium’s hands or fingers ... There is no holding or hesitating in the action of the machine; on the contrary, you hear that it is operated with an astonishing degree of swiftness and dexterity.*

As with alphabetical typtology and slate writing, therefore, spirit typewriting was employed to convey messages from lost loved ones – in this case, the sitter’s dead son. The messages conveyed also reflected the nature of mechanical writing, as the reporter emphasized the professional appearance of the typewritten scripts: ‘In mechanical execution this independent type-writing ... is done in a neat, clean, business-like manner, and although a punctilious critic could point out some errors in punctuation, & c., the performance is as good as the letters one receives from first-class business houses.’  

In other words, the typewriter was not simply operated by the spirit of the sitter’s dead son, but rather the message was dictated by the spirit to the machine itself, which apparently possessed the same skills as a professional secretary or amanuensis. These typewriter manifestations thus illustrate the threat

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42 Ibid.
that mechanical writing posed to the classical notion of authorship: while they appeared to confirm the presence of the author through the production of written texts, they also revealed the depersonalized nature of mechanical writing, as the author was effectively displaced by the machine.

During another séance with Bangs in 1896, the witnesses testified that ‘it would have been a physical impossibility for her to have, in any way, touched the key-board’, as the séance took place in total darkness. The sitters also conducted a test by asking a typewriter salesman to type a document in the dark: ‘Not a single syllable of what the gentleman wrote was correct; there was no sense to the lines, but simply a confused conglomeration of letters, figures, and punctuations. We were fully satisfied, as was the poor man himself, that beyond a doubt what we had got could not be done by mortal [sic].’ Despite his skills in salesmanship, in other words, the test subject had clearly not been trained in ‘touch typing’, a technique that enabled typists to write without looking at the typewriter keys. This test thus reveals how mechanical writing was perceived as a kind of out-of-body experience, as it detached the act of writing from the act of seeing. As with Bangs’ earlier séance, the message she received also resembled a form of business communication from an ethereal receptionist or switchboard operator:

Although we are not able at this hour to bring you in direct communion with your individual friends from the higher side of life, I trust that the manifestation of this writing will serve as evidence to you that under proper conditions nothing is impossible with the spirit ... I shall be pleased to again meet you in this way, and doubt not that I shall be able to bring you in communion with those near you on the other side of life.

Although the reporter claimed that this message provided ‘most wonderful evidence of the persistence of individual self-consciousness after death’, its impersonal nature once again illustrates the dehumanizing effects of mechanical writing and the displacement of the author by the machine.

A similar manifestation took place at Carnegie Hall in 1895 during a séance with a Chicago spiritualist named Dr Rogers. Rogers designed a cabinet with two compartments separated by metal bars. While he sat in one of these compartments, a Yost typewriter was placed in the other compartment at a distance of three or four feet. During the performance the audience could hear the sounds of the typewriter, and a witness peered behind the curtain to confirm that the typewriter was indeed typing on its own like a player piano. The reporter similarly confirmed that it was impossible for Rogers to reach the typewriter through the metal bars, and, even if he had, it would have been impossible for such messages to be

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43 Quaestor Vitae, ‘Type-Writing Without Human Contact’, Light (25 January 1896): 43–5, p. 44.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., p. 44.
written in total darkness. Rogers’ séance thus illustrates the uncanny aspects of mechanical writing, as the darkened cabinet and the metal bars simply exaggerate the separation of hand, eye and letter that the typewriter itself already embodied. It is also significant that the Yost typewriter, like the Smith Premier, was a ‘blind’ or ‘understroke’ machine, whose typebars were housed inside an enclosed black cylinder. When the keys were pressed, the typebars would strike against the bottom of the platen, entirely out of the typist’s field of vision, and it was only when the paper was removed from the machine that the printed letters could be seen. Like the cabinet, therefore, the typewriter also represented a miniature darkened room, and it thus enabled the same kinds of manifestations that occurred in the darkened rooms of spiritualist séances.

The fact that Rogers employed a Yost typewriter during his séances was far from coincidental, as the typewriter’s inventor, George Washington Newton Yost, was both a devoted spiritualist and a close personal friend of the medium. Yost was also an important figure within the typewriter industry, as he helped to convince Remington to produce the Sholes & Glidden typewriter and he formed both the American Writing Machine Company and the Union Typewriter Company, which was incorporated the year before his death. Unfortunately, Yost passed away two months before Rogers’ Carnegie Hall performance, yet his obituary testified to his life-long belief that typewriters could facilitate communication with the dead:

> Although a shrewd man of business, Mr Yost had a tendency in his nature which led him into abstract speculation and made of him a devoted Spiritualist. With a Chicago Spiritualist named Dr Rogers, he formed a great friendship, believing that the doctor was able to communicate with the spirits of the dead and to record these conversations and interviews upon the typewriter. In spite of the conviction of his friends that Dr Rogers imposed upon him, Mr. Yost maintained his intimacy with Dr Rogers in particular and his belief in Spiritualism in general to the last moment of his life.

Had he lived for another year Yost would have witnessed Rogers’ subsequent arrest for fraud, yet his combined interest in spiritualism and typewriters clearly illustrates the close connections between the history of spiritualist writing practices and the rise of new writing machines. Mechanical writing not only effaced the personality of the writer, which encouraged spiritualists to imagine that the texts generated during séances were dictated by disembodied spirits, but it also inspired fantasies of literary automation. By producing vast quantities of written material with only minimal human labour, the practice of spirit typewriting mirrored the industrial system that mass-produced the machines themselves, while at the same time providing fantastic visual spectacles that simultaneously functioned as a form of corporate advertising.

Christopher Latham Sholes, the inventor of the first commercial typewriter, was an avid spiritualist as well. He not only believed in the possibility of communicating with the dead, but he even founded his own spiritualist community, the Excelsior Church, which was devoted to this cause. Like Yost, Sholes also remained committed to spiritualism throughout his career. In 1888, only two years before his death, he wrote to a friend: ‘The great use of these manifestations ... is to teach a doubting world that life does continue.’

Spiritualist writing practices also had a tremendous impact on his invention. His first prototype, built in July 1867, was nothing more than a telegraph key fixed such that the typebar would strike up against a glass plate. Sholes then constructed a typewheel by placing a similar key for each letter of the alphabet on the rim of a circle so that each one was capable of striking the centre. By September Sholes had developed a larger model capable of printing the entire alphabet. Sholes referred to this machine as his ‘kitchen table model’, as it was essentially a table with a hole in the centre and a circle of letters printed on one side of the flat surface. A sheet of paper would be placed over the hole, and when the letters were pressed typebars would strike the paper from underneath. This device, which was patented in 1868 as the ‘Sholes, Glidden and Soule Type-Writer’, not only represents the origin of ‘understrike’ technology, but also illustrates how the typewriter incorporated various occult engineering principles. The typebars on Sholes’ apparatus would strike the bottom of the table when a particular letter was pressed, just as the spirits would allegedly ‘rap’ or ‘knock’ against a table when a medium’s hand passed over a particular letter. The circular arrangement of the letters on Sholes’ apparatus also replicated the ‘spiritual dials’ developed by Pease and Hare in the 1850s. The typed messages also appeared on the underside of a sheet of paper pressed against the surface of the table, just as spirit messages appeared during slate writing. The typewriter thus represented the ultimate realization of the ‘spiritual telegraph’, which explains why it was so easily incorporated into spiritualist writing practices in the 1890s.

**Mediums, Secretaries and the Literature of the Séance**

Spiritualist writing practices were not only inspired by the rise of new writing machines in the nineteenth century, but they also provided the earliest evidence of the impact of mechanical writing on subjectivity and authorship. The connections between the poststructuralist concept of the ‘death of the author’ and the rise of new writing machines can clearly be seen by examining the automatic scripts produced during séances, where spiritual mediums transcribed messages dictated by the spirits of dead authors. As with planchette and slate writing, the authenticity of these scripts was often established through an analysis of either their content or their appearance. Hester Dowden, a medium who allegedly transcribed messages

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from the spirit of Oscar Wilde, claimed that these messages contained ‘three separate proofs’ that the author was not herself: ‘First, similar handwriting; secondly, his style ... and thirdly, his ideas.’\textsuperscript{50} In order to show the resemblance between Wilde’s handwriting and her own automatic scripts, Dowden’s book included a sample of Wilde’s own handwriting (see Figure 3.1). Dowden also claimed that her automatic scripts were produced ‘at a speed which far exceeds that of the fastest writing’,\textsuperscript{51} which precluded the possibility of conscious manipulation. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was thoroughly convinced that Dowden’s automatic scripts were authentic because of their frequent allusions to colours, which he saw as characteristic of Wilde’s personal style. Dowden’s automatic scripts also contained several humorous phrases written in a uniquely Wildean manner, such as the following: ‘Being dead is the most boring experience in life. That is if one excepts being married, or dining with a schoolmaster’ (see Figure 3.2).\textsuperscript{52} Doyle also claimed that Dowden’s automatic scripts reflected ‘certain curious little tricks of spacing which were usual with him in life’.\textsuperscript{53} He thus saw these scripts as pieces of evidence that needed to be examined not only for their content, but also for their appearance.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.1.png}
\caption{‘Oscar Wilde’s handwriting’, in Hester Dowden, \textit{Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde} (London: T.W. Laurie, 1924), p. 169.}
\end{figure}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{in a very}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushleft}
\textit{doing; come: 1}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{are you and see}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushleft}
\textit{am a time 8}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{an the apparel 8}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushleft}
\textit{much interest to reading them:}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{they can and present themselves}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Believe me, Billy, your Oscar Wilde.}
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{50} Hester Dowden [Hester Travers Smith], \textit{Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde} (London, 1924), p. 139.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 107.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{53} Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, \textit{The Edge of the Unknown} (New York, 1930), p. 100.
While many of the texts produced during séances attempted to preserve the classical notion of authorship by reaffirming the spiritualists’ belief in the autonomy and integrity of the author, some explicitly challenged this notion. For example, in ‘Farewell to Earth’, a poem allegedly dictated by the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe to a medium named Lizzie Doten, the deceased author describes the dissolution of his personality as his soul transcends to a higher plane of existence where he will no longer be able to communicate with the living:

Thus, O Sons of Earth, I leave you! – leave you for that higher light; And my charge is now, Receive you all my parting words aright: Human passion, mad ambition, bound me to this lower Earth, Even in my changed condition – even in my higher birth. But, by earnest, firm endeavor, I have gained a height sublime; And I ne’er again – no, never! – shall be bound to Space or Time; I have conquered! and forever! Let the bells in triumph chime!

Lizzie Doten, Poems from the Inner Life (Boston, 1869), p. 170.
The obvious contradiction in this passage is that Poe’s ability to transmit literary texts from beyond the grave should indicate that he is no longer bound to space or time, yet his desire to continue writing still keeps him bound to this world. The autonomy and integrity of the author are therefore cast here in a negative light, as they prevent the author from attaining a higher state of spiritual transcendence. By relinquishing the position of author, Poe claims that ‘I have merged and lost my will in the Great Will of the universe’. The poem thus conflates the idea of spiritual transcendence with the concept of the ‘death of the author’ by calling for a new model of literary production in which the author becomes a conduit for ‘the Great Will of the universe’, much like the spiritual medium who effaces her own identity in the act of taking dictation from disembodied spirits.

By introducing a distinction between the author of a text and its writer, spiritualist writing practices implied that anyone could become a writer as long as they remained sufficiently passive, which was true for spiritual mediums as well as professional typists. Wilde’s spirit was drawn to Dowden, for example, because her mind was a complete blank: ‘I must have a clear brain to work with. It must let my thoughts flow through as fine sand might if filtered through a glass cylinder.’ The spirit of Oscar Wilde even described Dowden as ‘a perfect aeolian lyre that can record me as I think’. Doten similarly claimed that the role of the writing medium was to achieve a ‘state of exaltation – a state in which mediums readily receive inspiration, and render the poems with the least interference of their own intellect’. Doten also described her body as a musical instrument: ‘I was, for the time being, like a harp in the hands of superior powers, and just in proportion as my entire nature was attuned to thrill responsive to their touch, did I give voice and expression to their unwritten music.’ Some mediums employed more technological metaphors. Just as the word ‘typewriter’ originally referred to both the machine and its operator, for example, Madame Blavatsky was described as a ‘human typewriter’ because her Theosophical text *Isis Unveiled* was allegedly dictated to her by spirits. As one observer noted, she ‘loaned her body as one might one’s typewriter’. Doyle similarly compared spiritual mediums to typewriters in order to explain why the posthumous works dictated by dead authors sometimes seemed inferior to the work they produced during their lifetimes: ‘Even a typewriter under my own control, causes me, I find, to lose something of my sureness of touch, and how much more would it be if it were an unstable human machine which I was endeavouring to operate.’ The practice of automatic writing thus did not necessarily require the use of writing machines like the planchette or the typewriter.

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55 Ibid., p. 158.
56 Ibid., p. 36.
57 Ibid., p. 37.
58 Ibid., p. xix.
59 Ibid., p. xii.
61 Doyle, *The Edge of the Unknown*, p. 96.
but it effectively transformed the spiritual medium into a ‘human typewriter’ or ‘human machine’ capable of generating literary texts without conscious mediation.

Theodora Bosanquet’s career provides perhaps the most vivid illustration of the connections between spiritualist writing practices, mechanical writing and secretarial labour. Bosanquet worked as Henry James’s amanuensis from 1907 until his death in 1916, and she was also a practising medium who continued to transcribe messages from James on her typewriter long after his death. In her 1927 memoir *Henry James at Work*, Bosanquet employed spiritualist terms to describe herself, claiming that she was ‘acting as a medium between the spoken and the typewritten word’. In the process of learning to type on a new Remington, she also described the typewriter as having a ‘vicious influence ... over the spelling of the operator’, as if the machine were a conscious entity. Bosanquet’s automatic writing experiments first began in 1933, seventeen years after James’s death. Bosanquet first attended a séance with Dowden, during which James’s spirit asked her to resume working for him. James’s spirit also claimed that there was no fundamental difference between spiritualist writing practices and their early method of taking dictation: ‘You remember my methods when I was dictating to you. The hesitation before the word chosen was preferred to subsequent correction and I shall hope to be as definite and precise now that I am dictating from a different condition.’ A few weeks after this séance, James’s spirit once again encouraged Bosanquet to facilitate ‘a lending of the mind to follow mine’, which would allow him ‘to produce an instrument ... as efficient as my secretary’s typewriter’. Echoing Dowden’s advice for writing mediums, therefore, Bosanquet was encouraged to remain passive, which would effectively enable her to become a ‘human typewriter’. Bosanquet’s acts of transcription as secretary and medium thus represent the same fundamental phenomenon: the integration of the writer into a network of technological communication, which displaces her identity as the controlling consciousness of the text.

The distinction between authors and writers introduced in spiritualist séances was often linked to gender roles, as the deceased authors were typically male and the spiritual mediums who transcribed their messages were typically female. Women were considered better suited for mediumship, for example, because ‘the feminine mind ... is more plastic’, and the men who practised mediumship

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63 Ibid.
64 Theodora Bosanquet, ‘Notes on a Sitting with Mrs Hester Dowden, Feb. 15, 1933’, Bosanquet Files, Box 2, Archives of the Society for Psychical Research, Cambridge University Library.
65 Theodora Bosanquet, ‘Automatic Writing through Mrs Dowden, Evening of March 13th, 1933’, Bosanquet Files, Box 2, Archives of the Society for Psychical Research, Cambridge University Library.
were often seen as effeminate due to their passivity. Pamela Thurschwell argues, however, that mediums and secretaries still possessed a certain degree of ‘agency’ or ‘knowledge’ that ‘threatens any concept of unmediating mediumship’.

Thurschwell points out, for example, that Bosanquet’s automatic writings represent ‘a see-saw between desires to extinguish her own personality in the service of some great work of literary and cultural post-death transmission and her desires to write for herself and her livelihood’. Thurschwell thus concludes that Bosanquet was not simply seeking to preserve James’s literary authority, but rather that her writings represent a ‘fantasy of recognition – James will finally read what she has written – no longer just his voice coming through her but her speaking to him’. Helen Sword similarly argues that Dowden’s ‘claim to intellectual passivity belies a creative agency and an iconoclastic impulse’, and she even describes spiritualist writing practices as a ‘daughterly revolt’ against the ‘dead white men’ of the English literary canon. However, the close connection between spiritualist writing practices and mechanical writing reveals the contradictory nature of this empowerment, as the preservation of literary authority was dependent on the loss of that authority in the act of writing. While Bosanquet’s automatic scripts may reflect an unconscious desire to claim the privileged position of the author for herself, this goal was fundamentally at odds with her writing practices, which were based on a rejection of the notion that writing was a form of self-expression. Because spiritualist writing practices required spiritual mediums to relinquish their own identities, writers and writing machines effectively became interchangeable. Spiritualist writing practices thus attempted to preserve the autonomy and integrity of the author while simultaneously effacing the identity and agency of the writer.

Automatic Writing and the Subliminal Self

By revealing the instability of the writer’s identity and the ability of the writer to produce literary texts without conscious mediation, spiritualist writing practices effectively introduced the phenomenon that clinical psychologists later termed ‘dissociation of personality’. In 1884, for example, British psychical researcher Frederic W.H. Myers conducted an experiment in which the test subject generated surprising and unexpected answers to questions he posed to himself, which took the form of anagrams or puzzles that needed to be deciphered. In one instance, the

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69 Ibid., p. 17.


71 Ibid., pp. 42–3.
subject unconsciously answered the question ‘What is man?’ with the anagram ‘Tefi Hasl Esble Lies’, which he interpreted as either ‘Life is the less able’ or ‘Every life is yes’:

The desire for an answer was sufficient in the first place to put brain and muscles in motion. A desire soon arose to avoid the effect of expectancy. To meet this desire the brain unconsciously formed anagrams; one of these anagrams, ‘Life is the less able,’ is a sentiment only too frequently met with in the spiritualistic literature which I had been lately reading. The other, ‘Every life is yes,’ is similarly derived from Spinoza, whom I had just been reading ... Thus both these expressions were imbedded in my brain by late reading, and this fact supports the supposition of [unconscious cerebration] being the agent.72

Myers claimed that this experiment provided ‘for the first time, perhaps, in psycho-physical discussions, an instance of a sane and waking man holding a colloquy, so to speak, with his own dream; an instance, that is to say, where the unconscious cerebral action was not subordinated to the conscious’.73 Based on these experiments, Myers postulated the existence of a ‘secondary’ or ‘subliminal self’, which he defined as ‘a latent capacity ... 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 delirium or a dream – but may possess, for a time at least, a kind of continuous individuality, a purposive activity of its own’74

Writing experiments quickly became an important clinical tool for examining the phenomenon of multiple selves. In 1886, the French psychologist Pierre Janet showed that patients under hypnosis often assumed alternate personalities, and each of these personalities possessed its own unique handwriting style. Janet also recorded experiments in which the hand of a patient could be induced to write texts while the patient was not consciously aware of the hand’s performance. Such phenomena clearly paralleled spiritualist writing experiments, in which mediums similarly surrendered control of their hands. In his 1889 book Psychological Automatism, Janet even acknowledged the connections between this occult tradition and his own clinical studies: ‘The essential point of spiritualism is ... the dissociation of psychological phenomena and the formation, below the level of perception, of a second series of thoughts not attached to the first.’75 Theodore Flournoy, a professor of psychology at the University of Geneva, employed a similar approach in his 1900 book From India to Planet Mars, which focused on the writing experiments

74 Ibid., p. 27.
of a French medium named Hélène Smith. Smith’s handwriting often changed during séances, and Flournoy concluded that this phenomenon was an ‘effect of autosuggestion’ produced by ‘the autohypnotization of the séances’, which enabled the emergence of a ‘secondary self’.  

Flournoy’s investigation of spiritualist writing practices thus corroborated Janet’s discovery that changes in handwriting occur in hypnotized subjects, which reveals how spiritualism and psychology were seen as complementary and antagonistic fields of study in the late nineteenth century. Spiritualists and psychologists both approached the act of writing as a privileged site where the instabilities of human identity could be observed and scrutinized. Unlike spiritualists, however, psychologists explicitly rejected the notion that spiritualist writing practices provided proof of the survival of human personality after death. The practice of automatic writing was thus increasingly understood as the product of a pathological condition.

The connection between automatic writing and the ‘death of the author’ may seem obvious, as Barthes explicitly cites Surrealism as an example of a new model of authorship that openly rejects authorial agency.  

Foucault’s claim that in the absence of an ‘author function’, discourse would ‘develop in the anonymity of a murmur’ also echoes André Breton’s famous ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, which encourages Surrealist writers to employ automatic writing techniques: ‘Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written ... Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur.’

The practice of automatic writing was thus based on the principle of speed: writing should be performed as quickly as possible, without any conscious attention, without rereading, and without any memory of what has already been written in order to enable the formation of unconscious associations. Breton was clearly aware of the similarities between spiritualist and Surrealist writing practices; not only did he recognize Hélène Smith as the ‘muse of automatic writing’ in the Surrealist card game ‘Jeu de Marseille’, but he even argues in his 1933 essay ‘The Automatic Message’ that these are the same methods ‘towards which the surrealist poet must tend’. Breton adds, however, that there is also an important difference between spiritualist and Surrealist writing practices: ‘[C]ontrary to what spiritualism proposes – that is, the dissociation of the subject’s psychological personality – Surrealism proposes nothing less than the unification of that personality.’

Like psychologists, in other words, Surrealists recognized that the practice of automatic writing represented a form of communication not with

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77 Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 144.
78 Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ p. 160.
81 Ibid.
disembodied spirits, but rather with the ‘subliminal’ or ‘secondary self’. Surrealists thus attempted to exploit the artistic possibilities of spiritualist writing practices by recognizing the ‘subliminal self’ as a potential source of creative inspiration.

The practice of automatic writing was also associated with the rise of new writing machines. Myers, for example, compared the ‘subliminal self’ to a telegraphist:

> Since the subliminal self, like the telegraphist, begins its efforts with full knowledge, indeed, of the alphabet, but with only weak and rude command over our muscular adjustments, it is likely that its easiest mode of communication will be through a repetition of simple movements, so arranged as to correspond to the letters of the alphabet. And here, I think, we have attained to a conception of the mysterious and much-derided phenomenon of ‘table tilting.’

Myers thus dismissed the notion of alphabetical typtology as communication with the dead, yet remained convinced that automatic writing was not a fraudulent practice, as it represented an expression of the ‘subliminal self’. Myers also pointed out that automatic writing is much easier with the planchette because the delicacy of the instrument enables it to amplify even the slightest muscular actions. The speed of the typewriter similarly allowed writers to develop unconscious associations:

> Constantly, when using my typewriter, it has happened to me to find a difficulty in pressing a key, so great a difficulty as to oblige me to look to see what is wrong. I then see that what is wrong is that my finger was on the wrong key, but there is, in fact, no difficulty whatever in depressing the key if I determine to do so. The effect of this apparent mechanical difficulty is to draw my attention in time to the mistake I am on the point of making.

The speed and delicacy of the typewriter, and its separation of hand, eye and letter, thus transformed writing into an unconscious activity, which illustrates how practices such as automatic writing were closely linked to the rise of new writing machines.

Myers’ observations were corroborated by psychological studies on the acquisition of typing skills. In one experiment, for example, the test subject made the following observations:

> 38th Day. – To-day I found myself not infrequently striking letters before I was conscious of seeing them. Until now it has not been possible to feel sure of this, except for some of the short, common words, but to-day word associations took a long jump forward. They seem to be perfecting themselves

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84 Myers, *Human Personality*, p. 270.
just below the level of consciousness, since on previous days in one or two instances, there have been uncertain indications of their activity. The subject also added that ‘word association is probably ... brought about by a dispersion of the attention, as was shown by the fact that I not infrequently struck the key representing one or two letters ahead of the right one’. The typewriter was an ideal instrument for automatic writing, in other words, because it enabled texts to be written without conscious mediation, without rereading and without any memory of what had already been written, which encouraged the formation of unconscious associations. Unlike spiritualists, however, psychologists rejected the premise of spirit communication and argued instead that the automatic scripts produced during these experiments were generated by the ‘subliminal’ or ‘secondary self’.

Conclusion

Spiritualist writing practices were clearly part of a larger cultural crisis involving the impact of new information technologies, new concepts of human labour and new understandings of human psychology, which led to new ways of thinking about writers and the act of writing. By accelerating the speed of written communication and separating the movement of the hand from the position of the eye and the place where the letters appear on the page, writing machines like the telegraph and the typewriter transformed writing from an act of self-expression to an act of pure transcription. The rise of mechanical writing thus seemed to efface the identity of the writer, which resulted in a perceived loss of authorial autonomy and integrity.

Spiritualist writing practices such as ‘alphabetical typtology’, ‘planchette writing’ and ‘spirit typewriting’ clearly reflect similar anxieties. By allegedly transcribing texts dictated by disembodied spirits, spiritualist mediums introduced a distinction between authors and writers that was based on an understanding of writing as a form of spiritual possession. This notion of writing as a form of possession was directly inspired by the rise of new writing machines like the telegraph and the typewriter, which encouraged an understanding of the spiritual medium as a ‘human typewriter’. By reducing the act of writing to a function of a technological apparatus, the spiritualist seance effectively made writers and writing machines interchangeable.

Spiritualist writing practices such as ‘automatic writing’ were soon incorporated into nineteenth-century psychological studies, which illustrates how the rise of new writing machines was also linked to the discovery of the unconscious. By eliminating the delay between thought and inscription, mechanical writing

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86 Ibid., p. 304.
enabled the formation of unconscious associations, which led to the discovery of a ‘subliminal’ or ‘secondary’ self. Like spiritualist séances, therefore, these early psychological studies revealed the instability of authorship, as writing could be performed without conscious mediation.

The writing experiments performed by spiritualists and psychologists thus represent two contemporaneous methods of addressing the same anxiety concerning the loss of authorial autonomy and integrity following the rise of new writing machines in the nineteenth century. Unlike psychologists, however, spiritualists attempted to allay these anxieties by preserving the classical notion of authorship. The paradox of spiritualism, in other words, is that spiritualist séances revealed the degree to which literary texts could be produced without the conscious mediation of the writer while also preserving the author as a spectral trace or revenant, which appeared increasingly ephemeral and intangible.

The notion that deceased authors could continue dictating literary works from beyond the grave also revealed the degree to which literary production was conceived as an automated process. Spiritualists saw these dead authors as a virtually inexhaustible resource or standing reserve that could be called upon at any time to generate new literary work. The rise of spiritual mediums as a new occupation in the nineteenth century was thus linked to a broader reconfiguration of industrial labour following the rise of the electronic age. Like secretaries, typists and switchboard operators, spiritual mediums were part of a newly emerging technological proletariat, whose sole purpose was to function as relays in the new circuits of technological communication. The fact that these occupations were often seen as ‘women’s work’ simply reinforced the notion that mechanical writing was threatening to displace the cultural authority and centrality of the author. Instead of preserving the voices of dead male authors or allowing women to assume the privileged position of the author, spiritualist writing practices more often challenged the autonomy and integrity of the writing subject, and these practices thus provide the earliest evidence of the impact of mechanical writing on cultural notions of authorship and subjectivity.