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SKIRTING THE ABYSS: A HISTORY OF EXPERIMENTAL EXPLORATIONS OF AUTOMATIC WRITING IN PSYCHOLOGY

WILMA KOUTSTAAL

Automatic writing has been of interest to psychologists, clinicians and theoreticians of the mind both as a phenomenon in its own right and as a technique for exploring aspects of dissociation and normal and pathological consciousness. This paper follows the course of experimental investigations of automatic writing in psychology; beginning with the early work of Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney and continuing with that of Alfred Binet, Pierre Janet, William James and Morton Prince, it centers on the 1896 experiments of Leon Solomons and Gertrude Stein, but also examines later laboratory studies. The conceptual and methodological challenges posed by automatic writing persist in such contemporary concerns as divided attention, implicit memory, and dissociations of awareness and intentionality.

This dissociation of the consciousness into mutually exclusive parts is evidently a phenomenon destined, when understood, to cast a light into the abysses of Psychology. — William James¹

Automatic writing has assumed multiple identities during its many sojourns in psychology but the questions it has posed are of the enduring and deep kind that one is liable to peer into but briefly, before cautiously skirting them en route elsewhere. Seldom stated explicitly, nonetheless, behind the fledgling and more mature experimental explorations of automatic writing stir such questions as: Are mental habits acquired, and enacted, in the same way as motor habits? How much of symbolic activity—generation, production, reproduction—occurs within the purview of awareness? Wishing to construe symbolic activity as, if not exclusively, then at least prototypically, human, does it embody too much of what lies within and close to our conceptions of freedom, of the will, and the uniqueness of the individual to be readily or unequivocally denoted “automatic”? When we approach automatic writing, are we, if we cannot discount it as fraudulent or as the product of self-deception or social collusion, too inclined to construe it as a purely motor or purely mental phenomenon, avoiding any clear conception of a possible hinterland between the maximally and minimally intelligent, the maximally and minimally individual, the maximally and minimally expressive? Do we want always to connect symbolic activity to a self, to a coherent individuality, so that any version of a disaggregation of consciousness or thought is aversive?

Much more than a mere fad, and not nearly so readily discounted as the product of fraudulent or other illicit motives as many might believe, automatic writing has found a place in the clinics, laboratories and minds of many psychologists of no little merit. As a means of tapping the degree of intelligence and perception of the subconscious,

A portion of this paper was presented at the Twelfth Annual History and Theory of Psychology Colloquium at the University of New Hampshire, 17 November 1990. Early work on the paper was encouraged by Sheldon White. Roger Brown and Kenneth Bowers read later versions. Daniel Schacter guided the paper's development at key points. I also thank an anonymous reviewer.

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especially in Italy, as it provides a printed version the proceedings of a conference, held in Amalfi, Italy, in 1987, discussing the impact of Robert Merton's *oeuvre* in contemporary sociology. The book, skillfully edited by Carlo Mongardini and Simonetta Tabboni, assesses the status and influence of Merton's general sociological approach (part I), his conceptual analyses (part II), and provides interpretations of Merton's sociological legacy through a number of *comunicazioni* (part III). Robert Merton provides the final chapter of the book, with personal reflections on "Unanticipated Consequences and Kindred Sociological Ideas."

The volume is published with about half the text in Italian and half in English, roughly reflecting the composition of the participants who were summoned to Amalfi from within Italy and from abroad. The topics of the twenty-two contributions overlap to some extent, so that a few leading themes emerge, as follows: sociological ambivalence (Pierpaolo Donati, Birgitta Nedelmann, Alessandro Cavalli); unanticipated consequences of social action and manifest and latent functions (Arnold Zingerle, Peter Gerlich, Charles Crothers, and Robert Merton); the sociology of science and the sociology of knowledge (Volker Meja and Nico Stehr, Gianni Statera, Alberto Izzo, Harriet Zuckerman); the relationship between theory and empirical research and the attendant concept of *serendipity* (Paolo Ammassari, Maria Luisa Maniscalco, Elena Besozzi); and contributions on other scattered topics (Simonetta Tabboni, Filippo Barbano, Piotr Sztompka, Paolo Almondo, Rocco Caporale, and Giuliano Giorio). The contributions are uneven in quality (at the top are Robert Merton's postscript, along with Simonetta Tabboni's introductory essay, and Charles Crothers' case study of intellectual influences on and from Robert Merton) and in length (a few chapters are four or five pages long, others run to twenty or twenty-five pages). Altogether, the published volume reflects the shortcomings of many conferences and celebratory symposia by showing the unpolished quality of some contributions, the unfulfilled potential of some insufficiently developed insights, and the redundant ceremoniality that sometimes characterizes celebratory occasions. Perhaps this is just as it should be. The most fruitful component of conferences and of professional meetings is often not the presentation of fully developed, beautifully argued pieces of scholarship; rather, as Robert Merton writes in this book's preface, it is the "critical and spirited give-and-take of a theoretically consequential kind." This certainly must have occurred in beautiful Amalfi, where leading Italian and foreign social scientists were provided with the chance-of-a-lifetime—to engage in vibrant intellectual exchange with a sociologist who significantly shaped, directly or indirectly, their professional identity, as well as the intellect of generations of sociologists, and the standards of the entire discipline.

NOTES

1. Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review* 1 (1936): 894-904; Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3 (1938): 672-682.
2. E.g., Lewis Coser, ed. *The Idea of Social Structure: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975); Piotr Sztompka, *Robert K. Merton: An Intellectual Profile* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Charles Crothers, *Robert K. Merton: A Key Sociologist* (London: Tavistock, 1987); Jon Clark, Celia Modgil, and Sohan Modgil, eds. *Robert K. Merton: Consensus and Controversy* (London: The Falmer Press, 1990).

3. E.g., Thomas F. Gieryn, ed. *Science and Social Structure: A Festschrift for Robert K. Merton* (New York: The New York Academy of Science, 1980); I. Bernard Cohen, K. E. Duffin and Stuart Strickland, eds. *Puritanism and the Rise of Modern Science: The Merton Thesis* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Rivka Feldhay and Yehuda Elkana, eds. "After Merton": *Protestant and Catholic Science in Seventeenth-Century Europe*. In *Science in Context* 3 (1989) entire issue.
4. Edward A. Tiryakian, "Evaluating the Standard: An Introduction to Sociological Metrology," *Contemporary Sociology* 20 (1991): 506-510. See also the entire "Symposium: Robert K. Merton in Review," *Contemporary Sociology* 20 (1991): 506-530.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 507-508.

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L. S. Vygotzky, *Pensiero e linguaggio*. Roma: Laterza, 1990. x + 424 p. (cloth). (Annotated Italian translation of the original edition of *Thought and Language* by Luciano Mecacci). (Reviewed by René van der Veer)

Lev Vygotzky has gradually become well-known in English speaking countries and is now accepted as one of the classic thinkers of psychology. His last book, *Thought and Language* (originally published in 1934), has been translated into many languages and is the most well-known of his works. Unfortunately, neither in English nor in any other language has a reliable republication of *Thought and Language* been available. Leaving aside the questions that can be raised concerning the original Soviet 1934 edition (Vygotzky did not see the book in print and the editor, Kolbanovsky, changed some of the wordings to make the book more palatable for the ideological leaders), we know that the later 1956 and 1982 Soviet editions were marred by many mistakes and plain falsifications. All of the existing translations into English, or any other language, took these unreliable later editions as their point of departure. As a result, readers unable to read Russian or find a copy of the original 1934 edition have had, until now, no authoritative text of *Thought and Language* available.

The Italian expert Mecacci, in his recent translation of the original edition of *Thought and Language* into Italian, points out an immense series of differences among the three Soviet editions. Many of them seem the result of sloppiness, or a tendency to "improve" Vygotzky's convoluted style. But a significant number of them are best seen as a result of sustained efforts to adjust Vygotzky's text to the changing sociopolitical views in the Soviet Union. Thus, to give but two of Mecacci's examples, the word "pedology" was changed into "school psychology" in later editions and the word "test" was replaced by "investigation", or similar equivalents. Both changes reflected the infamous Pedology Decree of 1936 that banished pedology as a discipline and declared mental tests to be reactionary efforts to maintain the privileges of the bourgeois class (see van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). In other cases mentioned by Mecacci the names of authors that Vygotzky referred to, or the quotations marks he used, were simply removed, possibly in an attempt to make Vygotzky look more original than he actually was.

In the more than 400 notes to his translation Mecacci carefully points out the many inaccuracies in the later texts and gives the details of the writings and authors to which Vygotzky referred. This makes his notes a veritable gold mine for the serious researcher.

In none of the previous Soviet or other editions had so many of the original publications—often very difficult to locate—been identified. In addition, some of Mecacci's notes explore interesting side issues, such as Piaget's claim that he had not acquainted himself with Vygotsky's critique until 1962. Mecacci convincingly argues that this statement is wholly unlikely in view of the fact that, among other things, a) Piaget corresponded regularly with Vygotsky's close collaborator Luria since the early thirties, and b) Piaget himself wrote a foreword for the Soviet edition of two of his books, which also included a lengthy critical introduction by Vygotsky.

Mecacci's careful translation is preceded by a synopsis of Vygotsky's life and work, a short discussion of several of the earlier translations, and a list of Russian key terms with their Italian equivalents. It is followed by the meticulous notes mentioned above. We may conclude that Mecacci has managed to produce the first authoritative translation of Vygotsky's major work ever to appear. For those of us who read neither Italian nor Russian the situation is now more sad than ever. The most recent English language edition of *Thought and Language* (by Plenum Press) made use of the unreliable 1982 Soviet edition (forced by contract) and is replete with transliteration and other errors. Editor and translator thus missed a unique chance to provide us with a reliable edition. It is a brave publisher who will risk a new edition within the next ten years.

Professor Mecacci Responds:

I was very pleased to read this review by an authoritative scholar of Vygotsky. In order to summarize the results of the comparison among the 1934, 1956 and 1982 Russian versions of Vygotsky's masterpiece, a paper is in preparation for a larger and English-reading audience.

Briefly Noted

Virginia P. Dawson. *Nature's Enigma: The Problem of the Polyp in the Letters of Bonnet, Trembley and Réaumur.* Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1987. ix × 266 pp. (cloth)

Two striking discoveries made 1740 a turning point in the history of eighteenth-century biology. Charles Bonnet established that aphids could reproduce without male fertilization. Shortly afterwards Abraham Trembley proved that a tiny aquatic animal, the fresh-water polyp, or hydra, could regenerate from cuttings like some plants. The discovery of the polyp was important because of the disturbing metaphysical issues it raised. In their letters written during the 1740s to Réaumur, the great French academician, both Trembley and Bonnet referred to the polyp as an enigma. Not only did it seem to present a new mode of animal reproduction, previously unsuspected, but it called into question the prevailing mechanistic view of animal biology and brought into focus the problem of the animal soul.

Drawing on some of the most illuminating letters from the private archives of the Trembley family, Dr. Rawson's study focuses on the discovery of the polyp, using the correspondence of Bonnet and Trembley to understand their common Genevan background and their possible differences in approach from that of Réaumur.

Walter Bower. *Scotichronicon*, Volume 8. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987. In Latin and English. xxxii × 409 pp. \$42.00 (cloth)

Scotichronicon was composed in Latin in the 1440s while its author was abbot of the Augustinian abbey of Inchcolm, an island in the Firth of Forth. The first translation of Bower's work from Latin into English, this book presents Scotland's past as it was understood in the mid-fifteenth century, and is described by D. E. R. Watt as the crowning achievement of Scottish chronicle — writing and the most substantial work of literature produced in Scotland in the Middle Ages. We are led to understand the problems and challenges of Bower's day as they are revealed in the mind of an Augustinian abbot who was in the thick of ecclesiastical and political affairs, and we may watch a chronicler at work — through the study of the text itself, and the various revisions and marginalia.

David Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers in Nineteenth-Century Society.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. x × 261 pp. (cloth)