The occultation of Surrealism: a study of the relationship between Bretonian Surrealism and western esotericism

Bauduin, T.M.

Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Desnos now entered a trance-state, during which he too uttered some words and scratched at the table. Later, Breton would call the trance-state a ‘sleeping state’, and the séance a ‘sleeping session’. At the time, the first sleeping session was considered a success and well worth repeating. Over the following days, weeks, and then months, well into the spring of 1923, a varying group of proto-Surrealists gathered for more. They included, besides the above mentioned people, the couple Gala (1895-1982) and Paul Éluard (1895-1952), Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), Max Ernst, Louis Aragon (1897 - 1982), Roger Vitrac (1899-1952), Man Ray (1890-1976), Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and several others. Some attended a few sessions, others many. Crevel, Desnos and Péret proved to be the most adept at it, entering trances again and again; and while entranced, they recounted stories, gave answers to questions, and wrote or drew things on paper. On one occasion, Péret flopped belly down on the table and made swimming motions; Desnos allegedly established telepathic contact with Marcel Duchamp in New York and dictated poems by Duchamp’s alter ego, Rrose Sélavy. Other committed participants, on the other hand, such as Breton, Ernst, Éluard, and Morise, never entered a ‘sleeping state’, ‘despite their goodwill’.1

At first, the alternate state—I will come back to this term below—Crevel, Desnos and others entered into was celebrated for its unrestrained and original creativity. Everyone was in favour of continuing the sessions, sometimes night...
after night. The sessions were intense and fascinating. As Kahn-Breton wrote to her cousin Denise:

We’re living simultaneously in the present, the past, and the future. After each séance we’re so dazed and broken that we swear never to start up again, and the next day all we can think about is putting ourselves back in that catastrophic atmosphere.2

A ‘catastrophic atmosphere’ indeed. After a time the sessions took a turn for the worse, becoming dark of tone and even violent. For example, Crevel prophesied that all those present would get tuberculosis and die. To general dismay, some of the participants became ill in the next few days, causing Kahn to write to her cousin of ‘Crevel’s curse’.3 Desnos proved more and more difficult to wake up and even required the aid of a hastily summoned doctor on one occasion. He tried to stab Éluard with a penknife after the latter had resorted to emptying a jug of water over him to awaken him. At another session, a part of the group went missing, only to be discovered by Breton in a side room in the process of trying to hang themselves on Crevel’s instigation. It was clearly getting out of hand, and early in 1923 Breton put an end to the sessions.4

Generally scholars interpret the sleeping sessions in light of the many experiments with automatism and the creative unconscious the proto-Surrealists carried out in the early 1920s. A description found in histories of art might characterise the sleeping sessions as:

hypnotic sleep sessions by which the [proto-Surrealists] were beginning to explore unconscious states.5

Such a description ultimately goes back to Nadeau, the first historian of Surrealism, who labelled the entire episode ‘the period of trances’, and used the designation ‘hypnotic trances’ for the sleeping states—in the English translation, that is.6 In the original French, Nadeau calls the period ‘l’époque des sommeils’ (the time of sleeps, or slumbers), a designation he borrowed directly from Breton, who had retrospectively (1928) applied it to the entire period during which the sessions took place, from the autumn of 1922 to early 1923.7 The mental state during the sessions is described as ‘sommeil hypnotique’ (hypnotic sleep or slumber) first by Breton, then by Nadeau, and subsequently by all who trod in their footsteps.8 Terms such as ‘trance’ and ‘unconscious states’ are later interpretations of translators and historians, whereas the original surrealist vocabulary refers to sleep, slumber, hypnosis and the ‘subliminal’. Two accounts form the departure
point for all discussion of the sleeping sessions: ‘The Mediums Enter’ by Breton, which was published when the sessions were still in full swing,9 and ‘A Wave of Dreams’ by Louis Aragon, published in 1924.10

To ‘explore unconscious states’, to keep with scholarly parlance, the proto-Surrealists employed automatism, primarily automatic writing.11 The first experiments with automatic writing started in 1919. By the time Surrealism was officially founded in 1924, automatism was considered such a success that Breton established it as the fundamental essence—the cornerstone, let’s say—of Surrealism in his first Manifesto:

SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.12

Surrealism is here defined as automatism, ‘psychic’ even; which in turn is defined as thought outside of the control of reason. In the Introduction I have discussed the idea that Surrealism aimed at breaking open ‘certain doors’ that rationalism was suspected of ‘having boarded up for good’;13 we can be certain that pure thought—exempt as it furthermore is from such ‘bourgeois’ concerns as morals or aesthetics—is behind one of those doors. Psychic automatism, importantly, serves a double function in Surrealism: it is both the crowbar to break down those rationalist doors, and the pure reason-free state itself. Surrealist automatism is a mental state and a means of expression, written, verbal or otherwise.

The Surrealists had appropriated automatism, as both a mental state and a therapeutic practice, from the medical science of their day, specifically from dynamic psychiatry, the precursor to modern psychiatry. In dynamic psychiatry automatism served two functions as well, first being employed as a therapeutic practice and secondly as a tool for studying particular states of consciousness.14 The adjective ‘psychic’, in turn, was adapted from the discipline of psychical research, in which many dynamic psychiatrists engaged. The whole concept of psychic automatism, however, is a surrealist invention, as I will argue in this chapter. Even though the proto-Surrealists borrowed concepts, practices and terminology from other disciplines, the end result was something quite different from the original. As will become clear, psychic automatism is the surrealist poetic response to the discovery and investigation of the unconscious by dynamic psychiatrists in the nineteenth century, and an attempt to appropriate it for revolutionary art. The
sleeping sessions were part of the early surrealist experiments with automatism, and can be considered one form of psychic automatism.

Today we would associate ‘psychic’ with psi-phenomena and paranormal events, but as will also be shown, the surrealist psychic is solely related to the psyche, the mind, and did not extend beyond it in any way. This does not mean that no esotericism was involved, however. Automatic writing, for one, originated as a spiritualist practice. The sleeping sessions also resonated with Spiritualism, not least because of the séance setting. Moreover, Crevel, the instigator of the sessions, had been ‘initiated’ by a spiritualist madame:

Two weeks ago ... René Crevel described to us the beginnings of a ‘spiritualist’ initiation he had had, thanks to a certain madame D. This person, having discerned particular mediumistic qualities in him, had taught him how to develop these qualities; so it was that, in the conditions necessary for the production of such phenomena (darkness and silence in the room, a ‘chain’ of hands around the table), he had soon fallen asleep and uttered words that were organized into a generally coherent discourse, to which the usual waking techniques put a stop at a given moment.

Breton immediately made it clear that the involvement with Spiritualism went no further than Crevel’s ‘initiation’ and the acceptance of the ‘necessary conditions’:

It goes without saying that at no time, starting with the day we agreed to try these experiments, have we ever adopted the spiritualistic viewpoint. As far as I’m concerned, I absolutely refuse to admit that any communication whatsoever can exist between the living and the dead.

Others also pointed out their disbelief in Spiritualism; and throughout his career, Breton insisted upon his refusal to believe in communication with spirits. Still, denial of Spiritualism’s central tenet does not preclude that there were in fact correspondences between the sleeping sessions and Spiritualism, which I shall touch upon in this chapter.

The sleeping sessions, as a form of psychic automatism, combine elements of Spiritualism, of dynamic psychiatry and of psychical research, among others. These three disciplines are connected by an underlying development, which can therefore be said to lie at the root of the sleeping sessions as well: somnambulism. The key-concept here is sleep. Aragon described the particular
trance state of the sleeping sessions as follows:

René Crevel met a lady who taught him how to get into an extraordinary hypnotic trance which was something like *sleepwalking*.¹⁹

The idea that a trance state is similar to the state of sleepwalking originated in the early nineteenth century practice of artificial somnambulism. In turn, this evolved out of mesmerism, also called animal magnetism. In the first part of this chapter I will sketch the development of somnambulism, from eighteenth century mesmerism and artificial somnambulism, to Spiritualism, and to hypnotism and dynamic psychiatry. By the turn of the nineteenth century it had become so well established culturally that a popular craze for somnambulists in literature, on the stage and in the cinema ensued, a ‘somnambulism-mania’.

In the second part of this chapter I will turn to Surrealism. Surrealism and somnambulism are primarily connected through a shared paradigm that artificial somnambulism gave rise to: the notion that there can be a mental state other than ‘ordinary’ consciousness.²⁰ While this paradigm is very important for western Modernism generally, it is particularly so for Surrealism, obsessed as this movement was with the unconscious and its expression by means of dreams and automatism. Below, I will discuss psychic automatism, focussing in particular upon the sleeping sessions. By 1922 the somnambulist had been a fixture in the French cultural landscape for over a century and a half, and even though the concept was starting to lose currency in medical discourse, the somnambulist was still a regular and fashionable cultural presence. For the early Surrealists, deeply rooted in the French tradition, well read in medical literature, admirers of experimental psychiatry, and attuned to trends in popular culture as they were, entering into a ‘sleepwalking state’ so as to experience a certain mind-set was perhaps only logical. Experiments with automatism were their daily fare at this time and by opting for somnambulism, they placed themselves in a long tradition of experimenting with alternate states, one that had started with artificial somnambulism and ranged all the way to psychical research.

Besides tracing these developments, I will also pay attention to the way Surrealism interacted with specific somnambulist ideas, and how they distinctly ‘surrealised’, so to speak, the most important ones. Essential to somnambulism is the relation between the two main agents, the magnetiser and the magnetised, which is known as the *rapport*. Popular somnambulism already revised this rapport rather radically, as we will see, and eventually the proto-Surrealists reinvented it altogether. By locating psychic automatism unequivocally in the mind, they also circumvented the issue of simulation versus ‘real’ alternate states; for the
Surrealist all thoughts, whether authentically experienced or imagined for the purposes of artistic creation are real—and therefore, surreal.

In the end it will become clear that the surrealist sleeping sessions can be considered a final stage of a development that started with artificial somnambulism and mesmerism. As those currents form an important chapter in the history of western esotericism, it may be argued that the roots of the sessions can be considered at least partly esoteric. Moreover, automatism has an esoteric origin, just as the séance-like settings of the sleeping sessions, and the somnambulist states of altered consciousness. Surrealism, however, stripped automatism, research into the psyche, and the somnambulist states of the séance of their original esoteric context, and refashioned them into something, if not quite exoteric, at least rigorously secularised, aestheticised and, above all, uniquely surrealistic.
I. Somnambulism: from mesmerism to the cinema

Artificial somnambulism: origins

One day in 1784, in the French countryside, Armand de Chastenet marquis de Puységur (1761-1825) tried his mesmerist techniques upon one of his farmers, Victor Race (1760-ca.1818). Some time earlier de Puységur had been introduced to the healing techniques of Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a practice called ‘animal magnetism’ but colloquially known as mesmerism. It presupposed the existence of a ‘magnetic fluid’, flowing through bodies, which when unbalanced would cause illnesses; accordingly a readjustment of fluids on the part of the mesmeriser could potentially heal the patient. De Puységur magnetised Race (who was suffering from inflammation of the lungs), but rather than the expected mesmeric state of convulsions, Race entered a trance state not seen before. De Puységur termed it ‘artificial’ or ‘magnetic’ somnambulism, distinct from natural somnambulism or sleepwalking. Even though the practice of artificial somnambulism changed over time it remained known as such until well into the twentieth century, particularly in France, while the entranced person was generally known as a somnambulist. This dynamic duo of somnambulist and magnetiser first established by Race and de Puységur continued throughout the history of somnambulism.

The discovery of artificial somnambulism led to the ‘alternate-consciousness paradigm’ in the words of psychiatrist and scholar Adam Crabtree. This is the idea that people can enter into a second, or alternate, consciousness, a state that is hidden within us and which can potentially affect our lives. Before, consciousness was perceived as undivided. This paradigm lies at the basis of all subsequent developments derived from artificial somnambulism. From the moment it was accepted that a state of consciousness different from the ‘normal’ one could exist—leaving aside for the moment what would constitute ‘normal’ consciousness—the nature, possibilities and origin of such a state were investigated. This line of inquiry reached a high point in the late nineteenth century with the discovery of the unconscious, and it stretches all the way to the Surrealists and their experiments with ‘unconscious’ states. Besides unconscious, such states were and are also known as subconscious, dissociated, altered, or double consciousness, etc.; properly speaking, one is dealing with alterations of consciousness. From the invention of artificial somnambulism onwards, somnambulism was employed as a generic term referring to (induced) alterations of consciousness, and it was still current by the time the proto-Surrealists started their own experimentation with sleeping states.

The alterations of consciousness when somnambulism was artificially
induced usually included some or all of the following characteristics: a consciousness similar to sleepwalking; a different set of memories from that in one’s waking consciousness; alteration of one’s personality including an entirely different array of knowledge and skills; altered senses; partial or full anaesthesia of the body; suggestibility; and a rapport with the magnetiser. The rapport in particular distinguishes artificial somnambulism from a naturally occurring altered state, and it is important to realise that such a rapport is not a neutral relationship; on the contrary, it implies a certain power balance and at least interchange between the somnambulist and magnetiser, including increased suggestibility to the magnetiser’s suggestions. The social difference between the somnambulist (generally from a simple background) and the magnetiser (educated and of high status, perhaps even aristocratic) usually added considerable weight to the imbalance of the rapport. What is sometimes overlooked in scholarly literature but which I deem rather important, is that while the power dynamics of the rapport seem to be balanced in favour of the magnetiser in socio-political terms, when asleep it is the somnambulist who is the centre of attention and who is seemingly capable of remarkable feats that others, including the magnetiser, are not capable of. As we will see further below, by the end of the nineteenth century somnambulists would in certain respects turn the tables on their magnetisers and reshuffle the balance of power, something that left significant traces in early Surrealism.

Remarkable capabilities are a further characteristic of the somnambulist state: the apparent ability to perform extra-ordinary feats, often of an apparently paranormal nature and including telepathy, clairvoyance across time, across space and even into bodies—that is, insight into one’s own or another’s illness—and sometimes awareness of spiritual beings. Such powers were not present in every case of somnambulism, although they did become increasingly more important. One should be wary of associating apparently paranormal phenomena in somnambulism immediately with Spiritualism or similar beliefs; for many magnetisers, including Mesmer and de Puységur, such powers were thought to reside largely or entirely in the mind. While they did seem to exceed the limits of science at that time, they were expected to be explained as natural and understandable phenomena at a later stage.

Still, this hardly means that there were no connections to esotericism at all. On the contrary, Mesmer’s practice, not least his notion of magnetic ‘fluid’, was rooted in earlier esoteric developments. Clairvoyance and related abilities are moreover not without esoteric resonances either, and were indeed employed for religious, spiritual or similar purposes from the outset. Interestingly enough in France such capabilities were exercised directly and focused more on the
terrestrial realm, whereas in Germany they were dependent upon transcendent agents such as spirits or angels, and often led to theosophical revelations. Somnambulists would reach beyond their own mind into metaphysical domains. A publication by the physician Justinus Kerner (1786-1862), chronicling the spiritual somnambulism of Friederike Hauffe (1801-1829) and her theosophical cosmic revelations, did much to popularise the notion of spiritual magnetism. It impacted German and English audiences in particular. In France too somnambulism had been employed as a means to investigate the metaphysical, almost since the time of de Puységur. Accordingly, artificial somnambulism was from the outset constructed and perceived as either scientific, esoteric, or more often, as a combination of the two. Somnambulism was employed to heal, to explore the mind, to explore metaphysical realms and/or to contact spiritual agents. This combination of scientific, religious and specifically esoteric approaches and goals would continue to be part of somnambulism during all its later developments.

**Spiritualism**

By the middle of the nineteenth century it had become clear that the (entranced) mind was a powerful instrument, capable of extraordinary feats such as clairvoyance, and that in the somnambulist (or alternate) state super-sensory experiences of a transcendent realm or spiritual communications could occur. This gave rise to the idea that by training the mind and cultivating particular alternate states one could do (or see or know, etc.) extraordinary things, which was to become a key ingredient of occultism. I shall not pursue this further here, as pioneering studies such as Karl Baier’s *Meditation und Moderne* have already provided excellent analyses of this development.

The instances of apparent transcendent communication proved to be the key element in the formation of the new movement of ‘Spiritualism’, kick-started by the Fox sisters in 1848. Spiritualism revolves around the idea that communication with an outside agent, primarily the spirit of a deceased person, is possible, and as a rule the one communicating does so in an alternate state. In spiritualist circles the somnambulist was reinvented as the *medium*, and s/he was often regarded as a medium in a material sense: a relay, a human device through which a spirit could communicate; an ‘information machine’ as Hanegraaff calls it. Such technical materiality is relevant here, as Spiritualism was partly inspired by the uncanny nature of new technological inventions. This was not a new development; on the contrary, technical and scientific inventions such as magnets and electricity had played a role in mesmerism and subsequently artificial somnambulism from the outset. A magnetic tub with metal rods was often used in the practice of Mesmer’s animal magnetism [fig 7]. This squared with the
scientific aspirations and expectations of many mesmerists and magnetisers; in the minds of many others, though, it also bred the notion that technology could be quite uncanny. It is no coincidence that table rapping, apparently carried out by spirits, started not long after the invention of the telegraph, and the term ‘spiritual telegraph’ became current in spiritualist discourse. With the invention of the *planchette* or writing board around 1854, a writing device that seems to separate the pencil-holding hand from the body (let alone mind), spirits to all appearances began to write through their medium. With the advent of photography, spirits were ostensibly captured on the sensitive plate, often leading to very surprising and even dramatic results [fig 8]. With the invention of the telephone spirits started to speak through the medium and apparent phone calls from the dead began to occur. The radio emphasised even further that disembodied voices of real beings could effortlessly and quite instantaneously be heard over immense distances, and mediums themselves were seen as analogous to this new technology.

From the outset Spiritualism was engulfed in a very public debate, not least because of its very swift rise to great popularity and the outrage it sparked among many learned figures. A number of spiritualist mediums took quite public roles, advocating radical issues such as women’s rights together with spirit teachings. Besides the political, social and religious issues, the press could not get enough of the outward manifestations of Spiritualism either, whether it was dancing tables in the 1850s or spirit photography in the 1880s, or the subsequent unmasking of both by professional stage magicians and even criminal investigators. There was a strong streak of performance in Spiritualism, both in the private séance and in public, and it was continually covered by the press; both of these were traits that it had in common with its ancestors, mesmerism and artificial somnambulism.

In other respects Spiritualism differed from artificial somnambulism. For instance, it did not aim at healing but rather at communication. Moreover, the formula of the duo (the somnambulist and magnetiser) was changed to a one-person show, almost entirely focused on the medium. In American Spiritualism in particular, but also in the UK and on the Continent, mediums would frequently enter a state of alternate consciousness on their own, usually at a moment and in a location of their choice, and supported by the other participants in the séance. A magnetiser was no longer required as many mediums magnetised themselves. A further difference is that the spiritualist séance was inherently more democratic than had been the case with artificial somnambulism earlier, as it was understood that any person of any gender, age or social background could function as a medium—potentially, although this was not always the case in practice.
Hypnotism, dynamic psychiatry and automatism
Mesmer’s practice of animal magnetism was originally a therapeutic practice based in part upon scientific assumptions, and Race was originally magnetised by de Puységur to be healed. The element of healing remained important to a new current that eventually developed out of artificial somnambulism: dynamic psychiatry. Others have described this development extensively; here I will keep to the bare essentials. Within the medical establishment the practice of magnetic healing by means of artificially induced somnambulism first developed into hypnotism—a term retaining the connection with sleeping. ‘Magnetic fluid’ was dispensed with and hypnotism and its phenomena came to be framed in psychological terms. Slowly but surely, a new objective besides healing came to the fore: investigation of the alternate state of the divided consciousness itself. The dynamic power-relation between magnetiser and somnambulist remained, the parties now being the hypnotising doctor on the one hand, and the patient on the other. But even as the original mesmeric distinction between healer and afflicted was thus retained, the increasing emphasis on mind and consciousness modified it nonetheless, and quite significantly so in my opinion. In hypnotism, as in dynamic psychiatry generally, soundness of mind became an important differentiating factor. The somnambulist was once physically ill but now became more or less mentally ill, even insane. Those with a perfect grip on their own mind and on sanity (such as doctors, at least in their own opinion) were thought incapable of entering alternate states—at least such was the view of the influential French psychiatrist Pierre Janet (1859-1947), who held that a somnambulist state could not exist in strong, healthy and intellectually capable persons. His fellow psychologists Charles Richet (1850-1935) and Theodore Flournoy (1854-1920) were a bit more flexible about this issue, as was Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud came to the slightly different conclusion that alterations of consciousness could also happen to those who did possess intellect, will and character. Still, in a departure from artificial somnambulism the alternate state of mind itself was now generally considered to be a pathological condition, and an insurmountable difference between doctor and patient.

In his search for a concept to designate the (partly) dissociated state of his patients and a cure for their (perceived) mental problems Janet turned to automatism and automatic writing, which he integrated in his practice in the 1880s and thereby introduced into the field of dynamic psychiatry at large. Whereas automatic writing had been employed for instance in spiritual mesmerism and Spiritualism as a tool for communicating with spirits or angels,
Janet reinstituted it as a therapeutic technique to uncover psychological trauma. From there it was but a small step to employing automatic writing as a means of investigating the unconscious, a step taken by the British scholar, philosopher and psychical researcher Frederic W.H. Myers (1843-1901). Myers defined automatism as a range of ‘subliminal uprushes’: hysteria, genius, hypnotic suggestion, veridical hallucinations, automatic writing, and, lastly, the ‘utterances of spontaneous trance’. The subliminal is that which resides below the threshold (limen) of consciousness, ‘or say, if preferred, outside the ordinary margins of consciousness.’ In the words of Crabtree, it is an ‘inner centre of consciousness unavailable to one’s ordinary consciousness’, today often likened to the unconscious or subconscious. Decades later André Breton would rely rather heavily on Myers’ ideas, preferring ‘the subliminal’ to ‘the unconscious’.

Myers’ definition of the ‘subliminal uprushes’ already captured a variety of phenomena under the one heading of automatism, but he further broadened the subliminal’s possibilities for expression via automatism by dividing it into passive ‘sensory automatism’ and active ‘motor automatism’:

[Products of inner audition or inner vision [are] externalised into quasi-percepts [sic]—these form what I term sensory automatisms. The messages conveyed by limbs or hands or tongue, initiated by an inner motor impulse beyond the conscious will—these are what I term motor automatisms. … They will be seen to be messages from the subliminal to the supraliminal self....]61

Dreaming and hallucination are passive sensory automatisms. Writing, speaking and other physical movements, even walking, are active sensory automatisms. All are messages from the subliminal and therefore meaningful. Accordingly, by the time automatism arrived in Surrealism a couple of decades later, it applied to a variety of mental states, (passive) experiences and actions. Among the actions, automatic writing was the most frequently used technique in dynamic psychiatry, while hysteria, at least before the turn of the twentieth century, was one of the most prominent afflictions.

Psychical research and the case of Smith and Flournoy
The spiritualist séance might have offered the somnambulist, now turned medium, a reprieve from the magnetiser, but the authority figure returned with a vengeance. As soon as the movement really got up steam, from the 1880s well into the 1920s, many prominent researchers and intellectuals investigated Spiritualism and its various claims, across Europe and certainly in
This form of research is generally known as psychical research, and later as parapsychology; it is obviously a more complex movement than I can present here. Frederick Myers, for one, was a very important proponent. The personal position of the scientists ranged from sympathy and belief to extreme scepticism or just outright dismissal, while their research objectives ranged from establishing contact with the departed to investigating metaphysical claims and lucid faculties (e.g., clairvoyance and telepathy). A remarkable majority of those undertaking psychical research were dynamic psychiatrists. Rather than sympathy or dismissal, they championed a third approach: that of psychology, of studying the medium’s alternate (rather than waking) consciousness. As the psychologist William James (1842-1910), another trailblazer of psychical research, would have it: ‘[m]ediumistic possession in all its grades seems to form a perfectly natural special type of alternate personality’, allowing the psychologist to study it in all its forms. To a considerable extent psychical research continued the earlier position of many scientifically inclined magnetisers, who had also considered the paranormal phenomena of artificially induced somnambulism to be extraordinary, as yet unexplained, but probably natural capabilities of the mind.

To shed more light on dynamic psychiatry’s interaction with mediums, I will discuss one case in particular, which would later have a significant impact upon Bretonian Surrealism: that of the Swiss medium Catherine-Élise Müller (1861-1929), who became renowned under the pseudonym Hélène Smith, and her research companion Theodore Flournoy. Smith was propelled to fame by Flournoy’s book *Des Indes à la planète Mars. Étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie* (1900), the result of a five-year study of Smith conducted by Flournoy, who acted as an observer of and a participant in her séances. Flournoy is considered a pioneer of dynamic psychiatry, whose theories (partly set forth in *From India*) were particularly influential in the early decades of the twentieth century.

As Shamdasani has argued, Flournoy opted for the setting of the séance rather than the laboratory because he felt that laboratory psychology was much too limited; he yearned for a psychology that would ‘embrace the whole personality, including its transcendent dimensions’. He found it in the séance, where the medium would be so at ease that all dimensions of the personality could be displayed. Flournoy represents a group of dynamic psychiatrists who worked with mediums and were of the opinion that the séance-setting was conducive to the various phenomena they were so keen on exploring. Others, such as Pierre Janet decades earlier, preferred to work with mediums in the more traditional institutional setting of the mental hospital. As this illustrates, some dynamic psychiatrists did engage in psychical research while others did not,
even while both (in this case, Flournoy and Janet) worked with those who called themselves, and were known as, mediums.

Flournoy’s trust in the efficacy of the experimental séance was borne out in practice: during the many séances he attended Smith wrote and drew in a dissociated state, she spoke and sang in tongues, related long accounts of past lives as a Hindu princess and Queen Marie-Antoinette, and undertook and recounted astral journeys. In her experience, she journeyed to Mars, for instance, and she took down the Martian alphabet and made drawings of the supposed inhabitants and landscapes. In 1895 Flournoy wrote to William James: ‘This woman is a veritable museum of all possible phenomena and has a repertoire of illimitable variety’. To Flournoy, Smith was a ‘museum’ of mental phenomena; in From India to the Planet Mars he made it very clear that his object of research had been Smith’s unconscious—and not her spiritualist qualities, much to her subsequent dismay. Flournoy was confident that he had indeed studied ‘the whole personality’, and in his study identified the functions of the unconscious (as per Smith) as creative, protective, compensatory, and ludic (playful) or mytho-poetic. He illustrated his book with some of her writings and drawings, including Martian writing and the Martian landscapes, thereby emphasizing that mediumship could result in written and drawn products, besides communication and verbal accounts [plates V and VI]. An important connection between psychiatric phenomena and the arts was made.
Performance, spectacle and popular somnambulism

Artificial somnambulism originated as a therapeutic practice often practiced in the home environment. As a medical discipline, it developed into hypnotism and dynamic psychiatry, which were generally practiced in the environment of the mental hospital. Another development, Spiritualism, remained initially in the home again. Psychical research blended science and Spiritualism, and was often practiced in a home environment, or at least séance-setting, as well. Yet already from the early days of artificial somnambulism there was another location where it was employed too: the popular stage. Because besides medical and spiritual, there was a further side to somnambulism: a popular one.

Mesmer and his practice were a tangible presence in the press in the late eighteenth century. For a time, being treated by him was very fashionable, and society ladies swooned in their salons under the watchful eyes of others. Illustrations of the day, both serious and in caricature, depict the sometimes dramatic events at a mesmerising session [fig 9]. With the invention of artificial somnambulism by Race and de Puységur the performative element continued and increased. Public demonstrations of what was (and is) variously called mesmerism, magnetism or somnambulism were frequent occurrences, and were usually well attended. In the state of alternate consciousness the somnambulist often reached a level of (mental) lucidity, which could range from being smarter, wittier or better spoken than normal, to the extraordinary paranormal feats mentioned above; all
traits that lent themselves well to stage-like settings and demonstrations in front of amazed audiences.\textsuperscript{74} In France the somnambulist Alexis Didier, who could read closed letters and see into closed boxes for instance, reached celebrity status, becoming much sought-after in many exalted circles.\textsuperscript{75}

Popular demand for public demonstrations of somnambulism increased around the middle of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{76} On one side of the spectrum Spiritualism answered this demand, as a number of (supposedly) spiritualist performers took to the stage. This blurred the distinctions between spiritualist mediums and illusionists and stage-magicians, which were already not very clear to begin with.\textsuperscript{77} On the other, medical, side, popular demand was met and further stimulated by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), who headed the mental hospital \textit{la Salpêtrière} in Paris. Charcot was a firm believer in the efficacy of hypnotism and turned it into a great medical success, employing it in his treatment of patients with epilepsy, hysteria and paralysis, for instance.\textsuperscript{78} But for all his ground-breaking work in medicine, Charcot is most renowned today, as he was in his own time, for turning hypnotic treatment into a spectacle.

During the 1880s Charcot staged a weekly public lecture on various neurological ailments.\textsuperscript{79} Entertaining the Parisian beau-monde every Tuesday, the doctor and his assistants would expertly manipulate (female) patients of the Salpêtrière into attacks of epilepsy and hysteria. Contemporaries commented on the theatrical qualities of Charcot’s lectures, which are vividly captured in the contemporary painting \textit{Une lesson clinique à la Salpêtrière} [fig 10].\textsuperscript{80} In the painting Charcot directs the audience’s attention to the patient, Blanche (Marie) Wittman (1859-1913), who is supported by one of Charcot’s disciples, Joseph Babinski (1857-1932). Wittman was a beautiful young woman, whose physical appearance contributed to the attractiveness of her performance, already lauded for her perfect display of various stages of the hysterical attack.\textsuperscript{81} Highlighting the visual qualities of the hysterical attack in a performative sense, as we also see in the painting, was practice rather than exception at the Salpêtrière. Not only did the audience consider hysteria and hypnotic manipulation of it partly if not entirely a spectacle, Charcot and his staff did too. Charcot had in fact compiled an extensive photographic almanac of his patients in various stages of attack, which was subsequently published as \textit{Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière}.\textsuperscript{82} ‘Iconography’ is originally an artistic term; Charcot was the first to combine medicine and the arts in his \textit{Iconographie photographique} but probably also one of the earliest doctors to retro-interpret art works as well as artists’ personalities neurologically.\textsuperscript{83} In Charcot’s practice, (dynamic) psychiatry and the arts were closely related.

With his well-attended lectures Charcot contributed significantly to the
popularisation of the image of the hypnotising doctor as an impresario, of the (possibly hysterical) somnambulist/patient as a performer, and of somnambulism, here in the form of hypnotism, as something worthy of the stage. Somnambulism reached unprecedented popularity by the end of the nineteenth century and became an integral part of (popular) culture. It proved to be a particularly popular theme in literature, and Charcot himself functioned, more or less disguised, as a model for many characters in novels and plays in the 1890s. Literary characters soon rivalled real-life somnambulists for celebrity. A famous example is the character of Trilby, who made her debut in the 1894 novel Trilby by George du Maurier. The story of Trilby, a beautiful young woman under the influence of an evil hypnotist, Svengali, and magnetised into being a great singer, immediately struck a chord with audiences, and it was made into plays and films even before the advent of talkies. Cultural historian Rae Beth Gordon speaks of ‘Trilby-mania’; I would argue that that was part of a larger phenomenon: somnambulism-mania.

Somnambulism-mania was first a popular stage performance and subsequently reached a high point in literature, only to spread to cinema in the early decades of the twentieth century, where it reached a climax with a 1920 German expressionist film: Das Kabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari). The film revolves around a hypnotiser, Caligari, and his ward Césare the somnambulist, who commits crimes at his suggestion [fig 11-13]. The film is an example of the post-World War One tendency to explore alternate and possibly pathological states of consciousness, such as insanity or the dream, aesthetically. This is a departure from earlier popular products engaging somnambulism, which were more focused on the interplay of somnambulist and magnetiser than the actual alternate state itself. Importantly enough Surrealism is another example of this tendency to focus on the aesthetic potential of psychiatric phenomena. Dr. Caligari is possibly the first cinematographic rendering of alterations of consciousness; in this case somnambulism in the first instance, and in the second instance madness, as it is revealed that the story’s narrator Francis is an inmate of mental institute. The two states seem interchangeable. The particular expressionistic style of the film was so unique that it came to be called ‘le caligarisme’ in France.

The combination of the state of somnambulism and the pathological state of madness that happens in Dr. Caligari, is one example of how popular somnambulism was very sensitive to trends in the various somnambulist disciplines it was rooted in; Janet, for instance, had equated somnambulism to mental illness. At the same time popular somnambulism jumbled all somnambulisms together, usually without concern for differences between stage hypnotism, stage Spiritualism, séance Spiritualism, hypnotism, psychiatry, etc. The question
whether it is Caligari, Césare or Francis who is mad, and who controls whom, is
left unresolved in the film, whereas one can imagine that for a psychiatrist it would
be of foremost concern. Popular somnambulism questioned the established
disciplinary bastions, not least the tradition of the rapport.

Revising the rapport

Back in the late eighteenth century Race and de Puységur had established the
prototype of the duo, somnambulist & magnetiser, and their unequal relationship,
the rapport. Over time the position of magnetiser came to be filled by the doctor
or scientist, but in general that party remained intellectually and socially superior
to the somnambulist. Frequently gender and/or age were part of the rapport
too: often the magnetiser/doctor was male, whereas the somnambulist was a
woman or child. Already in the time of Mesmer most mesmerised patients were
women. But while Mesmer had treated society ladies of certain social standing,
in artificial somnambulism the somnambulist was often socially inferior to the
magnetiser and usually portrayed as intellectually weaker too.

The hypnotic practice of Charcot reinforced the image of one party
as the doctor, while the other came to be identified as a hysterical or otherwise
mentally weak or ill person, again often female. While cases of male hysteria were
known, they were a minority; hysteria was considered a feminine disease and
patients were as a rule feminised. In Spiritualism, many mediums were women,
though certainly not all. As pointed out earlier, spiritualist mediums seemed to
divest themselves of the controlling counterpart, yet this is certainly no definitive
rule; one can argue for instance that spirit controls replaced the magnetiser, and
in the experimental séances of psychical research the doctor/scientist made his
triumphant return. This mirrored standard practice in dynamic psychiatry, with a
(usually male) doctor and a (female or feminised) patient.

Popular somnambulism addressed the rapport and its imbalance. In
literature and film the somnambulist became the hero/ine of the story, with the
magnetiser taking the part of the villain. Svengali in particular embodied the evil
magnetiser. Trilby, as we can see in an engraving made by du Maurier himself,
is not only young and beautiful, but also associated with the light [fig 14], while
Svengali stands in shadow (always an indication of evil nature), and has very dark
looks. In The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari Caligari, who is not only a stage hypnotist
but also the director/head psychiatrist of a mental institution, is depicted as evil
and manipulating and possibly mad himself [fig 13]. The Svengalis and Caligaris
obviously comment upon contemporary practices and respond to cultural
anxieties about the power a doctor could wield over the patient; they are
the ‘demonic doubles’ of Janet, Charcot or Flournoy and represent the doctor
This distrust of the hypnotising doctor was based on his increasing visibility in popular culture, as other doctors, following in Charcot’s footsteps, had taken to the stage as well, while simultaneously many performing hypnotisers presented themselves as ‘doctors’. As a rule the general audience conflated stage hypnotists (and also stage magicians) with more or less bona-fide psychiatrists, as those all worked with and/or manipulated the mental states of persons subservient to them or just blatantly under their control. When during the first decades of the twentieth century many psychiatrists concluded that hysteria was often simulated, the discussion turned to the question of whether it was a product of suggestion or even manipulation on the doctor’s part. This debate—which Freud, for one, also got caught up in—spilled over into the media and reinforced the popular notion of the psychiatrist as some sort of impresario who would instruct his charges hypnotically.

By making the somnambulist the heroine of the story, a symbolical revenge was enacted upon the authority-figure. Moreover, such revision of the rapport also testified to the growing realisation that a rapport is always reciprocal. As Hilary Grimes has shown in an interesting analysis of *Trilby*, Svengali cannot do without Trilby; the power-balance of the rapport is fluid and power flows both ways. Svengali needs Trilby to perform, just as Caligari needs Césare to commit the crimes he has designed; just as, in the ‘real’ world, Charcot would not have been so famous without his star patient Blanche, nor would de Puységur have invented anything without Victor Race’s contribution.

The revision of the rapport by popular somnambulism further recognised the possibility that new rapports can be established as well, in which the somnambulist switches position to become the magnetiser. When a hypnotised Trilby is singing she turns into a hypnotiser: audiences are mesmerised by her. This is not merely a literary construction; musical performance and entranced audiences already had a long history together, and by the end of the nineteenth century audiences were generally expected to enter a certain state of mind at the behest of performer or conductor. It is in the power of the performer to hold sway over the audience—and over the audience’s consciousness as well. Musicians, stage performers or cinematographers offered audiences alternations of consciousness, addictively so. Virtual audiences flocked to the performances of Trilby and Césare, reflecting the contemporary practices of real audiences between 1880 and 1920 who were fascinated by Blanche, *Trilby* and *Dr. Caligari*. Somnambulism-mania answered to, and further reinforced, an audience’s anxious realisation that they could be manipulated. It is no coincidence that somnambulism became a popular trend at a time when stage magic and illusion,
(stage) hypnotism, (stage) Spiritualism, scientific demonstrations of wonders such as electricity and magnetism, and cinema, were vying for the public’s attention; all performances more or less based upon technical machinery and/or scientific claims, all showing marvellous things, and all having a certain (mental) effect on the audience. Such an effect could, as a matter of fact, be quite significant, particularly in the case of cinema: in the famous train incident, an audience was so shocked by a train advancing speedily on screen that they panicked and fled. Obviously being able to distinguish between illusion and reality was an important factor. Somnambulism-mania was rampant because audiences knew very well that they were being manipulated on all sides by smarter, more educated and technically more savvy wo/men; including not least doctors and scientists who could turn innocent people into automata with their magnetic hypnotising skills.

In this climate of fascination for, experimentation with, and anxieties over somnambulism, a young group of aspiring poets gathered together and thought about exploring the mental states of the somnambulist-hysteric-patient for themselves.
II. Somnambulist Surrealism

Surrealism and dynamic psychiatry

Before he became a poet Breton studied medicine. During the First World War he trained at various hospitals, such as the psychiatric ward of St. Dizier at Nantes. He became familiar with the medical methods of the time, including automatism and Freudian dream-work. By the end of the War he moved to the Salpêtrière-la Pitié in Paris, where he studied under Joseph Babinski, one of Charcot’s disciples (and the man holding Wittman in the painted lecture [fig 10]). Breton read a number of textbooks that introduced him to the early ideas of Freud and ideas of other trailblazers of dynamic psychiatry, including Janet, Charcot, Flournoy, Richet, Myers and James, and he quickly moved from textbooks to their actual works. The question of which of these dynamic psychiatrists has extended the most influence over Breton is an on-going scholarly debate; while Freud is primarily acknowledged by the Surrealists themselves, it is clear that the others left their traces as well, chiefly Janet, Flournoy and Myers, all of whom Breton had read by 1922. Louis Aragon had trained in psychiatry as well and Max Ernst had studied psychology in Bonn, while Pierre Naville (1903-1993), Philippe Soupault (1897-1990) and Jacques-André Boiffard (1902-1961) had some background in medicine too. With such a substantial number of proto-Surrealists having a medical-psychiatric background—a ‘doctor’s club’—it stands to reason that this dada group, soon to become surrealist, proved a fertile ground for psychiatric concepts.

Breton took to dynamic psychiatry immediately and was fascinated by mental states and mental illnesses, as is documented in the letters he sent to various renowned doctors about the subject. There is no doubt that the early surrealist experiments with automatism are squarely grounded in contemporary psychodynamic practice, yet at the same time the objective of surrealist automatism differed essentially from that of psychiatry. Already at St. Dizier Breton had been impressed by what he considered the imaginative and original ‘fantasies’ of the shell-shocked soldiers, in particular their ability to fashion ‘the most distant relations between ideas, the rarest verbal alliances’. Rather than a cure, he thought about how to further explore such apparently authentic and wholly original creativity. If Breton had taken his medical degree and continued in psychiatry, eminent historian of psychiatry Ellenberger has argued, he might very well have become ‘the founder of a new trend of dynamic psychiatry’. Instead, Breton founded an art movement and pursued the practices and theories of dynamic psychiatry to creative, primarily literary, ends, where automatism functioned as a creative expression in itself rather than therapeutic practice.
In the process of developing automatism as the essential creative practice of Surrealism, many psychiatric phenomena were reinvented as art. An example is the surrealist treatment of hysteria, which, on the basis of Myers’s theory, was considered an automatic ‘subliminal uprush’. Half a century after Charcot, on the occasion of the ‘fiftieth anniversary of the invention of hysteria’, Breton and Aragon celebrated it as poetical expression:

Hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon and may in all respects be considered as a supreme means of expression.

By the time of their essay in La Révolution Surréaliste, 1928, hysteria had become obsolete in the medical world. The ‘dismemberment of the concept appears to be complete’, the authors noted, which allowed them to divest the concept of pathology, insist that it existed independently from the medical establishment, and grant it aesthetic rebirth as a poetical performance. They illustrated their essay with photographs of hysterical poses performed by Augustine, another of Charcot’s patients, taken from Charcot’s Iconographie photographique [fig 15]. Like Wittman, Augustine (real name unknown, 1860-?) was young, beautiful and susceptible to suggestion. Aragon and Breton did more than aestheticize the condition of hysteria; they also elevated the hysteric herself to a new position of power, erotic power specifically. In the essay they point out that even while the patients might have been in the doctor’s power during the day, at night the tables were turned, and Augustine and other patients of the Salpêtrière would seduce the doctors and interns, to Charcot’s (assumed) blissful ignorance. The photographs in Iconographie photographique clearly show that Charcot and his assistants looked at the, frequently sexually suggestive, antics of their hysterics with an erotic gaze. In any case, by elevating Augustine to a position of erotic power, starring in her own creative performance, the authors position her as someone undermining and subverting patriarchal order by means of her body. She also addresses the victimisation of herself as well as other patients, which is implied in the essay not least by calling them ‘the survivors’ of Salpêtrière. What the surrealist treatment of hysteria shows, is that the Surrealists were very familiar with contemporary psychiatry, generally gave it the same radically critical treatment as they did all bourgeois institutions, and without any qualms appropriated the ideas and concepts that suited their own practice, for creative ends alone and reinventing them as art in the process. This is typical of the way many psychiatric phenomena were reconfigured in Surrealism, and in my opinion an essential part of the surrealist worldview: expressions of the subliminal, considered to be expressions of unrestrained creativity, in whatever
The knowledge of Breton and others was not limited to the psychiatry of the recent past, in this case hypnosis, but also encompassed contemporary sources, for instance the books of Theodore Flournoy. Breton knew all of Flournoy’s works, including the two about Hélène Smith, and was particularly impressed by Flournoy’s theory of the ‘hidden creative self’. In the end such a self was the Surrealists’ main concern. Accordingly Breton celebrated Smith, the woman whom Flournoy had dubbed ‘a veritable museum of mental phenomena’ the majority of which was expressed creatively. She fascinated Breton, not as a person—he couldn’t care less about her daily life or her Spiritualism—but as a creative automaton. As a poet eagerly searching for authentic creativity outside of the established and bourgeois frameworks of the (art) academy and society, he could not but be in awe of her ‘beautiful subliminal poems’, ‘subliminal imaginative’ romances and ‘invented’ languages, all generated by an untrained mind.
He introduced her in the surrealist discourse, referred to her relatively often, reproduced her artistic work, and had her immortalised as a surrealist heroine by elevating her to the status of ‘siren’ in a surrealist deck of cards that was created in 1939 [plate VII]. Hysteria-as-poetry was celebrated in the form of Augustine, and mediumship-as-poetry in the form of Smith. In both cases the groundwork for associating their unconscious expression with art had already been laid by their respective doctors, Charcot and Flournoy, as mentioned above.

Automatism and The Magnetic Fields
Breton’s background in dynamic psychiatry detailed above led him to the conclusion that the creative potential of Myers’s subliminal, or Flournoy’s ‘hidden creative self’, was unlimited, and that automatism was the key to unlocking such a self. A personal experience showed him the ease with which one can enter into an automatic state: one afternoon in 1919 when on the verge of falling asleep, slumbering as it were, he was suddenly overcome by a poetic insight. The consequences of this simple insight were rather far reaching, as it pointed him to the poetic potential of the intermediate state between dreaming and waking, ‘that hypnagogic state where scattered words and images occur to the mind’. Not only was this state a gateway to the subliminal, but it was also available to those of ‘normal’ mind, that is Breton and his friends, who were after all not shell-shocked, hysteric, hypnotised or hospitalised. This parallels Freud’s assessment that alternate states can also exist in those of character and intellect, and runs contrary to Janet’s view, as mentioned above. Breton and Philippe Soupault, a fellow aspiring poet, immediately decided to ‘voluntarily re-create in [themselves] the state in which [such words and images] took form’: ‘all [they] had to do was shut out the external world’, and when they were thus suspended in an extended moment of almost-falling-asleep, words or sentences sprung to their minds and they wrote quickly and immediately, without apparent thought or pause for re-reading or editing. The first experiments with automatic writing were a fact. The tangible result was The Magnetic Fields of 1920, a combined composition consisting entirely of automatic writing. It is a milestone in surrealist exploration of automatic writing—in fact a milestone of automatic writing in modern literature generally. In the writing of The Magnetic Fields, said Louis Aragon,

Surrealism was invented. The thing itself. Not the word.
Two

writing specifically became the quintessential surrealist practice. Breton and Soupault were both poets, and accordingly their dissociated state yielded words and sentences that they captured in writing; literature is the touchstone. Just as important is that Breton connected surrealist subliminal creativity to a state related to sleeping from the outset. Shutting out the external world by closing the eyes was the means to enter into an intermediate state located between dreaming and waking. As I will explore in the next chapter, closing the eyes is a symbolic act, as it signifies turning inward and opening one’s inner eyes upon a landscape of dreams or the imagination. While the proto-Surrealists inherited this notion from their revered forebears, the Romantic and Symbolist poets, it was their own idea that the inner landscape would be one akin to that of mental patients.

In Surrealism automatism was divested of its medical framework. It served the (proto-) Surrealists only in an artistic, initially chiefly literary, capacity, something exemplified by The Magnetic Fields, which was after all published as avant-garde poetry. The Magnetic Fields further testifies to the fact that the Surrealists easily moved between the automatisms Myers had defined as sensory and passive—a hypnagogic moment, for instance—and motoric and active, such as automatic writing. Even more distinctive is that in Surrealism automatic acts are typically followed up with conscious, i.e. rational and wilful, action. Not only was The Magnetic Fields written, it was also published, which requires a certain amount of editing even if minimal. This twofold combination of, firstly, passive with active automatism, and secondly, automatism with conscious action, was rather uncommon in dynamic psychiatry, and can be taken as typically surrealist. The Surrealists explored many forms of automatism, as we will see, and in each case we find this combination of passive with active, and automatic with conscious. For instance, another automatic (and passive, sensory and hallucinatory) state was the dream. While awake and rational, the Surrealists would write down those dreams, recount them to others, and even publish them. Many of the automatic events of the sleeping sessions were written down too, first in transcript and subsequently in the condensed (and romanticised) essays the ‘Wave of Dreams’ and ‘The Mediums Enter’, which were in turn published in surrealist journals. As the 1920s progressed the Surrealists would begin to automatically create (visual) art, which was reproduced in publications, exhibited or otherwise made public. In other words, the very practice of automatism was embedded in a rational context of planning and publicizing. Again, this is a distinctive surrealist practice, and indicative of the fact that automatism and its creative products were strategically employed in an artistic discourse, as strategies of distinction.
The sleeping sessions: lucid dreaming

The Magnetic Fields was only the beginning. The experiments with automatism were quickly broadened to include dream-work too; indeed dreaming came to dominate the early surrealist discourse so much that Ellenberger even speaks of an ‘oneiric climate’ in Surrealism. I argue that this climate proved the impetus for the sleeping sessions, that is, for the exploration of a particular mental state—this is the ‘sleeping’ part of the sessions, to be discussed first. The particular form of those sessions, the séance-setting, was precipitated by another development, which I shall discuss further below.

The ‘oneiric climate’ in early Surrealism was fuelled by Max Ernst, the one Surrealist who, because German, could read all of Freud’s works in the original (rather than French abridged) version. Ernst had joined the proto-Surrealist collective just before the time of slumbers, when he was deeply involved in dream-work. A graduate in psychology and philosophy, besides art, and very interested in the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and others, Ernst practised a form of auto-psychoanalysis. He studied his dreams and used them as a departure point for his art, and paintings such as Oedipus Rex (1922) testify to his exploration of Freudian ideas [fig 16]. Ernst found himself faced with a specific problem: how to truly recapture a dream upon waking? The issue also worried Breton no end, and many others too. The proto-Surrealists primarily tried to capture the pure automatic hallucination of dreams by dream description afterwards, but as Breton lamented, this was an unreliable method, as memory negatively influenced such narration—not to mention revision, editing or other interventions on the writer’s part.

Dawn Ades has suggested that in response to this problem the proto-Surrealists may well have turned to the practice of the sleeping sessions as an exploration of the creative unconscious that was direct and instantaneous, i.e. unedited or undistorted; and I agree. Furthermore, I would specify and add that in fact they were trying to dream lucidly. By simultaneously combining passive sensory automatism (dreaming) and active motor automatism (speaking or writing), they were attempting to give a ‘live’ account of the hallucinatory state of dreaming. In view of that the sleeping sessions should not be considered just any other form of experimentation with automatism, a temporary and failed attempt at that, as they are sometimes made out to be by art historians; but rather a directed and serious effort to explore the specific automatic state of dreaming directly and verbally. This is borne out by the fact that terms such as ‘sleep’, ‘slumber’ and ‘dream’ abound in the descriptions of the sessions by Aragon and Breton. Aragon’s essay is even entitled ‘A Wave of Dreams’ and those who were entranced during the sessions are called the ‘dreamers’. Throughout Breton’s
‘The Mediums Enter’ we find an emphasis upon sleeping, and furthermore upon its opposite, waking. The anecdote about Breton being overcome by a poetic insight when almost falling asleep, the first surrealist automatic state that eventually led to *The Magnetic Fields*, precedes the actual account of the sleeping sessions, in that way not only embedding the whole narrative of those sessions in a larger discourse on sleeping, slumbering, dreaming, and dream-narration, but also explicitly linking it to earlier automatic experimentation and automatic writing specifically. The sleeping session represent the next experimental step. Breton may have mastered the art of writing down the dream without editing, Aragon tells us, but Desnos mastered the art of *dreaming without sleeping* [plate VIII]. ‘[H]e contrives to speak his dreams at will’.143 That is the objective of the sleeping sessions: speaking your dreams. This squares with the definition of Surrealism Breton provided in 1923: Surrealism is the term that designates ‘a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather well to the dream state’.144

The spoken dream represents a form of uncensored pure thought, a unique surrealist form of automatism that is practiced with eyes closed but not asleep, accessed by means of a slumbering state. This is almost as close to the surreal as one can get: ‘Desnos speaks surrealist at will’, Breton wrote admiringly.145 There is no doubt that speaking while a-slumber was considered an automatic act; it was another of Myers’s ‘subliminal uprushes’, namely ‘utterances of spontaneous trance’.146 Without a doubt it was also a poetical act—within this context of young poets everything involving words is potentially literature—and in ‘The Mediums Enter’ Breton called automatism a ‘magic dictation’.147 Pure thought itself dictates. Not to be limited to automatic speaking only, during the sessions the entranced person would be given pencil and paper almost every time, to invite automatic writing and drawing too.

Besides the oneiric climate within the soon-to-be-surrealist collective itself, a further impetus for the sleeping session may have been somnambulism-mania. It had reached a highpoint in literature in the wake of *Trilby* (1894) and continued on stage and in the cinema.148 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* reached Paris just before the onset of the time of slumbers, and the film surely impressed the proto-Surrealists on many accounts, not least because mental states are one of the main motifs, furthermore explored in an innovative visual form, ‘le caligarisme’.149 In the cultural imagination, somnambulism and art had become intimately connected. The proto-Surrealists were furthermore familiar with the other forms of somnambulism—all developed out of artificial somnambulism, as I have detailed above—too. As will be discussed below, they were well aware of contemporary practices of Spiritualism, and of psychical research, besides the history of hysteria and hypnosis. Last but not least, they had had their taste of
popular stage-practices of somnambulism too; just days before the first sleeping session, Breton and Desnos had publicly debunked two alleged hypnotisers as frauds. In other words, in 1922 dreaming, sleepwalking and sleepwalkers were very much part of their frame of reference and perhaps daily world. Somnambulism, with its medical, literary, artistic and pop culture roots, may have seemed the obvious way to proceed.

The sleeping sessions: the séances

Lucid dreaming might be practised in many a setting. The group however opted for a very specific one, namely the séance-like setting. This was primarily inspired, I argue, by contemporary psychodynamic practices, and grounded upon the proto-Surrealists’ understanding of Surrealism as an experimental and (semi-) scientific undertaking. Surrealism was a mode of research. There is no doubt that experimentation was on the (proto-)Surrealists’ minds, something Aragon made clear at the time and which many scholars often emphasise. As far as Breton was concerned surrealist psychic experimentation, that is with the mind and its subliminal states, had started in 1919 with The Magnetic Fields. He had sent Freud an inscribed copy of The Magnetic Fields, writing that he considered himself and Freud ‘fellow explorers of the hidden mind’, even. And although this was followed by a rather disastrous visit in 1921—in which it became clear that the surrealist explorations were of a rather different nature to Freud’s—he was not discouraged from pursuing his goals by means of experimentation and research. Now by the onset of the time of slumbers, early Surrealism was surrounded by successful examples of scientific experimental investigations of the ‘hidden mind’: the experimental séances of psychical research. What better manner of inspirational model could there be?

In 1920 Charles Richet (mentioned above) had founded the Institut Métapsychique in Paris, where experimental séances were carried out. In his 1922 best seller Traité de métapsychique Richet reported on his experiments with the famous medium ‘Eva Carrière’ (1886-?), best known for her manifestations of ectoplasm. Breton certainly read Richet’s Traité, and appropriated Richet’s term ‘métapsychique’ and even his seminal concept of cryptesthesia for Surrealism. He also attended sessions at the Institute (although this is documented for 1927 only). And even though no ectoplasm ever materialised during surrealist experiments (to the Surrealists’ regret, I would guess), scattered comments show that they were certainly familiar with this term, and therefore probably also with the experimental practices that generated it. In addition to Richet’s interesting experiments, studies such as Flournoy’s suggested that experimental séances
yielded the best creative results, resulting not only in creative, but also ludic and mytho-poetic explorations of the hidden self, which I assume must have appealed to the Surrealists, for whom games were already a daily staple and who were hardly averse to some mytho-poetry. If these important and innovative psychologists found the laboratory much too limiting for studying ‘the whole personality’ and resorted to the experimental séance, it only stood to reason that the proto-Surrealists—rather more keen on new and/or controversial science than traditional scientific avenues anyway—would do the same.

Plate VIII.

They upheld the superficial trappings of the spiritualist séance, just as Flournoy had done with Smith, and the sessions took place in the quintessential locale of the séance, the home (in this case of the Bretons and the Éluards). Lights were dimmed, hands were held, etc.; such were the ‘conditions necessary for such [automatic] phenomena’, apparently. Breton called the conditions ‘imbecilic’, but even so they worked; very quickly the experimental surrealist séances led to psychic success—not psychic in a spiritualist sense, but psychic automatic in a surrealist sense. Even though Desnos claimed to have established telepathic contact with Duchamp in New York, and presented poems and spoonerisms as if
by Duchamp’s alter-ego Rose, those were just epiphenomena, perhaps even part of those ‘imbecilic’ but ‘necessary’ conditions. The real phenomena the sleeping session brought forth were ‘words organised into a discourse’, according to Breton, and, added Aragon, ‘equations’ and ‘facts’ ‘human reason can’t work out’. Literaty expressions of irrational origin, in other words.

A few scholars have a different take on the spiritualist trappings and on the events I have called epiphenomena. Yvonne Duplessis and Jean Clair, for instance, have focused on the prophetic clairvoyance and telepathy on the part of Desnos and the possibility of their veracity. The Surrealists themselves, however, and Breton certainly, did not take Desnos’ predictions seriously at all but instead appreciated them as part of the process of creative expression. Years later it appeared that a few remarks had turned out to be prophetic after all; their marvellous and clairvoyant character was celebrated, but only retrospectively. As I will show in chapter four, prophets could be hailed in Surrealism only after the fact, as the realm of ‘the marvellous’ whence such predictions spring is of a secular nature and therefore never supernatural, although always super-real. Meanwhile Desnos’ spoonerisms were appreciated for their inventiveness, and his attribution of them to Rose was treated as the joke (telepathic contact with an alter-ego) it was. Polizzotti has argued that Desnos might have opted for apparent telepathic contact with such an esteemed and living Precursor as Duchamp in an attempt to best Crevel, with whom he was embroiled in a rivalry of entranced feats. Another argument, put forward by Katherine Conley, is that Desnos’ appropriation of a specifically female alter-ego may have been a way to deal with his increasing investment in something traditionally considered a feminine pursuit, namely automatism. I find both explanations probable, and mutually inclusive. Conley has further pointed out that Desnos may also have been reacting to the uncanny technology of the radio, which was just being introduced in Paris at the time. He claimed to hear Duchamp’s voice, and contact was only possible if Duchamp was ‘wide awake’; it might well be that he acted as if a radio’s microphone to Duchamp/Rose’s voice speaking on the air. There seems to be a parallel here with Spiritualism, which was after all also partly predicated upon the perception of technological inventions as uncanny. It remains on the surface, however; no Surrealist took Desnos’ ‘contact’ for actual telepathy, and this episode aside, no other surrealist dreamer ever claimed to communicate with anyone other than themselves—or rather, their subliminal.

Still, it is obvious that the sleeping sessions are nonetheless partly indebted to Spiritualism. All ‘necessary conditions’ and epiphenomena aside, the originator of the whole experiment, René Crevel, was ‘initiated’ by a spiritualist medium, and brought his knowledge with him to his friends. Spiritualism had in
fact been enjoying a renewed and widespread popularity in France after the First World War, and it is very probable that other proto-Surrealists besides Crevel also had some familiarity with it. Many Surrealists, Breton foremost among them, visited the parlour of a clairvoyant, a certain Mme Sacco [fig 17]. While these visits started in 1925, it may well be that some of them were acquainted with mediums and clairvoyants earlier. As I will argue in the following chapter, Mme Sacco was not paid visits for her knowledge of the future, but rather for her imaginative predictions, that is, for the fantasies of her hidden mind. Again, the mediumistic setting served literary ends.

The practice of automatic writing itself is also a bone of contention; the aforementioned Clair considers it an essentially spiritualist practice and capitalises on its pre-eminent position in Surrealism to accuse the movement of ‘salon Spiritualism’. On the other side of the spectrum we find Ellenberger, who insists that the surrealist ‘technique of automatic writing had nothing in common with that of the Spiritualists’. Many art historians share his position, and usually a psychodynamic origin is provided for automatic writing. While that is certainly correct, it is also true that automatic writing as such did originate in spiritualist circles, whence Janet appropriated it for psychiatry, as pointed out above. Accordingly psychiatric automatism and spiritualist automatism are in fact related, and do have something in common: the assumption that the one doing the writing is not in their normal state—although obviously opinions differ with regards to the particularities of that state. Accurately enough Breton would state at one point that surrealist automatism was ‘inherited from the mediums’. It was. To start with, the Surrealists inherited it from dynamic psychiatrists such as Myers, Flournoy, Richet, and Janet, who all carried out a large part of their research with persons who considered themselves, and were known to others including the doctor-scientists, as mediums. Hence the title of Breton’s essay documenting the sleeping sessions, ‘The Mediums Enter’. In his opinion Desnos, Crevel and others had really tried to emulate mediums—those of Flournoy (in the séance) and of Janet (in the psych ward), that is. Those authors who are keen to use Breton’s statement to establish associations between Surrealism and esotericism are right, too—but it is a second hand connection, as the automatic writing of Spiritualists and spiritual mesmerists arrived in Surrealism only mediated by dynamic psychiatry.

What it comes down to in the end is that the Surrealists made use of certain ‘spiritualist techniques while abandoning all expectations about content’. In my opinion this distinction between technique and content—or belief—is essential, and one should not mistake a practice for a belief (as Clair does), nor treat mediums in Spiritualism and those in experimental psychiatry as
all alike. One can see why this might happen; in the psychodynamic séance, the boundaries between Spiritualism, metaphysics, parapsychology and science could be blurred sometimes. Early Surrealism in turn blurred dynamic psychiatry, its experimental séances, notions of the ‘hidden creative self’, explorations of somnambulist states and automatic experiments with dreaming, and some trappings of Spiritualism, all of which however does not detract from the fact that surrealist automatism was always a fundamentally creative literary practice anchored in a secular here and now.

As I have shown, the proto-Surrealists created their own form of psychical research experiments. They departed from psychodynamic practices in a variety of ways, primarily by focussing upon unchained creativity rather than therapy. The sleeping sessions were one psychical experimental avenue, predicated upon various disciplines concerned with somnambulism, and in my opinion resulting in something new: surrealist somnambulism.

*Psychic automatism: surrealist psychical research*

Lucid dreaming was just one form of psychic automatism. Surrealist psychic automatism, I argue, should be considered an investigative field, modelled upon dynamic psychiatry generally and in particular upon psychical research carried out by dynamic psychiatrists. The proto-Surrealists considered their pursuits a parallel to psychical-psychiatric research, and themselves ‘fellow-explorers’ to Myers, Flournoy and Richet, as well as Freud. The adjective ‘psychic’ derives from psychical research. It should be noted that the modern scholarly division between parapsychology on the one hand, and psychology and psychiatry on the other, is a construction that did not exist for the proto-Surrealists, who considered them all one discipline concerned with the mind—as they were too.

The surrealist efforts to create a proper investigative field of their own reached full fruition a year after the time of slumbers. 11 October 1924, just days before the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* was to be published, the Bureau of Surrealist Research (BRS) opened its doors at 15, Rue de Grenelle, Paris. It was to be at once office of the fledgling movement, meeting place of members, ticket window for interested parties, and location for surrealist experiments with automatism. Bertrand Méheust argues that the Bureau of Surrealist Research was modelled directly upon the Institut Métapsychique of Richet, which I find convincing enough. Certainly the BRS functioned as a sort of experimental research facility: experiments with automatic writing were taken down in a logbook, dreams were recounted, and plans were made. The Bureau, it was declared in the press, was to be engaged in
collecting by all appropriate means communications concerning
the diverse forms taken by the mind’s unconscious activity [l’activité
inconsciente de l’esprit]. No specific field has been defined for this
project and surrealism plans to assemble as much experimental data as
possible, without knowing yet what the end result might be.182

The statement confirms my argument that, at least at this stage,
Surrealism was concerned with ‘the mind’s unconscious activity’. It should be
noted that the terminology of the Surrealists is somewhat fluid; ‘the hidden mind’
and ‘the hidden self’ are also current, but all point to the same: exploration of the
alternate consciousness expressed via automatism. The declaration of the BRS
also testifies to Surrealism’s twofold attitude towards science; on the one hand
the Surrealists wanted to collect ‘experimental data’, as is proper to science, but
on the other the unwillingness to define a ‘specific field’ and the declaration of
an open-ended result represent a significant departure from traditional scientific
practice. Moreover, they were remarkably democratic about their data: the BRS
specifically aimed at collecting communications from the public at large, which
was invited to contribute accounts of dreams, for instance.183 In contrast to
psychodynamic practice, and more in conformity with Spiritualism, anyone and
everyone could in theory provide information of possible value.

As is proper to a scientific endeavour, the Surrealists documented
their experiments and made the results public. To this end they founded their
own journal, La Révolution Surréaliste (1924-29), another embodiment of the
scientific aspirations and much longer lived than the Bureau itself. Explicitly
modelled upon scientific reviews such as Nature, rigidly laid out in columns and
featuring only a few illustrations and photographs, it was distinctly different from
other art journals of the time. A good part of the journal’s content—besides
the political and aesthetic declarations, of course—can be read as reports of
research in progress: written recitations of dreams (under the heading ‘surrealist
text’), experiments with automatic writing, questionnaires, and reports on other
surrealist experiments and group activities.184 In a similar vein Breton’s essay ‘The
Mediums Enter’ in Littérature had documented the successes and dangers of the
sleeping sessions, and served further to point out that the Surrealists took their
explorations of all forms and states of automatism very seriously, and were willing
to try many approaches.

For good measure a sleeping session was restaged at the Bureau and
photographed by Man Ray; the photograph in turn was reproduced on the
cover of the first issue of La Révolution Surréaliste, 1924 [plate IX; fig 18]. On
a certain level this photograph is just like those that were sometimes taken by
psychical researchers at séances with spiritualist mediums: ‘objective evidence’, predicated upon the assumption that a camera is an objective instrument [fig 19].185 While there is no flying table here, we do see Simone Kahn-Breton centre stage, transcribing verbatim all that transpired on a typewriter. The typewriter functions as the equivalent of levitating furniture: proof that something really special happened, in this case, authentic poetry; the creation through live recitation of which was ‘objectively’ documented.186 It is important to note that this photograph does not document an actual session, but only a restaged one, made after the actual sessions had come to an end. It is a performance, which served to emphasise the experimental nature of surrealist automatism to third parties. Besides providing documentary evidence, the proto-Surrealists were deliberately breaking the rules of ‘salon Spiritualism’, to borrow Clair’s term,187 by turning the whole thing into a public performance, even if after the fact—something they had learned in their (but recent) Dada days.188

As a method of research, psychic automatism was furthermore considered automatic in the sense of mechanical, in my opinion, and as a result not just objective but beyond concerns such as morals or aesthetics. As I have said in the introduction to this chapter, psychic automatism is a double-edged sword: it is an inherently valuable creative expression in itself, as well as a strategy to attack rationalism and bourgeois society. Not too long after the sessions Breton made the point that the surrealist poet should be like a device: ‘simple receptacles of so many echoes’ or ‘modest recording instruments’. As such, the Surrealist would be ‘without talent’.189 Desnos acting as a radio to the talented Duchamp/Rrose incidentally fits this objective to be an untalented instrument. ‘Modest instruments’ paraphrases a contemporary psychiatric handbook,190 but also Hélène Smith, who in a letter had referred to herself as a ‘modest instrument’ in Flournoy’s glory.191 Within Spiritualism mediums were also considered instruments, which all goes back to artificial somnambulistic practices where the somnambulist had already been sometimes positioned as if an instrument.192

The construction of humans as instruments touches upon the deep Freudian anxieties over the uncanny nature of machines, where machines (automata in particular) appear to be animate, while human beings act as machines. Human automatism raised moral, ethical and judicial issues of responsibility, which were only compounded with the advent of hypnosis and the publicly demonstrated full mental control of doctors over patients.193 In a long footnote in his Manifesto Breton showed awareness of these ‘medico-legal considerations’ on the question of whether an automatist can be held responsible for their actions or not.194 In line with the reasoning that Surrealists have no talent, they should, obviously, not be held accountable for their psychical automatic acts either.195 Responsibility for
one’s acts is only another bourgeois construction.

(Auto-)suggestion and the conflation of subject and object
Surrealist experimentation with automatism differs in a few essential aspects from the practices of somnambulism, foremost in the objective, which was creative rather than therapeutic, communicative, revelatory or entertaining. There are two further differences: the rapport and the veracity of the particular alternate state. The significant changes the Surrealists made to extant practices illustrate, I think, the creative objective of the sleeping sessions in particular and of psychical automatism in general. The proto-Surrealists radically reinvented the old power-balance of the rapport, which I shall discuss first, in such a way as to create something new, unique and wholly surrealist. This fits well with the radical character of the sessions overall; while none of the individual components is original to Surrealism but rather inherited from extant practices, together the proto-Surrealists turned them into a quite particular—and inherently surrealist—experimental séance of poetical lucid dreaming.

Plate IX.
A first break with the rapport is the surrealist reliance upon the democracy of the collective and the uniqueness of the individual at the same time. The proto-Surrealists’ non-conformity to traditional gender divisions, emphasis on group-activity and belief in each individual’s potential led to a series of séances in which, in principle, each and every one could become a dreamer: female or male, regular or incidental attendant, well-educated or less so, proto-Surrealists or guest, poet or lay-person. The creative hidden self is democratic and inherent in all. We find here a parallel with the spiritualist understanding that communication with the other side is in principle possible for all. Likewise, both the spiritualist and the surrealist séance depended upon the collective and shared enthusiasm for the procedures and possible outcome.196

Further typical for the surrealist rapport is that there is none—or such, at least, is suggested by some scholars, who in line with Dawn Ades consider the ‘hypnotic trances’ ‘self-induced’, or otherwise caused by (partial or complete) autohypnosis.197 This autohypnosis theory is however undermined by those who ascribe a ‘mesmerising personality’ to Breton. In the context of the history of artificial somnambulism, ‘mesmerising’ obviously indicates active agency; Breton was the hypnotiser, apparently, albeit perhaps unwittingly. I certainly acknowledge that emotional or psychological dependency upon Breton on the part of some (that is, Desnos and Crevel) may well have played a part in their willingness to participate, ability to slip into trance, actions performed while entranced, and/or willingness to simulate. Breton had a forceful personality and his présence should be recognised.198 It is quite possible that a mild form of rapport existed between Breton and Crevel and/or between Breton and Desnos in particular.199

Dumas has compared Desnos to Augustine. Both Desnos and Augustine performed to please a domineering male father figure (Breton and Charcot respectively) and both their performances were captured on camera. Desnos was photographed a-slumber multiple times by Man Ray, and these photographs were published in various surrealist sources throughout the 1920s [plates VIII and IX; fig 18 and 20]; while photographs of Augustine, originally published in Iconographie Photographique, were reproduced in La Révolution Surréaliste, and thereby claimed for Surrealism not only in words but visually appropriated too [fig 15]. Embedded within an artistic discourse as they were, the actions of Augustine and Desnos both became reified as poetical performances, thereby nullifying any possible original intentions the two might have had.200 Desnos-as-Augustine makes of Breton a Charcot, and it is quite possible that Breton’s encouragement of Desnos operated as suggestion, inciting Desnos to continuously develop and even embellish his sleeping states.

An even better parallel can be drawn with the Smith-Flournoy case, with
Breton acting as the constantly impressed Flournoy to Desnos’ Hélène Smith. Breton made Desnos essential to his surrealist undertaking by stating that he (alone) ‘spoke surrealist’, and that ‘more than any of us… [Desnos] perhaps got closest to the surrealist truth’. While that is no small praise, it is no mean burden to bear either. Breton reported on all Desnos’ actions and always maintained a detached and ‘scientific’ position, similar to that of Flournoy (or Richet or Janet, for that matter), never crossing the line into entering trances himself, but constantly depending upon Desnos to take it to even further (creative) lengths—at the cost of Desnos’ stability of mind. When Flournoy had gathered enough material, he ended his visits to Smith’s séances; similarly, when Breton had been sufficiently amazed and the experiments were furthermore breaking through the limits of acceptable behaviour (even for avant-gardistes), he ended the sessions. As far as he was concerned, this particular experimental phase had been successful and was now over, regardless of the fact that Desnos, for one, still wanted to continue. Taking the position of the rational well intentioned doctor, Breton decided unilaterally to protect Desnos from himself.

Still, whatever the rapport between Breton and Desnos, that is not sufficient to turn Breton into a Svengali. Besides, incidental guests who were hardly emotionally dependent upon Breton, such as Man Ray’s girlfriend Kiki (Alice Prin), also entered sleeping states. More to the point, the Breton couple went on a holiday for a couple of weeks while the sessions continued at Éluard’s home. Breton may have (unwittingly) exercised a degree of suggestion upon one or a few individual(s), but only sometimes. Furthermore Desnos could eventually dispense with the ‘necessary conditions’: near the end of the time of slumbers he could enter a sleeping state everywhere, even in noisy cafés, independently of whether Breton was there or not. Autosuggestion seems probable, the more so when taking into account that in line with medical opinion the Surrealists may well have thought that Smith also auto-hypnotised, and were inspired to emulate her.

The most important characteristic of the surrealist non-rapport is that the proto-Surrealists claimed direction of their own unconscious. In another departure from psychodynamic practice, as well as artificial somnambulism and mesmerism, experiments were carried out with oneself, rather than a second party. Through autosuggestion the surrealist dreamer became researcher and object of research in one, object and subject united. I think it probable that the Surrealists were at least in part inspired by popular culturally created somnambulists, who took control over their side of the rapport and claimed a position of power for themselves; just as Aragon and Breton provided Augustine with a position of (erotic) power. But the proto-Surrealists went further. Primed by their Dada-days
to reject all forms of authority and committed to upsetting, forcibly if need be, bourgeois order, there was no question they would implement such an old-fashioned and hierarchical power-relation as the rapport. No one controlled the proto-Surrealists’ unconscious but themselves. The dreamers initiated, directed and experienced their own trance—and generally reaped the benefits of it, credit with their artistic peers, too. 207

Integration of subject and object can be considered one of Surrealism’s main objectives, if not the objective. In chapters three and four I will explore this further. The early experiments with psychic automatism—automatic writing, dream description and lucid dreaming—paved the way, and even though surrealist somnambulism came to an end, it had still been proven possible. In merging object and subject as they did, the proto-Surrealists transgressed traditional models going back at least to the Enlightenment. It was distinctly at odds with the established practice in medicine, indeed in science, of separating rational from irrational, consciousness from the unconscious, doctor from patient, sane from pathological, researcher from object. Not so for the early Surrealists, who could create from their unconscious one moment, and discuss it consciously and rationally the next. Psychic automatism, in Surrealism, means total ownership of one’s own ‘hidden creative self’. Avenging in a way all the patients and somnambulists who had had to submit their consciousness to the Charcots, the Puységurs and the Svengalis too, the Surrealists made every automatic word and act an individual creative expression of poetry. Janet had considered ‘all manifestations of a second self’ a degradation of normal mental activity;208 half a century later, Surrealism designated normal mental activity the dead end and emancipated the automatic manifestations of the alternate self as personal, relevant and creative.

The Surrealists also flouted that most essential of dualistic models, male versus female. The unconscious, the irrational, somnambulist (alternate) states, mediumship, etc.; all of these had since the eighteenth century been associated nearly exclusively with femininity, whereas the role of the conscious and rational doctor/researcher/hypnotist had been exclusively male. Automatic writing was considered a feminine practice, while intellectual pursuits such as ‘serious’ (read: literary) writing was a masculine pursuit. Surrealism’s dedication to automatic techniques entailed a significant break with gendered tradition, while the aim of integrating the observed and the observer, and the unconscious and consciousness is an even more radical transgressions of gender-categories.209 Breton and Aragon’s war-time experience with shell-shocked soldiers may have contributed to their willingness to pursue ‘feminine’ practices, as such ‘hysterical’ men had shown them that the gender-boundary of hysteria could be crossed,
and that ‘hysterical delusions’ of men could be just as poetic and innovative as those of women. Still, the Surrealists were hardly paragons of women’s emancipation—on the contrary, in most cases. They appropriated a ‘feminine’ practice for themselves as men. I will return to the topic of (automatic) woman in Surrealism in the next chapter.

Speaking one’s dreams within the collective setting of the group made the dreamers into performers, and the others the audience; and it is important to note that the dual opposition between performer and audience remained more or less intact. Breton, someone who never entered a sleeping state, was part of that audience, another sign that rather than the magnetiser, he was mesmerised, along with everyone else. Just as Trilby held the audience in thrall with her singing, the surrealist dreamers held the reins of power during the time of slumbers; ‘dazed and broken’, the participants could still not think of anything else than ‘putting [themselves] back in that catastrophic atmosphere’. This squares with the popular cultural notion that stage-performers such as musicians, and visual artists such as the cinematographer in particular, were thought to influence the consciousness of their audiences. Without a doubt the proto-Surrealists enjoyed this idea that they might influence the consciousness of others through poetic performance. They were highly aware of the value of performance, not only as poetical inspiration (vis-à-vis Augustine), but also a strategy of distinction in the intellectual field. The restaged sleeping sessions at the BRS and their subsequent publication in print and photograph, showing off their artistic originality as well as their scientific approach, testifies to such awareness. It further shows that the positions of performer and audience were fluid for the Surrealists: audience of Desnos in one instance, they changed to a collectively performing group for the benefit of non-Surrealists in another.

Performing lucid dreaming and simulating it

The third and final essential difference between surrealist somnambulism and automatism generally on the one hand, and disciplines such as psychical research and dynamic psychiatry on the other, is the veracity of the trance states. In fact the entire discipline of psychical research revolves around the idea that the metaphysical claims of Spiritualism, for instance, can and should be scientifically tested and verified. Likewise the question of simulation had dogged the medical practice of hypnosis from the outset, and led many dynamic psychiatrists to disavow hysteria in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The surrealist consideration of the mental states was different, and again supported the fundamentally creative conception of automatism.

Some scholars have cast doubt upon the reality of the sleeping states,
claiming that certain participants of the sessions simulated them for Breton’s benefit, as some former participants indicated years later—although ulterior motives may have played a part there. Still, the sessions did turn very quickly into a notable struggle between Desnos and Crevel, the two most prodigious dreamers, which might have been an incentive for simulation, as Polizzotti points out. As he furthermore suggests—convincingly in my opinion—the trance-states might well have been genuine in the beginning but simulated in part or entirely at a later stage, possibly under the increasing demand for ever more marvellous displays of unconscious creativity.

Still the ‘veracity’ of trance-states is from the Surrealist point of view a rather moot point. Louis Aragon pointed out:

Is simulating something any different than thinking it? And once something has been thought, it exists.

I find it hardly coincidental that Aragon’s recognition of the possibility of simulation and subsequent acknowledgment of it as a genuine experience nonetheless is found in his account of the time of slumbers. Even while scholars continue to debate the issue of simulation today, the proto-Surrealists were aware of the possibility at the time and considered it a creative expression in its own right. I would like to draw a parallel with hysteria here. By the 1920s hysteria ‘was widely regarded within the medical mainstream as a simulated illness’. I have discussed how Aragon and Breton appreciated hysteria as poetic expression par excellence, and they and other Surrealists would certainly have known the medical opinion of hysteria as simulation. As a poetical performance, hysteria is just as much of a creative act when simulated, perhaps even more so. As Man Ray stated of Desnos’ performances during the time of slumbers, even if those had been ‘previously practiced and memorised’, they were ‘miraculous’ still. Precisely because automatism is pure thought, and simulation is such thought too, unmediated by such things as ‘talent’, ‘morals’, ‘aesthetics’ or ‘responsibility’, it is creative and valuable.

A couple of years later, Éluard and Breton put the principle that simulation is thought and therefore of possible poetic value to the test. During long sessions of automatic writing they simulated the following mental illnesses, in order: ‘mental debility’, ‘acute mania’, ‘general paralysis’, ‘interpretive delirium’ and ‘dementia praecox’. The result was included in the automatic novel The Immaculate Conception (1930), in a section entitled ‘The possessions’. Note that the authors are the possessors rather than the possessed. William James had referred to ‘mediumistic possession’ as a ‘perfectly natural special
type of alternate personality’, where the possession is passively experienced.\textsuperscript{224} Surrealism practiced active ‘poetical possession’, the mechanism to turn pathological phenomena into aesthetic expressions. By such possession and the artistic result, ‘The possessions’, Breton and Éluard proved that

the mind of a normal person when poetically primed is capable of reproducing the main features of the most paradoxical and eccentric verbal expressions and that it is possible for such a mind to assume at will the characteristic ideas of delirium without suffering any lasting disturbance (…).\textsuperscript{225}

Scholars may debate whether the simulated illnesses yielded only mere pastiches;\textsuperscript{226} as far as the Surrealists were concerned mental illness was a gateway to poetry, in just the same way as hysteria, lucid dreaming and automatic writing were.\textsuperscript{227} Those are all just different forms of Myers’s ‘subliminal uprushes’, after all, and the avenue of experimentation with psychic automatism that had started with \textit{The Magnetic Fields} reached a new landmark in \textit{The Immaculate Conception}. Surrealist experimentation had started with the practice of automatic writing only, had moved on to experiment with further techniques—automatic speaking and lucid dreaming—and a particular state of mind—somnambulism—during the time of slumbers, to arrive at the full blown assumption, albeit temporary, of actual madness. Psychic automatism really mined the psyche for all its poetic worth. And because the mind of the Surrealist is ‘poetically primed’ and also normal (importantly enough) as Breton and Éluard claimed, unfortunate side-effects such as actual madness or hospitalisation are avoided.\textsuperscript{228} Simulation is a useful mental process in this regard, and by validating simulation as thought, and therefore potentially equally creative as other thought processes, they rejected psychiatry’s pathologisation of the psyche, stage-somnambulism’s pitfalls, as well as the traditional artistic emphasis upon academic training and the particular personality of the mind, while stressing that pure thought alone was their touchstone. In the introduction to ‘The possessions’ Breton and Éluard state unequivocally that

“attempted simulation” of disorders... could with advantage replace the ballad, the sonnet, the poem, the gobbledygook poem, and other outdated [read: traditional and bourgeois] genres.\textsuperscript{229}

The new genre was psychic automatism, or ‘the dictation of pure thought’: automatically generated and thought-based. Once thought, something is real, and once expressed, it is surreal(alistic).
In conclusion

Psychic automatism, in Surrealism, is an investigation of the creative unconscious. It is based on the premises that pure unmediated thought is authentic and original and thereby the best departure point for art, that the subliminal self is the locus of pure thought, and that automatism is the best way to access it experimentally. The automatic techniques through which psychic automatism is expressed can be manifold, although automatic writing was the most important one. Other techniques were also practiced. The dream is one form of hallucinatory automatism, uninfluenced by rationality or similarly bourgeois concerns. The Surrealists described and published their dreams. An even better way was to dream lucidly, which was done in the sleeping sessions, during the time of slumbers.

In creating their sleeping sessions and automatic techniques the proto-Surrealists based themselves upon various disciplines that all evolved out of artificial somnambulism, including dynamic psychiatry and psychical research, Spiritualism, and popular somnambulism. Yet for all that, psychic automatism went beyond any therapeutic, pathological, psychiatric, scientific and certainly metaphysical aims. The experimental nature was retained however, and automatism, already tested by Spiritualism and dynamic psychiatry, became the experimental technique of choice for exploring the subliminal. Similar to the many dynamic psychiatrists who worked towards an unveiling of the mind’s hidden self, the (proto-)Surrealists considered themselves ‘fellow explorers of the mind’. They experimented with various mental states: the hypnagogic state of almost-falling-asleep; full sleepwalking or somnambulism, reinterpreted through automatic techniques as a state of lucid dreaming; and states of madness. All these states were considered potential sources of authentic creativity, and all resulting automatic expressions potential poetic discoveries.²³⁰ Just as the Surrealists reified hysteria as a poetic performance, they reinvented automatism as an experimental-investigative technique with creative ends only. The results of these experiments range from The Magnetic Fields to ‘The Mediums Enter’, ‘A Wave of Dreams’ and Desnos’s spoonerisms, to The Immaculate Conception, among many other things. Inspired by the somnambulist hero/ines of popular somnambulism and driven by their own rebellion, they also bypassed the rules of the rapport and unified subjective and objective, alternate state of mind and researcher into one. The Surrealist was researcher, doctor, and somnambulist all rolled into one. Performer and audience remained separate however—if only because as avant-gardistes they could not do without a garde.
In the end, the surrealist sleeping sessions were an investigation of lucid dreaming under the aegis of surrealist psychic automatism, Surrealism’s own creative somnambulism. Psychic automatism can be considered the surrealist equivalent of ‘le caligarisme’: an aesthetic form expressing alternations of consciousness. While Ray’s photographs of the restaged sleeping session are the historical, ‘scientific’, documents of what transpired, Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé has captured the time of slumbers metaphorically in *The Harvests of Sleep*, from the series entitled *Subversion of Images* (1929-30) [plate X]. We see a person asleep, his eyes closed. Yet he is writing. This is the essence of psychic automatism: writing your dreams. One can also speak one’s dreams, as Desnos did. The ‘harvest’ that sleep yields is a literary product. In the next chapter, I will discuss what happened to psychic automatism when the surrealists continued to dream while literature proved to be no longer enough, and they turned to visual art.