Introduction
The Material Muse in Nineteenth-Century Poetry

What does it mean to be an agent of poetry? This is a question that was asked with increasing urgency throughout the nineteenth century, and for good reason. With literacy on the rise, more people were reading and writing than ever before; changes in media technology meant that these readers and writers were encountering poetry in newly material ways; and in the midst of it all, the status of poetry as a genre was shifting in relation to the rise of the novel. Querying the role of poetry in the modern age, nineteenth-century writers repeatedly attempt to determine its contours, to dictate what it means to write poetry and even what it means to read it. Yet from the Romantic fascination with hallucinatory poetics to the turn-of-the-century mania for automatic writing, poetry in nineteenth-century Britain appears at crucial times to be oddly involuntary, out of control of its producers and receivers alike. *Poetry, Media, and the Material Body* investigates precisely this phenomenon: the ways in which nineteenth-century readers and writers are not, in fact, agents of poetry. Instead, poetry is imagined to promote in them involuntary bodily responses, and these responses enlist the body as a medium that does not produce poetry but rather *re*produces it. Alongside a well-established poetic tradition that insists on poetry's immediacy, in other words, runs an alternate tradition of theorizing poetic agency (in both literary and nonliterary texts) that demonstrates a deep engagement with theories of material embodiment and mediation. Uncovering and articulating this alternate tradition is my project here. As I aim to show, the relationship between poetry and material mediation – mediation that is often involuntary, physical, and reproductive – plays an integral role in the production of modern poetics.

In considering the ways in which poetry comes to be mediated throughout the century, I argue, it is necessary to consider the ways in which nineteenth-century thinkers conceived of the human body as one of the material media of poetry. In order to do so I investigate the often surprising intersections and overlaps between three infrequently related fields: studies

of poetry, studies of media, and studies of the body. It is at these intersections that we can see the development of a nineteenth-century theory of poetry – what I call "autopoetics" – deeply invested in automatic reproduction. I use the prefix "auto-" here to invoke a variety of meanings: "by hand" (i.e., by the body), automatically (i.e., mechanically), autonomously (by itself, independently). This is a poetics that depends upon evolving theories of physiology that establish the embodied mind as a material medium. At the same time, this poetics develops alongside the media revolutions of the century – from the rise of mass print culture and its attendant silent reading practices to the development of telegraphy and phonography – which make poetry's mediatedness, materiality, and reproducibility increasingly obvious. My argument, then, expounds upon two parallel premises: that nineteenth-century theories of poetic agency are deeply engaged with questions of the materiality of the body; and that these same theories of poetic agency are equally engaged with questions of the materiality of poetic media. Part of my goal here is to make clear the extent to which these premises are indeed parallel – the extent to which an increasing awareness of materiality, on multiple levels, comes to impact theories of poetic agency. Most important, however, is the end result: that these materialist theories of poetic agency drive toward a way of being with poetry that in fact has very little to do with agency. Instead, in the theory of poetry I outline here the material body is at the mercy, as it were, of poetry. Throughout the nineteenth century, poems are imprinted on retinas and on nerves; they dictate directly to hands and to hearts; they make readers listen and listeners speak. This is a poetics that draws attention to, rather than effaces, the mediacy of the body – its instrumentality, its complex and intermediate agency in the processes of poetic composition and reception alike. Privileging automatic responsiveness over imaginative agency, the autopoetic tradition rewrites the muse as material language. When Coleridge dreams of Kubla Khan, it is no coincidence that he dreams of it as an already-written poem.

In its investigation of the role of material mediation in theories of poetic agency, this book traces two central and interrelated narratives. The first narrative focuses on the mediacy of the body in nineteenth-century poetics – a body that is seen as increasingly material, as a means of retaining and reproducing information. The second narrative concerns itself with the material mediacy of nineteenth-century poetry itself: its investment in a logic of quotation, fragmentation, and allusion. As increasing attention is paid to the mediating body, material poetry appears to attain a surprising degree of autonomy. Indeed, if poetic automatism displaces writers and

readers as agents of poetry, it seems to install in their place the material poem itself as independent, autonomous, and self-replicating. Throughout the long nineteenth century, in other words, these two forms of material media – poetry and the body – are imagined to be deeply interactive. When and why they become so intertwined – and when and why they cease to be – is this book's governing line of inquiry. Why are questions of poetic agency so embroiled in discussions of and debates about materiality – the materiality of poetry, of media, of the body? Why did it become productive for nineteenth-century writers to imagine (in contravention of a longstanding poetic tradition that exalts the spiritual and immaterial) the human body as one of the material media of poetry? And what are the limits and rewards of a model of poetic agency that conceives the bodies of readers and writers as automatically responsive to – even physically at the mercy of – the material poem?

The Automatic Body in Nineteenth-Century Science

Physical responsiveness to language and literary form has proven to be a productive topic in nineteenth-century literary scholarship ever since the "neurological turn" challenged critics to historicize models of textual affect and its relationship to the body. By now we are especially familiar with the anxieties surrounding the problem of involuntary responsiveness in the reading experience, by nature compulsory and even addictive. This is particularly true in novel theory: from Nicholas Dames's *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007) to Elisha Cohn's *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (2016), studies of the physiological experience of reading have proven to yield rich and rewarding interpretations of Victorian fiction.[1] Building on this rich tradition, this book aims at the same time to expand and at times trouble our picture of the bodily medium that literature acts upon. I want to do this in part by shifting our orientation – taking a broad step sideways, as it were, to consider poetry in general, but also refocusing our attention on the particular formal qualities of poetry that constitute its materiality. I am not the first to consider the somatics of poetry, of course. Compared to the wealth of material on the physiology of the novel, far fewer critics have examined the problem of bodily responsiveness in encounters with poetry; but the field is a rich and growing one. Within it scholars have been particularly attuned to the role of meter in the physiology of poetic affect. Jason Rudy's *Electric Meters* (2009), for example, identifies in Victorian physiological poetics a focus on "rhythms that pulse in the body, a rhetoric of sensation that readers might feel compelled

to experience" (2); Kirstie Blair's *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (2006) traces the history of a poetics in which "the rhythm of a poem draws the reader into participation in a bodily sense, affecting blood and health" (17). Rudy, Blair, and other critics working on poetry in material culture have helped us to reconsider the place of poetry in studies of nineteenth-century reading.[2] What many of these studies share is an emphasis on the way meter, with its rhythms and pulses, can act on those physical systems of the body that best exemplify what makes us human: our hearts, our brains, our nerves. This book, instead, asks us to consider aspects of bodily mediation that often seem to work against or athwart humanist models of the body. Looking beyond the pulses of the heart and the nervous system, I work here to uncover elements of poetic materiality beyond rhythm and meter. As a result, the mediacy of the body comes to look quite unfamiliar in these pages: nineteenth-century auto-poetics often bypasses the heart and the brain – both traditional seats of embodied consciousness – and registers instead in seemingly disparate and disjoint bodily phenomena. Randomized fragments of print poetry operate like visual hallucinations, appearing unbidden in front of people's eyes; vocalized poetry attains a strange autonomy in the ears and mouths of its speakers and listeners; hands of automatic writers are used to substantiate a global network of excerpted and plagiarized poetry. In short, I focus on instances of bodily mediation that function in unnervingly fragmented and autonomous ways, ways that unsettle models of the body as an organic or coherent system.

It's necessary at the very outset to consider what I mean by media and mediation. Clifford Siskin and William Warner's provocative study of Enlightenment media defines mediation very broadly, as "work done by tools" (5). My own use of the word here draws from a somewhat more focused, yet still capacious, definition of mediation as a kind of physical process of communication or transmission, one that includes the mediation between mind and world. In one sense, then, I use the word "medium" to mean an instrument or channel of communication. In nineteenth-century physiology, the body was increasingly understood to be such a medium, as scientists began to investigate the way the body literally mediated sensation, expression, and even seemingly mental phenomena. Physicist David Brewster's 1832 treatise on the retina's role in mediating impressions, which I discuss at length in Chapter One, makes this evident: "This wonderful organ may be considered as the sentinel which guards the pass between the worlds of matter and of spirit, and through which all their communications are interchanged. The optic nerve is the channel by which

the mind peruses the hand-writing of Nature on the retina, and through which it transfers to that material tablet its decisions and its creations" (10–11). The retina here functions as a material channel of communication between the mind and the external world. Yet the body-as-medium depicted by nineteenth-century physiology (and, as we shall see, theories of poetry and media technology as well) also invokes another sense of the word "medium" as any kind of physical material used for recording or reproducing data. And we need look no further than the same text – Brewster's study of the retina – to see this model of the body's mediacy at work as well: "we find the retina so powerfully influenced by external impressions as to retain the view of visible objects long after they are withdrawn," even reproducing them at random (which, according to Brewster, accounts for the phenomenon of spectral illusions) (37). In addition to acting as a channel, the retina is also an inscribed medium that retains and reproduces impressions. When I refer to the mediacy of the body, then, I mean to implicate both senses of the word "medium" – an intermediate means of communication but also a means of material reproduction.

This complex sense of bodily mediation lies at the heart of nineteenth-century physiology's investigations into automatism – that is, the ability of the body to perform without voluntary or conscious control. For nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists, the emerging problem of bodily automatism became crucial to understanding the mind-body relationship. A body that was capable of operating automatically challenged humanist and antimaterialist claims about intellectual agency. In this way, the burgeoning science of physiology drew upon (and yet significantly departed from) eighteenth-century associationism, which attempted to explain mental phenomena via the habitual "association of ideas." David Hartley – philosopher, physician, and onetime hero to Coleridge – was the first to propose a physiological theory of association in his 1749 *Observations on Man*. Hartley linked the association of ideas to the vibrations of the nervous system: "Any Sensations A, B, C, etc., by being associated with one another a sufficient Number of Times, get such a Power over the corresponding Ideas a, b, c, etc. that any one of the Sensations A, when impressed alone, shall be able to excite in the Mind b, c, etc., the Ideas of the rest" (41). Hartley's associationism accounts for automatism, which he describes as motions "of which the mind is scarce conscious, and which follow mechanically, as it were, some precedent diminutive sensation, idea, or motion, and without any effort of the mind"; these automatic motions, he writes, are "to be ascribed to the

body [rather] than the mind" (104). For Hartley and the associationist school, the habitual association of ideas allowed the body to operate automatically; and yet the automatism modeled by associationism remains subservient to the mind's ability to train its own habits. While the theory seeks to explain seemingly random associations, it is at bottom a theory of reliable habit, of governance and predictability. This sense of the importance of habit and predictability is precisely what nineteenth-century theorists of automatism abandon as they explore the involuntary workings of the body.

Romantic physiologists were among the first to model a post-association automatism, a body whose involuntary impulses were not in fact predictable or habitual, and whose workings were beyond the management or direction of the mind. Romantic studies of hallucination, which I discuss at length in this book's first chapter, depicted the retina as a literal retainer of images, which could be "renovated" in front of the eye at random. Scientific studies of vision, as we shall see, began to depict the body as an unruly collection of material imprints unconnected by any links of habit or association. Take, for example, the testimony of a celebrated "ghost-seer" whose materialist analysis of his hallucinations prompted scientists to study the phenomenon more closely: after being haunted by phantasms for months, and "having fairly proved and maturely considered it," he concludes that "these visions in my case were not the consequence of any known law of reason, of the imagination, or of the otherwise usual association of ideas" but were simply the involuntary productions of his body (Nicolai 167). Over the course of the century the issues at stake here – the body as capable of operating automatically, of reproducing impressions spontaneously – became part of the scientific lexicon as writers debated the role of physical automatism in mental or cerebral processes.[3] By the late Victorian period, it was well understood that bodily automatism was an established phenomenon, one that needed consideration in any attempt to explain the relationship of the body to the mind. Noted physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter's 1874 *Principles of Mental Physiology*, for example, is careful to distinguish the ways in which doctrines of automatism have diverged from eighteenth-century theories of association:

> By far the larger part of our Psychical operations depend on the mechanism by which past states of consciousness *spontaneously* reproduce themselves: and while the Metaphysician accounts for this reproduction on the principle of "association of ideas," the Physiologist holds that in the formation of such associations, certain modifications took place in the organization of the Brain, which determine its mode of responding to subsequent suggestions;

> so that, under the stimulus of new impressions either from without or from within, the long-dormant "traces" of former mental states arc caused to reproduce themselves as Ideas and Feelings. (465–466)

For Carpenter and other nineteenth-century scientists, physiology provided a new way of conceiving of the body's role in mediating our experiences: not only does it act as a medium of transmission, turning sense impressions into mental phenomena, but it also stores these "past states of consciousness" in order to "*spontaneously* reproduce" them as ideas and feelings. The body is both signal and archive, transmitter and instigator.

Nowhere is this complex bodily mediation more evident than in discussions of linguistic automatism. Physiologists often turned to the problem of language because of the way language seemed to operate at both a mental and a physical level: words may be formed in the brain and expressed by the body, and yet both processes may be automatic. Carpenter writes in *Principles of Mental Physiology* that

> the act of expressing the thoughts in Language, whether by speech or by writing, may be considered as a good example [of automatism]: for the attention may be so completely given-up to the choice of words and to the composition of the sentences, that the movements by which the words and sentences already conceived are uttered by the voice or traced on paper, no more partake of the truly Volitional character, than do those of our limbs when we walk through the streets in a state of abstraction. (280)

In this example it is merely the physical expression of language that is automatic. However, Carpenter goes on to implicate the mental production of language in a similar kind of automatism: "great talkers, like Coleridge, sometimes run on automatically, when they have got patient listeners; one subject suggesting another, with no more exertion or direction of the will than we use in walking along a course that has become habitual" (393). Poor Coleridge: he appears frequently in these studies as an example of impotent agency and mental automatism, in keeping with William Hazlitt's more widely known depiction of him in *The Spirit of the Age*.[4] Carpenter, in a footnote, elaborates: "We have seen that the whole mental life of Coleridge was one of singular automatic activity, whilst there was a no less marked deficiency in the power of volitional self-direction" (*Mental* 393n).[5] However, the opium-addled poet also contributed an important study of linguistic automatism to the canon of Romantic and Victorian psychophysiology, one to which scientists returned throughout the century. In his *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge relates an anecdote about

a young German woman who becomes multilingual while suffering from a nervous fever: "She continued incessantly talking Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, in very pompous tones and with most distinct enunciation. . . . Sheets full of her ravings were taken down from her own mouth, and were found to consist of sentences, coherent and intelligible each for itself, but with little or no connection with each other" (I: 112–113). According to Coleridge, this "feverish glossolalia" (as Jerome Christensen calls it [111]) can be traced back to the young woman's childhood, when her learned guardian used to "walk up and down a passage of his house into which the kitchen door opened, and to read to himself with a loud voice, out of his favorite books" (I: 113).

In Coleridge's anecdote, the woman's involuntary and meaningless quotation – her automatic reproduction of phrases impressed upon her memory long ago – proved to be a fascinating object of analysis for physiologists, partly because it revealed memory to be an automatic and at times ungovernable faculty. Moreover, it linked mental automatism together with a model of the physical body as a reproductive medium: Carpenter writes that the phenomenon displayed "the automatic action of the 'Mechanism of Thought'" and claimed it was the result of the "recording process" of the cerebrum (*Mental* 439). Along with the body's bizarre ability to record and repeat past impressions, however, Coleridge's anecdote exemplifies another important trend in studies of automatism: a focus on the phenomenon of being *out of control* of language. For physiologists of automatism, even more intriguing than the idea that the physical body could function automatically was the idea that our relationship to language could also be automatic and involuntarily reproductive. Coleridge's garrulous German girl resurfaces in a wide variety of texts, deployed throughout the century as writers grapple with the relationship between mental and physical processes. Her recurring presence is testament to the fact that language – reproducible language, in particular – plays a key role in defining and delineating theories of bodily automatism. Physiologists of vision, for example, draw upon stories of sleepwriting and involuntary recitation in order to make their claims about the material functions of visual memory; later in the century, developing discourses of phonography engage with contemporary theories of the body's ability to reproduce spoken language, and the advent of spiritualism gives researchers a new venue for experimenting with automatic writing and speech. In the chapters that follow, I trace the role of automatic language in Romantic and Victorian theories of physiology – theories that, I argue, fix upon language as evidence of our own lack of control over our bodies and minds.

Involuntary language, in other words, comes to be the most productive confirmation of psychophysical automatism.

Poetry – deployed so often to exemplify a certain kind of intellectual creativity, a certain kind of relationship with an immaterial muse – offers a particularly potent site for considering linguistic automaticity. We tend to think negatively of automatized, mechanical interactions with language; interacting mechanically with poetry is perhaps an even worse offense. The nineteenth-century archive is rich with evidence of this same distrust. Alexander Melville Bell (celebrated elocutionist and father of Alexander Graham) voices a familiar complaint in his 1887 *Elocutionary Manual*:

> There can be no doubt that the school methods of *scanning,* and of reading poetry by the line, are directly productive of this worst and most prevailing oratorical taint. It is but rarely that a reader can be found whose voice is entirely free from this blemish; and the habit is speedily extended from poetry to prose, so that the expressive irregularity of prosaic rhythm is entirely lost in the uniformity of time to which the reader's voice is set. Pinned, as it were, on the barrel of an organ, his accents come precisely in the same place at every sentential revolution, striking their emphasis, at one turn, upon a pronoun or a conjunction, and, at another, impinging sonorously on an article or an expletive. (10)

Bell objects to this mechanical form of reading, one that seems to begin in poetry's regularity and spread even to metrically irregular prose in a kind of reverse Wordsworthian contagion of metrics.[6] In reading mechanically, the body imposes an unnatural rhythm that overlooks the nuance and even meaning of language. However, if poetry's rhythmic regularity was apt to set the body's automatism in motion, it could also be used to advantage. Even Bell goes on to offer a corrective to mechanical poetic reading – in the form of a poem:

> Some writer has happily expressed the principle of pausing in a metrical form, which is worth committing to memory:
>
> "In pausing, ever let this rule take place,
> Never to separate words, in any case,
> That are less separable than those you join;
> And, which imports the same, not to combine
> Such words together as do not relate
> So closely as the words you separate." (12)

Here the poem's metrics are expressly what recommends it to Bell, who advises his reader to commit it to memory.[7] He relies on its rhythms and rhymes to imprint it in his reader's mind – the same rhythms and rhymes

that tend so dangerously toward mechanical reading. Poetry's unusual relationship to memory, in other words, complicates Bell's attempt to do away with mechanical reading entirely. This is an important relationship, one that I will return to throughout the book. However much we might idealize language – and particularly poetry – as antithetical to automatism, poetry's history as a mnemonic device in oral cultures grants it special powers to bypass mental agency and operate at the level of automatic memory.[8] If the automatic body is a language-producing machine, it's a machine that is particularly susceptible to being played upon by poetry.

Yet what is perhaps most striking about the role of language in studies of automatism is that both poets and their audiences come to be figured as involuntarily susceptible to the machinations of poetic language. If this book aims to provide a more complete picture of the role of involuntary responsiveness in nineteenth-century literature and science, another way it does so is by considering the writing body alongside the reading body. As I hope to show, concerns about automaticity are not limited to acts of creation or acts of reception alone: nineteenth-century depictions of poetic automatism suggest that being out of control of language is equally relevant to writers and to readers, to speakers and to listeners. As a result, the automatic body affords a new perspective on the relationship of bodies to language more broadly. In this schema of seemingly random or isolated acts of mediation, production and reproduction appear as strikingly similar processes. Writerly intuition and readerly absorption alike are revealed to be embodied and automatic: they both demonstrate the body's automatic mediation of language. In short, the automatic body underwrites authorship and readership simultaneously, further complicating our picture of the responsive body as a medium for poetry. Attending to the automatic body enables us to see something we've overlooked even in our recent attention to poetry's somatics: the degree to which other people's language can act on the body as a powerful material muse. In so doing, it suggests one possible avenue for reconsidering the complex relationship between creativity and receptivity in the history of poetic theory and – most broadly – in the history of our discipline.

Agency and Automatism in Poetic Theory

According to longstanding critical tradition, automatism became central to poetics in the twentieth century, with André Breton's Surrealist manifesto of "pure psychic automatism." One of the aims of this book is to radically expand and revise our understanding of the significance of bodily