This essay explores the desk as an important figure through which to understand the genre of life-writing and the life of writing at the close of the eighteenth century. Through a discussion of Sophie von La Roche’s *My Writing Desk* (1799), the desk and its biography emerge as key instruments for working out the automaticity and the machinality of writing—the way writing and its instruments could produce more writing. In so doing, the biography of the desk rewrites one of the founding tropes of autobiographical narrative—that of conversion. Instead of being understood in the sense of a personal crisis, conversion assumes a new meaning in the nineteenth century as a means of exploring the discursive and technological transformations that allow for writing’s movement between different types of material and epistemic spaces.

Can a desk have a life? If so, what kind of life would it lead? Few objects are more fetishized than the writer’s desk. Like all things bibliographic, anthropomorphism is never far away when talking about things like desks, pens or books. They are the tangible signs—signs of the tangibility—of the experiential vacuities known as reading and writing. Desks are the material counterweights to the lightness of thought.

The desk work that I would like to concentrate on here is the late project by Sophie von La Roche, *My Writing Desk* (*Mein Schreibetisch*, 1799), in which La Roche recounts over the course of two volumes the contents and history of her desk. La Roche is one of the most important German women writers of the eighteenth century, often identified as the first professionally successful female writer of the period. She is best known for her novel *The History of Fräulein von Sternheim* (1771), a major epistolary precursor to Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). But she was also the author of popular travel narratives of touring through England, as well as editor of an early periodical for women, *Pomona: For Germany’s Daughters* (1783–84). *My Writing Desk* can be seen, in the context of her professional aspirations as a writer, as akin to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), in which the articulation of female writerly
autonomy assumes architectonic dimensions. There are spatial conditions of the writer’s emancipation that these works argue for at a general thematic level.

But *My Writing Desk* is of interest, too, for the ways in which it points towards the materiality of writing not as a condition of writerly agency—as that which makes possible the female writer—but in terms of its own agency—as that which makes possible more writing. Standing at the head of a range of work that begins to appear towards the end of the century and into the next, *My Writing Desk*, I would argue, is interested in working out the automaticity and the machinality of writing—the way writing and its instruments could produce more writing. *My Writing Desk* is unmistakably a work of autobiography, the life of the desk standing in for the life of the writer. Like the spread of other quasi-autobiographical genres at the turn of the century, such as the popular “conversations with” or “letters from”, the biography of the desk is an indication of an emerging concern with how to imagine writing’s agency on its own terms. As Christina Lupton has written, this was a period marked by a larger investment in the consciousness of writing instruments, in what it would mean to cede agency to medial objects—“scenes of lost intention”, in Lupton’s words, or, stated another way, scenes of intentionality found.

In both its quasi-autobiographical nature and its attention to the agency of materiality, *My Writing Desk* gestures towards a broader field of autobiographical reflection in which writing’s agency emerges as a central concern by the turn of the century. In so doing, what we can see happening is the way one of the archetypal tropes of autobiography—that of conversion—assumes an important new meaning. The question that *My Writing Desk* and a host of other life-writings of the period seek to address is not conversion in the traditional, Augustinian sense—the narration of a personal crisis or radical change that was at the heart of a Christian confessional tradition (and that would not have been far from La Roche’s mind, given that the book’s primary interlocutor is a theologian). Rather, this work is concerned with conversion in the sense of the discursive and technological transformations that allow for the movement between different types of material and epistemic spaces. The narrative of personal crisis that belonged to the Christian tradition gives way to the crisis of narrativity in La Roche, the *Mischmasch* that she will invoke to describe her desk’s contents, which is itself as a word an entanglement of lexemes, morphemes, languages and cultures. How does writing transform itself into other kinds of writing, assuming new material but also formal configurations? How is the desk part of a larger ecology of instrumentation within such processes of scriptural conversion? And finally, how are these writing materials integral to an emerging sense of the instrumentality of life after 1800, the way life is something that can only come into view through an instrumental environment? The life of instruments in La Roche and elsewhere turns back on itself to reveal the instrumentality of life.
My Writing Desk begins as an imaginary dialogue with Georg Petersen, a privy counsellor in Darmstadt, theologian and one-time tutor to the local prince’s two children, who, La Roche imagines, has a desire to know this object in full because of the way it stands in the centre of a room in which she spent so many hours instructing her granddaughters. The opening is thus suffused with both a pedagogical intent—the desk as a site of sociable learning—and the hesitancy familiar to so much of women’s writing from the period: “Why should I offer my hand to an irreplaceable loss I said. There is so much that is small there, which will displease a man occupied with large and serious things”. The desk is framed within a distinctly feminine topography—small and intimate as opposed to the masculine’s large and wide. It is indicative of a distinct spatiality that surrounds women’s autobiographical writing of the period, which exhibits a recurrent interest in the Kreis, or female “circle”, in distinction to the picaresque and worldly travels of writers like Casanova or Goethe.

But the desk, which La Roche refers to as being like a grey-clad servant who has faithfully served her over the years (9), is also in many ways impossibly large. At two volumes, the description of the desk’s contents, which often veers into transcription, takes an exceedingly long time. So much is described that one wonders how it could all fit in one space. Inventory and indexicality give way to a feeling of the endless expanse of writing. As Gaston Bachelard would suggest, the intimate and the diminutive become the conditions of the infinite and the endless. The desk is where these mutually conflicting experiences of space come to coexist.

As the inventory of a desk, the book as a medium assumes cartographic dimensions, making these spatial scales intelligible to the author’s imagined interlocutor. The book makes accessible competing dimensions of experience. The story of the desk is in some sense also about the problem of the story, of narrative more generally when it comes to dealing with the knowledge of objects. As La Roche asks: “How should I write it? How will you read it?” (20). By way of response, she imagines her friend’s thoughts: “Certainly, thought my friend, a sincere description of the medley of papers and books laid out upon this desk and expanding towards the window would give him a very precise outline of my head and my inclinations” (6). Far from being a narrative instrument, the book is understood as an “outline” (Grundriβ) or blueprint—a term that would emerge as a key type of visually informed print object at the end of the century. Whether it was the vogue for “silhouettes” (Schattenrisse), Flaxman’s urn-inspired “outline drawings” (Umrisse) or the rise of printed architectural blueprints themselves, the “foundational outline” (Grundriβ) merges the taxonomic urges of the Enlightenment with the sketchy, developmental poetics of the Romantic. In the sequentiality of the inventory, in its storied nature, both in the time of its telling and the time of which it

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tells, we can see how the spatiality of the schema is overcoded by questions of time. It is important that this is not just an object external to the reader, but something that the author and reader move through. Like the bifurcated spatiality of the desk, the narrative schema becomes an index of time.

As La Roche takes us through the contents of her desk, we are provided with a fascinating tour through the kind of writing that would have mattered to an intellectual woman who was born in 1730 in Kaufbeuren in southern Bavaria; raised under pietistic (not Catholic) circumstances; later spent time as a courtier’s wife, first in Warthausen and then in Koblenz; eventually was widowed; and then lived the rest of her life in Offenbach near the Main River, where she took over the raising of her daughter’s three girls when their mother died prematurely due to complications in childbirth. The biography of the desk is, at a very elementary level, a very effective autobiographical medium. There is much to be learned about everyday life in the eighteenth century from these volumes.

The *Mischmasch* that La Roche passes through includes a great deal of heterogeneous material, again highlighting the desk’s ability to unite difference. She takes us first through a folio of papers that include the *Lady’s Magazine* from England; numerous letters from children and friends, including a large collection from Julie Bondely, which comprise most of the second volume; excerpts of poems in French, German and English ranging on topics from love to sympathy to travel; sentimental novellas like *Emma* about two lost lovers who eventually discover each other again in the woods; an inventory of the amounts that Frederick the Great gave to his citizens while ruler of Prussia; cooking recipes and kitchen bills; a basket that contains all the necessary instruments of desk life (scissors, glasses and a knife); and then a list of her favourite books. These include Burke’s treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Thomson’s *The Seasons*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, the reflections of Marcus Aurelius, Lessing’s *Education of Mankind*, Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, the letters of Madame de Sevigné, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s four-volume *Études de la nature*. We see the generic heterogeneity of her book-reading complementing the heterogeneity of the papers stored in her desk, as we move from the recipe to the *Lady’s Magazine* to Kant. As a spatial instrument, the desk flattens hierarchy and brings dissimilarity together in order to better reflect the author’s actual reading experiences, as opposed to the intertextual fictions constructed by scholars.8 The desk is democratizing. As La Roche herself writes: “it has no high poetic function” (305).

Over the course of these descriptions, there gradually emerges a basic tension informing the instrument of the desk between the genre of the excerpt—writing a work or part of a work out in full—and that of the inventory—the indexical naming of a work that is somewhere else. The desk is
both a medium of indexicality and transcription, pointing elsewhere and also serving as a form of containment. Sometimes this can take the combinatorial form of writing out an inventory, as in the “Ledger of German Poets”, in which La Roche records for us a table of virtues printed elsewhere that belong to German writers of the period (organized under familiar eighteenth-century categories like genius, imagination, mood, wit, insight and taste, among others). Books are reproduced in tabular form, but so too are tables. The desk can also be an iteration engine.

In a particularly interesting example, and one that occupies the largest amount of space in the two volumes after the letters to Julie Bondely, La Roche describes her practice of recording books she wished to purchase on small pieces of paper, which were then stored together (she lists 105 in all). After transcribing her scraps, she tells us that the point of such an exercise is this:

Through this I nourish the sweetly deceptive hope to procure these writings at the first opportunity. At the same time I acquire the conviction that wishes and sketches are indeed pleasures in themselves. In writing them down, the covetousness that is bound up with impatience created through the reading of the catalogue transforms itself into a composed form of waiting. (169)

Transcription is framed here not in its actuality, but in the futurity it contains. The inventory is a sketch, that which points elsewhere. At the same time, it is framed as an end in itself, as a medium of patience and repose. Rewriting—writing down that which is in the catalogue again—both enflames desire and replaces desire. Like the spines of books on the bookshelf that point to a potential textual encounter—that are both more than and enough—the little pieces of handwritten paper in the desk point to the imaginative encounter with an object one hopes to possess in the future, but for which the part—the excerpt—stands in satisfyingly for the whole. The desk, for La Roche, is the instrument where we wrestle with these competing desires.

When critics have talked about this work—it is treated lightly in the scholarship, though not unknown—they tend to do so in terms that resonate with how we have come to understand women’s writing of the period. They speak of the way the work gives voice to an “indirect self-empowerment” within a domestic space,9 a “dualism”,10 or a reckoning with the “absence of point of view”11 so characteristic of women’s writing from the period and which I saw, for example, on display in the ways translation came to play such an important role in the work of so many eighteenth-century and Romantic women writers.12 The spatial heterogeneity of My Writing Desk and its absence of narrative structure are understood as strong indices of how women’s writing
resists the male model, in which, in the words of Michaela Krug, “spatial progression corresponds to psychosocial development”.13

And yet, by the 1790s, Sophie von La Roche was a writer who was deeply ensconced in the print culture of her day, having published in some of the most popular forms of the period, from the novel to the travel narrative to the periodical. However much her work is still very much about the mediations facing women writers of the period, what interests me about a work like My Writing Desk is not the restraint of narrativity or expressivity on display, but the way it articulates what we might call a poetics of instrumentalization, a future-oriented materiality that could do work on its own.

By way of illustration, I want to pause over a particular poetic excerpt included in the first volume, one that I think is indicative of the work’s larger concerns with the instrumentality of life-writing. “A Spindle Song”, by Susanne von Klettenberg, tells the story of putting down the artistic instruments of the paintbrush, the pen and the book in place of one of the quintessential instruments of feminine labour—the spindle. Here are the first three stanzas:

Come spindle come, let me leave the brush for now,
He has given me too much fun.
You, spindle you, will amuse me from now on,
Good night dear brush.

He who no longer values glimmer, charm and beauty,
For whom the rose no longer laughs,
Whose eye no original enjoys,
To the description he says good night.

Come spindle come, the quill shall soften before you,
My desk shall cause me no more care,
What use are thought’s signs,
I think more quickly without them.

[Komm Spindel komm, ich laß den Pinsel liegen,
Der mir so viele Lust gemacht.
Du, Spindel du, sollst mich anjetzt vergnügen,
Geliebter Pinsel gute Nacht.

Wer Schimmer, Reiz und Schönheit nicht mehr schätzet,
Wem selbst die Rose nicht mehr lacht,
Wes Auge kein Original ergötzet,
Der sagt der Schilderung gute Nacht.
What interests me about this innocuous poem is the way its innocuousness is used here—in the context of a book about a desk—to make an argument about the materiality of ideas and about instrumentation more specifically, one that is obviously gendered in its argumentation (La Roche calls it a piece of Rockenphilosophie, a “philosophy of the skirt”). On the surface, this is a poem about not writing, about all of the ways that writing gives way in a woman’s life to other kinds of domestic labour, as we come back to the question of time and the time here that is not one’s own. But it also does so as a form of seduction or enchantment (“Come spindle come”), as something alluring and restful in opposition to the work of art. Within the context of a book about writing instruments within the lives of women, we can see how this poem can be read not simply as an interlude, as a reminder that there is more to a woman’s life than writing, but instead as a re-imagining of the instrumentality of writing itself. The spindle becomes a key metaphor to think through the nexus of instrumentation and life that is La Roche’s subject.

The spindle, as we know, is a weighted pointed object used to transform wool fibres into yarn, akin to a spinning top in its structure. Its hardness is essential to its meaning, standing in contrast to the softness of the other pointed, and more creative, technologies mentioned in the poem, such as the brush or the quill (or even the book, which is said to be eaten by mice). The quill’s yielding to the spindle is a condition of its differential materiality: “Come spindle come, the quill shall soften before you / Komm Spindel komm, die Feder soll dir weichen”. Weichen means “to yield” or “to give way to” something, but literally derives from weich, the word for “soft” or “pliant”. As the soft quill gives way to the hard spindle, we can see a reversal at work in the gendered associations of technologies, as this quintessentially female instrument assumes a profound agency. But the spindle’s hardness is also the condition of the kind of agency at play here: its hardness is the condition of its ability to generate torque and centripetal force so that the loose, planar fibres of the wool can be transformed into the more taught, linear material of yarn. Unlike the brush or the quill (or the book) as instruments of imagination, the spindle is an instrument of intensification, a means of adding energy to some material. It does so through the act of repetition and speed. This, too, is articulated in the poem not only through its use of brevity, the refrain and rhetorical swiftness, but also through the paratextual reuse of someone else’s material within one’s own book.
Unlike the practices of sewing or weaving, however, the spindle does not produce a final product, but an intermediate stage for further use. In its most significant aspect, the spindle is an infrastructural technology, one that dates back to antiquity and has important mythological legacies. The first of the three Fates or Greek Moirai is called Clotho (the spinner), while the other two were Lachesis (the allotter), who used a measuring rod to measure out one’s life, and Atropos (the unturner), who marked the end of life through the use of cutting shears. The spindle is an infrastructural tool both in the sense that it transforms material for future use and is itself a bearer of narrative material that can be persistently reused, like Klettenberg’s song. Unlike the “originality” and the “beauty” of the brush’s “glimmer”, the spindle offers us an experience of language’s refrain in the double sense—repetition and redundancy as well as renunciation and disavowal. The poem moves us away from a poetics of mimesis and virtualization—the description, the sign, the laughing rose—and towards a poetics of infrastructure—a disaggregation of one form of material (in this case, the wool), which is rotationally aggregated into another form (in this case, the yarn), a form that is not an end in itself, but the precondition of another stage of making. The spindle as an intellectual instrument puts us in a conversational economy rather than an originary one, a world of undoing and redoing rather than the singular and temporally finite universe of the Faustian “deed”.

To think about writing as spinning—significantly different from weaving and yet still obviously ancient in its pedigree—is, in the context of the life of the desk, an important move away from an authorial model of creativity towards a model of automaticity, one of self-propelled instrumentation. Under the sign of the spindle, the desk and its related tools of book, pen and ink are not situated as sites of agency, but rather intensifications—centripetal technologies that depend on the adding-in of energy through gestures of repetition and automation. As the final lines of the “Spindle Song” tell us:

Come spindle come, happily shall the hand lead you,
You leave my heart and head free;
Sensitively I can now feelingly think:
The rest is just foolishness.

[Komm Spindel komm, froh soll die Hand dich lenken,
Du läßt mir Kopf und Herz frey;
Empfindungsvoll kann ich da führend denken:
Das andre ist doch Narrethey.] (331)

The spindle not only allows for an embodied form of knowledge through the alignment of touch and thought (fühlend denken). It also enables the freeing-up of the heart and mind through this gestural automaticity. The disassociation
between the hand and the head becomes the condition of intellectual and emotional freedom. The rest is just Narrethey (“foolishness”), according to the poem, a word that contains a nice pun on the relationship between Narr (“fool”) and Narrativ (the association of language with a clear sense of time passing and language as a past time). The time of instruments like the desk and the spindle is far more intensional than linear.

The feeling-thinking of the spindle, then, becomes a key proxy through which one can understand La Roche’s thinking about the instrument of the desk and writing instrumentation more generally, which a book like My Writing Desk is meant to convey. The spindle’s hardness and its combinatory potential mirror the desk’s own combination of hard and soft technics—from the loose bundle of scraps of paper to the rigid containers of the drawers—which are understood generatively as that which produces more writing. And the spindle’s admixture of speed and repetition, where repetition becomes the condition of a change of time frame, is mirrored in the primary genre of the desk—the “inventory” (Verzeichniß). The inventory for La Roche stands for the tension between the index and the excerpt, between the act of rewriting something out word for word and writing that points to an elsewhere of more writing. The Verzeichniß emerges as the ideal “sign” (Zeichen) to replace the narrative history of a person, one that had been programmatically on display in La Roche’s first literary work, The History of Fräulein von Sternheim, with its emphasis on the correlation between history and subjectivity. Instead of a story, here we encounter the bundle and the inventory as key infrastructural technics. Instead of the unfolding of a person’s life, we are presented with the tensions surrounding the intensification of writing’s potential energy.

The spindle and the desk thus mark out an example of a set of cultural techniques and technologies—what is called a Kulturtechnik in German—which are premised on a notion of automation, a mode of producing more writing in the future in which material and formal conversions rather than narratives of personal conversion are inscribed at the heart of the process. In My Writing Desk, we do not encounter stories of radical change or new forms of belief. Rather, it is a work that is imbued with a sense of locating lineages and genealogies, the paper trail of technologies of female sensibility and authoriality. The singular, radical change that defined the notion of life within a post-Christian tradition of autobiography after Augustine undergoes in La Roche a radical kind of conversion itself, where it comes to stand instead for a repeatable and materially informed process. La Roche’s theory of the spindle-like basis of life-writing would then undergo its own conversion back into the biological understanding of life at the close of the nineteenth century in the form of the “mitotic spindle”. With the appearance of Walther Flemming’s Zellsubstanz, Kern und Zelltheilung [Cellular Substance, Nucleus and Cellular Division] (1882), the spindle would emerge as one of the fundamental tropes
through which to understand the structuring of matter during cellular division. The trope used to understand the automaticity of life-writing is translated, by the end of the century, into a trope through which to understand the scriptural underpinnings of life itself.

Notes


2 On La Roche, see Barbara Becker-Cantarino, Meine Liebe zu Büchern: Sophie von La Roche als professionelle Schriftstellerin (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008); Claire Baldwin, The Emergence of the Modern German Novel: Christoph Martin Wieland, Sophie von La Roche, and Anna Maria Sagar (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002); and Gudrun Loster-Schneider, Sophie La Roche: Paradoxien weiblichen Schreibens im 18. Jahrhundert (Tübingen: Narr, 1995).

3 See Loster-Schneider 337–43.


5 Sophie von La Roche, Mein Schreibetisch:Nachdruck der Ausgabe von 1799, 2 vols. (Karben: Petra Wald, 1997) 1: 7. Subsequent citations are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.

6 La Roche’s desk biography is sometimes mentioned within the history of autobiography and sometimes left out. The immediate source most often mentioned in the scholarship is Xavier de Maistres, Voyage autour de ma chambre (1794). But I would suggest there are affinities with a project like Elisa von der Recke’s autobiographical writings, though these cannot be at the level of influence because they were unpublished at the time. Nonetheless, there seems to be a discourse of female spatiality that begins to take shape during and after the 1790s. For a discussion of La Roche in the context of women’s autobiography, see Annegret Pelz, “Der Schreibtisch: Ausgrabungsort und Depot der Erinnerungen,” Autobiographien von Frauen: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte, ed. Magdalena Heuser (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996) 233–46, and Helga Meise, “Die geheime Macht des Kleinen’: Hybridisierung in Sophie von La Roches Mein Schreibetisch und Melusinens Sommer-Abende,” “Ach wie wünschte ich mir Geld genug, um eine Professur zu stiften”: Sophie von La Roche im literarischen und kulturpolitischen Feld von Aufklärung und Empfindsamkeit, ed. Gudrun Loster-Schneider and Barbara Becker-Cantarino (Tübingen: Francke, 2010) 239–50. On spatiality and autobiography, see Andreas Bähr, Peter Burschel, and Gabriele Jancke, eds., Räume des Selbst: Selbstzeugnisforschung transkulturell (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007).


10 Loster-Schneider 341.


14 The spindle is, for Flemming, an articulation of a fundamental polarity within cell division: “I understand the emergence of the spindle as an expression of polar-oriented forces, whether they move towards the poles or away from them”. Walther Flemming, *Zellsubstanz, Kern und Zelltheilung* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1882) 341.

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