

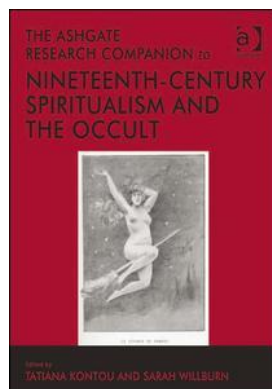
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The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton

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PART 2
*Occulture: Sex, Politics,
Philosophy and Poetics*

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The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton

J. Jeffrey Franklin

'It was a dark and stormy night' – as I choose to imagine it – the setting Knebworth, the Tudor-Gothic mansion and maternal ancestral seat of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who, as he passed the 'yellow room', glanced in, thinking he might glimpse the ghost of the 'fair-haired boy' whom he insisted haunted that room.¹ On the previous day while in London, Bulwer-Lytton had taken his seat in Parliament, where he had exchanged observations, both political and literary, with his friend Benjamin Disraeli, beside whom he would serve in Lord Derby's government as Secretary of State for the Colonies.² Both he and Disraeli would be raised to the peerage and move to the House of Lords. He then had met briefly with one of his publishers, William Blackwood, about royalties. As the immensely popular author of *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and *The Caxtons* (1849), among other bestsellers, and as a man on his way to becoming 'one of the most successful writers of the nineteenth century' (at least financially), Bulwer-Lytton knew he could demand top dollar

¹ I open with the now infamous opening clause of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford*, at: www.gutenberg.org/files/7735/7735-h/7735-h.htm (accessed 13 July 2011). In this paragraph, I take the liberty of imaginatively condensing into a short period historical facts from Bulwer-Lytton's biography that occurred over a longer timeframe. On the fair-haired boy's ghost, see Leslie Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (London, 2003), p. 147.

² On Bulwer-Lytton's twenty-three-year political career, see Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, pp. 88, 133, 188–90 and 211. In short, Bulwer-Lytton's politics, aesthetics and views on the occult coincided in that in all three arenas he professed himself a traditionalist or conservative and an elitist, believing always in aristocratic order, refined sensibility and adept knowledge. He opposed the materialism and progressivism of his age.

and get it.³ On his way to join Charles Dickens for a midday repast, he had stepped into a rare bookshop specializing in occult literature, searching for a first edition of Johannes Andreae's *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (1616).⁴ He was conducting research for another occult romance novel, *A Strange Story* (1862). His earlier occult romance, *Zanoni* (1842), had become known as a 'Rosicrucian novel', and Bulwer-Lytton would later become, by induction, 'a member of the Society of Rosicrucians and Grand Patron of the Order'.⁵ Dickens, whom Bulwer-Lytton was meeting near the offices of *All the Year Round*, had invited Bulwer-Lytton to publish his next novel serially. Dickens would also consult him about the draft ending of his own novel-in-progress, *Great Expectations*, and dedicate that novel to Bulwer-Lytton. *A Strange Story* would appear in *All the Year Round*. He and Dickens had been joined for lunch by Chauncey Hare Townsend, whom Bulwer-Lytton had known since their school days at Ramsgate. Townsend had drawn both Bulwer-Lytton and Dickens toward mesmerism and spiritualism, and works of his, like *Facts in Mesmerism* (1840), were significant in legitimating mesmerism in the eyes of many Britons, as were the fictional and personal investigations of it by such notables as Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton. In the afternoon, Townsend and Bulwer-Lytton had called on Dr John Elliotson at the London Mesmeric Infirmary, which Elliotson had founded in 1849. There they observed ongoing experiments to test the efficacy of mesmeric medicine. Bulwer-Lytton had already defended Elliotson against the censure of the medical establishment.⁶ He had previously urged Harriett Martineau to try mesmeric treatment, and Martineau then helped popularize the movement with her *Letters on Mesmerism* (1845).⁷ In the evening, Bulwer-Lytton had met with Daniel Dunglas Home, one of the most famous spiritualist mediums of the century, as well as Madame Home, with whom Bulwer-Lytton later would correspond, at their lodgings for drinks. Bulwer-Lytton 'offer[ed] Knebworth as a venue for his séances'.⁸ Now, back at Knebworth, he was walking with a flickering Egyptian oil lamp in hand towards a darkened room in which his guests that

³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴ Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Zanoni* opens with just such a scene in a rare bookshop in London where the narrator encounters an aged adept of Rosicrucianism.

⁵ This was reported by Bulwer-Lytton's grandson, quoted in Robert Lee Wolff, *Strange Stories, and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction* (Boston, 1971), p. 233.

⁶ This fact comes from Wolff, *Strange Stories*, p. 237. Other sources on Elliotson or his connections with Dickens or Bulwer-Lytton include: Fred Kaplan, "'The Mesmeric Mania': The Early Victorians and Animal Magnetism", *Journal for the History of Ideas*, 35 (1974): 691–702, pp. 696–701; Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent, OH, 2006), p. 96; Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, 1998), p. 59.

⁷ On Martineau's connection with Bulwer-Lytton, see Winter, *Mesmerized*, p. 221, and Wolff, *Strange Stories*, p. 235. Martineau had been so impressed with *Zanoni* that she wrote a celebratory summary of it that came to be published as an appendix to the novel.

⁸ Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 148. Mitchell also notes that 'among the spiritualists of Belgravia and Bayswater [Bulwer-Lytton] was hailed as "the High Priest and Great Wizard of our Circle"'.

evening had been prepared for his arrival. As part of the evening's entertainment, he told their fortunes, having assumed the persona in which he called himself 'Le Vieux Sorcier'.⁹

A historical study of Victorian spiritualism and the occult might well begin with Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–73). While he, of course, was preceded in the century by many students of the occult and esoteric, and while many of his famous contemporaries also attended séances or consulted mesmeric physicians, few were as informed or as influential as Bulwer-Lytton. As a dedicated, lifelong student of occult spiritualities, he

*... had put himself through a wide-ranging course of experimentation in the practical investigation of the occult, leaving unexamined not even the most outré practices of the magicians, and simultaneously he had systematically educated himself in the latest works of physiologists, philosophers, and students of the supernatural as they appeared; ... astrology, alchemy, mesmerism, clairvoyance, hypnotism, spiritualism, and magic: he investigated them all at first hand, and wrote about them all.*¹⁰

Thus his 'metaphysical novels', as he called *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story*, drew upon and combined virtually all of the occultisms and mysticisms from the history of ancient, medieval and contemporary practices. Though these novels were tortuously written, crammed with diverse occultisms and too didactic to be as popular as some of his other novels, they nevertheless were influential conduits through which the esoteric traditions underlying the mesmerism and spiritualism movements of his day were disseminated into popular discourse. Whatever their literary merits, these novels were a principal point of origin for the occult romance novel as subsequently written by authors such as Marie Corelli and H. Rider Haggard. More significant in relationship to the history of spiritualism and occultism, Bulwer-Lytton, in his life and his writings, provided a pattern of scholarly sampling from ancient esoteric traditions that was repeated by some founders of late-Victorian 'syncretic' or 'hybrid religions', including Helena Blavatsky and Theosophy.¹¹

This chapter therefore situates Bulwer-Lytton within the history of nineteenth-century occultism and spiritualism. I think of that history very broadly as occurring in major overlapping waves: the mesmerism movement followed by the spiritualism movement followed by the founding of hybrid religions and the culmination of the centuries-old imbrications of science and the occult in the formation of the Society for Psychical Research. The first section below theorizes a broad evolutionary model for the stages of occult spiritual discourse in England over the course of the century. It summarizes the ways in which mesmerism contributed to the form

⁹ Ibid, p. 147.

¹⁰ Wolff, *Strange Stories*, pp. 148–9.

¹¹ The historical phenomenon of the late-Victorian hybrid religion is treated at length in J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca, NY, 2008).

of spiritualism and how each of those contributed to the formation of hybrid religions. Recognizing the continuities, I also argue that a seismic shift occurred in these discourses, beginning approximately in the 1860s, between the paradigms of mesmerism and spiritualism and that of the hybrid religions later in the century. I then locate Bulwer-Lytton at that 1860s pivot point and argue for his importance, first in translating previous waves of occult spirituality and science, such as medieval alchemy and Enlightenment vitalism, into Victorian occultism and spiritualism and, second, in preparing the way for and even predicting the shape of the later hybrid religions. Perhaps more than any other single person in the first half of the nineteenth century, Bulwer-Lytton was representative of that period's enthusiasms, reservations, and deep-seated fears concerning occult spiritualities.

I

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed first the arrival in England from the Continent of the 'mesmeric mania' and then the invasion from the United States of spiritualism, all during a period when the Church of England was losing congregation to Nonconformist denominations and experiencing internal revolutions, both High and Low, Tractarian and Evangelical.¹² The sensation that Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) had created with his new science of 'animal magnetism' in Vienna and Paris was contemporaneous with the French Revolution, which is why many Britons disparagingly associated mesmerism with that event. Not until the late 1830s did the movement hit London; it then rapidly became a subject of intense public and medical interest in the mid-1840s, and had saturated popular culture by the 1850s. Hundreds of articles and books championed or criticized the claims made on behalf of mesmeric medicine and/or mesmeric spiritualism.¹³ Among the key events were the launching of *The*

¹² 'Mesmeric mania' is from the title of John Hughes Bennett, *The Mesmeric Mania of 1851, with a Physiological Explanation of the Phenomena Produced* (Edinburgh, 1851), from which Kaplan derived his essay's title, "'The Mesmeric Mania': The Early Victorians and Animal Magnetism'. Winter, *Mesmerized*, uses a similar phrase: 'Mesmerism Mania'.

¹³ Among the most significant of these for the popularization of mesmerism were John Elliotson, *An Introduction to the Study of Animal Magnetism* (London, 1840); Chauncey Hare Townshend, *Facts in Mesmerism: with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into It* (London, 1840); and Harriet Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism* (London, 1845). According to Kaplan, "'The Mesmeric Mania'", p. 698, n. 25, these also were significant works: Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Theory of Pneumatology: in Reply to the Question, What Ought to be Believed or Disbelieved Concerning Presentiments, Visions, and Apparitions, According to Nature, Reason and Scripture* (London, 1834); James Campbell Colquhoun, *Isis Revelata: An Inquiry into the Origin, Progress, and Present State of Animal Magnetism* (Edinburgh, 1836); Jean Dupotet [De Sennevoy], *An Introduction to the Study of Animal Magnetism. With an Appendix, Containing Reports of British Practitioners in Favour of the Science* (London, 1838); James Braid, *Neurypnology, or, The Rationale of Nervous Sleep, Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism: Illustrated by Numerous Cases*

Zoist in 1843, after *The Lancet* refused further mesmerism articles, and the founding of the London Mesmeric Infirmary in 1849, both initiated by John Elliotson, 'the single Englishman most responsible for the spread of mesmerism in England'.¹⁴ A number of recent excellent histories fully treat mesmerism; I only will note here that both the proponents and the opponents divided roughly into two camps: the 'materialists' and the 'spiritualists'.¹⁵ Like Mesmer himself, Elliotson and most medical practitioners were materialists; they viewed the phenomena as grounded in nature and ultimately explainable by science, whether in terms of the physics of a 'vital principle' transmitted as magnetism or electricity or in biological terms as a 'vital fluid' or 'life force' animating the entire organic universe.¹⁶ On the other side, spiritualist interpretations of mesmeric phenomena were backed by centuries of popular discourse. The histories of esoteric Christianity, occult spirituality, and Enlightenment Deism or Natural Theology had all set the stage for Victorians to view mesmeric phenomena as evidence of the invisible presence of Spirit in the universe.¹⁷ As Maria Tatar summarizes, 'the magnetic fluid that had once streamed so abundantly through Mesmer's clinic was transformed by mystics into a divine afflatus, by spiritualists into ethereal specters, and by metaphysicians into an impalpable force designated as the will'.¹⁸ Thus there were four non-exclusive camps: those who championed mesmerism on materialist grounds as soon-to-be-proved science; those who questioned mesmerism on materialist grounds as unsupportable weird science; those who embraced mesmerism for spiritual purposes and therefore viewed materialist mesmerism as shortsighted if not sacrilegious; and those who criticized mesmerism on spiritual grounds, either as heretical to Christian orthodoxy or, conversely, as too materialist to be sufficiently spiritualist.

Following on the heels of mesmerism, the spiritualism movement had begun in New England in the 1840s before it swept 'like a contagious infection' through England and the Continent.¹⁹ By the 1860s, 'spiritualism had become a conspicuous

of its Successful Application in the Relief and Cure of Disease (London, 1843); and James Esdaile, *Mesmerism in India, and its Practical Application in Surgery and Medicine* (London, 1846).

¹⁴ Kaplan, "'The Mesmeric Mania'", p. 696.

¹⁵ The histories to which I allude are these: Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA, 1968); John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY, 2008); Maria M. Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton, 1978); Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines*; and Winter, *Mesmerized*.

¹⁶ Tim Fulford, 'Conducting the Vital Fluid: The Politics and Poetics of Mesmerism in the 1790s', *Studies in Romanticism*, 43 (Spring 2004): 57–78, p. 62.

¹⁷ Some in the nineteenth century, especially proponents of the spiritualism movement, used capital-S 'Spirit' to designate the eternal human essence in a sense distinct from, and usually superior to or subsuming of, the traditional Judaeo-Christian soul.

¹⁸ Tatar, *Spellbound*, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1983), p. 43. Spiritualist practice was highly diverse and only ever partially codified or institutionalized; the few tenets shared by spiritualists of all persuasions might be summarized briefly, as they were in Mary F. Davis, *Danger Signals: An Address of the*

and, to many, lamentable part of Victorian cultural life, with its mediums, specialist newspapers, pamphlets, treatises, societies and private and public séances'.²⁰ By the time it had been partially subsumed into late-century hybrid religions, spiritualism had drawn many Britons – including royalty, famous authors, eminent scientists and even clergymen – to hold hands around a parlour table, sit in a darkened séance chamber, or, later, attend auditorium-style performances, providing many subject positions from which to choose. Given the plethora of recent histories of spiritualism, I only will summarize several characteristics of the movement which stand out and which will prove relevant to my reading of Bulwer-Lytton.²¹ First, it shared with other religious and spiritual discourses of the time a primary mission to defeat materialism. In popular usage, 'materialism' variously signified atheism, science and 'mammonism'.²² Understood at the broadest level as abnegation of the human soul, 'materialism was widely perceived as the archvillain of the

Uses and Abuses of Modern Spiritualism (New York, 1875), p. 5: 'It is simply a belief, first, that man has a Spirit; second, that this Spirit lives after death; third, that it can hold intercourse with human beings on earth.'

²⁰ Richard Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in Mid-Victorian Britain', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (eds), *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 23–43, p. 26.

²¹ The studies of spiritualism to which I allude are these: Brandon, *The Spiritualists*; Daniel Cottom, *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (New York, 1991); Russell M. Goldfarb and Clare R. Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters* (Cranbury, NJ, 1978); Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural'; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia, 1990); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2004); Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany, 2006); Marlene Tromp, 'Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (2003): 67–81; and Sarah A. Willburn, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot, 2006). Victorian histories and studies that I have found useful include the following: William B. Carpenter, *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Historically & Scientifically Considered: being Two Lectures Delivered at the London Institution, with Preface and Appendix* (London, 1877); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols (1926; New York, 1975); Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism*, 2 vols (London, 1902); James Robertson, *The Rise and Progress of Modern Spiritualism in England* (Manchester, 1893); Epes Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism* (Boston, 1881); and Hudson Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism: A Manual of Spiritual Science and Philosophy* (London, 1876).

²² With 'mammonism' I allude to Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843; London, 1960). Prior to the connotation of 'materialism' as a desire for material possessions, 'materialist' meant 'one who denies spiritual substances', according to Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), no page numbers. Similarly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'spiritualism' was used most broadly to mean *any* belief in the existence of spiritual beings and states, first and foremost the human soul and the afterlife, which transcend material existence.

age'.²³ Proponents of spiritualism argued that it provided a stronger defence against materialism than could institutional religions because it relied not on faith but, according to believers, on the empirical evidence of direct experience. As James Robertson wrote in his 1893 history of the movement, 'one single echo, a tiny rap from the [deceased] loved ones, was more value than book revelations, more comforting than what without evidence were simply speculations'.²⁴ Thus spiritualists enlisted the method and imprimatur of the scientific materialism whose truth-telling authority they otherwise denounced, and this points to the profoundly conflicted relationship of Victorian occult spiritualisms in general to science.

Spiritualism might also be understood as a logical historical outcome of the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on individual faith. It asserted the right of the individual entirely to control her own spiritual practice; every spiritualist became, in effect, his own clergy, congregation and divine Spirit. Having partially subsumed from God the responsibility of guaranteeing immortality, and motivated by the need to explain what spirits were doing loitering outside the gates of heaven or hell, spiritualists responded by formulating models of progressive spiritual evolution. As Hudson Tuttle wrote in 1867 in his 'manual' of spiritualism, 'Progressive evolution of intellectual and moral force is the endless destiny of individual spirits'.²⁵ He and many others arrived at conceptions of spiritual evolution by combining elements of evolutionary science, progressivism and Eastern religions, especially Buddhism. Another feature of spiritualism was that it emerged still bearing the influences of the long history of European occultisms and mysticisms of which it was a part. Frank Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism* (1902) traces its roots back to witchcraft, alchemy, magicianship, Rosicrucianism and, most recently, mesmerism. Finally, spiritualism contributed to a shift of the locus of spiritual discourse away from the patriarchally controlled public sphere dominated by traditional religious institutions to a more private and domestic sphere. As scholars following the groundbreaking work of Janet Oppenheim and Alex Owen have shown, full understanding of the movement requires reading it in relationship to the histories of conditions for women, women's sexuality and women's spiritual practices.²⁶ While mesmerism had been spearheaded almost exclusively by men

²³ Oppenheim, *Other World*, p. 61.

²⁴ Robertson, *The Rise and Progress of Modern Spiritualism*, p. 66.

²⁵ Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism*, p. 14.

²⁶ My sources on women and nineteenth-century spiritualisms include these: Ann Braude, 'The Perils of Passivity: Women's Leadership in Spiritualism and Christian Science', in Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream* (Urbana, IL, 1993), pp. 55–67; Diana Burfield, 'Theosophy and Feminism: Some Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Biography', in Pat Holden (ed.), *Women's Religious Experience* (Totowa, NJ, 1983), pp. 27–56; Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia, MO, 1996); Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, MD, 2001); Robert Ellwood and Catherine Wessinger, 'The Feminism of "Universal Brotherhood": Women in the

and had most famously involved the treatment by male physicians of (often working-class) female subjects, spiritualism was more woman-centred, both in origin and practice.

It is well established that mesmerism provided a platform for spiritualism and influenced its development.²⁷ Many elements of mesmerism transferred almost directly into spiritualism: the mesmeric trance translated into the séance medium's trance; mesmeric 'table-turning' morphed into table-rapping by spirits; and the mesmeric 'imponderable fluid' became the medium through which spirits communicated with the living. It is less established how the movements that emerged in the first half of the century contributed to the development of late-century hybrid religions and organizations such as the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Anthroposophical Society. The founders of the Theosophical Society, most notably H.P. Blavatsky (1831–91), had begun by investigating and practising spiritualism and, in formulating the doctrines of Theosophy in 1875, they drew upon elements of spiritualism while at the same time claiming to have superseded it.²⁸ Thus, on the one hand, I am suggesting an evolutionary model with some degree of continuity from mesmerism to spiritualism to late-century hybrid religions. All of the features of spiritualism summarized above – its impetus to defeat materialism, its enactment of Protestant

Theosophical Movement', in Wessinger, *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, pp. 68–87; Oppenheim, *Other World*; Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Tromp, 'Spirited Sexuality'.

²⁷ As Podmore argued in 1902, 'historically, moreover, Spiritualism is the direct outgrowth of Animal Magnetism' (*Modern Spiritualism*, p. xiv), Oppenheim notes that 'Mesmerism expanded effortlessly into spiritualism for a rich variety of reasons, not the least important of which was the combination of scientific, religious, and occult sources on which both movements drew' (*Other World*, p. 222).

²⁸ All references to Theosophy are to the Theosophical Society International, which should not be confused with the Theosophical Society Pasadena. My primary sources on Theosophy and Blavatsky are: H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology. Vol. I – Science* (1877; Pasadena, CA, 1972); H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology. Vol. II – Theology* (1877; Pasadena, CA, 1972); H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (London, 1888); H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy: Being a Clear Exposition, in the Form of Question and Answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy for the Study of which the Theosophical Society has been Founded* (New York, 1889); Henry Steel Olcott, 'The Genesis of Theosophy', *The National Review* (London), 14 (October 1889): 208–17; A.P. Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), 7th edn (Boston, 1887); and A.P. Sinnett, *The Early Days of Theosophy in Europe* (London, 1922). Useful secondary sources include: Mark Bevir, 'The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 63.3 (Fall 1994): 747–67; Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (New York, 1994); Marion Mead, *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth* (New York, 1980); Stephen Prothero, 'From Spiritualism to Theosophy: "Uplifting" a Democratic Tradition', *Religions and American Culture*, 3.2 (Summer 1993): 197–216; Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington, IN, 1996); and Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America* (New York, 1993).

individualism, its subscription to progressive spiritual evolution, its debt to preceding European occultisms, and its woman-centredness – were incorporated and re-emphasized in the seminal texts of Theosophy.

On the other hand, I suggest that a paradigm shift began in occult spiritual discourse in England approximately in the 1860s, as a result of which late-century occultisms differed in significant ways from the earlier movements. In this I parallel Alex Owen's thesis about the "'new" occultism' that characterized the end of the century.²⁹ This paradigm shift correlated with several major cultural events in the 1860s, including the Darwinian revolution, the full entry of Buddhism into scholarly and then popular discourse, and the establishment of comparative religious studies, all of which were conditioned by the culmination of the British Empire. For an immensely complex set of reasons, then, late-century hybrid religions like Theosophy constituted an evolutionary leap beyond spiritualism or mesmerism. In the first place, they were more institutionalized: they developed written histories and doctrines, organizational structures, fixed meetings and some uniform ritualized practices. Unlike mesmerism or spiritualism, they appealed to ancient lineages from which they claimed the imprimatur of an original divine authority. Blavatsky went to great lengths in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) to trace the genealogy of Theosophy back to the 'ancient wisdom-doctrine', 'the once universal religion, which antedated the Vadaic ages', thereby claiming historical precedence over the world religions.³⁰ In addition, the new occultisms were, by intentional design, intensely hybridized. They 'brought together a vast array of occult material and synthesized it into a coherent and teachable system'.³¹ The founders of Theosophy borrowed elements drawn from Egyptian polytheism, Kabbalahism, Platonism, Astrology, Gnosticism, Hinduism and Buddhism. With these they also synthesized elements of Victorian secular discourses, such as self-help, progressivism and evolutionary science. At the same time, they thought it necessary to distance their new occult spirituality from the immediately preceding popular movements, claiming that, while those spiritual phenomena were genuine, the practitioners possessed only a crude understanding of the arcane mysterious in which they dabbled.³² All of these features contributed to the marketability of the new hybrid religions.

²⁹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 5.

³⁰ Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. II, pp. 99 and 123.

³¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 58.

³² A fourth characteristic of late Victorian hybrid religions that I will just mention briefly concerns split-and-multiplied subjectivity. Here I follow John J. Cerullo, *The Secularization of the Soul: Psychological Research in Modern Britain* (Philadelphia, 1982); Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*; Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James* (New Haven, CT, 1997); Owen, *Place of Enchantment*; and, Willburn, *Possessed Victorians*. In short, the new occultisms moved away from the traditional, unified soul, as well as from the vaguely diffuse Spirit, in developing models of spiritual selfhood as multiple or layered in taxonomically specific ways. In this they foreshadowed the fragmented subject of modernism. One expression of that subject was the psychoanalytic models that were emerging by the end of the century, which also were influenced by occult spiritualities. Freud was a member of the Society for Psychological Research and championed the

The preceding evolutionary history of occult spiritualities in nineteenth-century England provides a foundation for the claims that I will now develop in analysing Edward Bulwer-Lytton's metaphysical fiction.

II

Bulwer-Lytton's metaphysical novels are romance novels of ideas, which is to say that they are non-comedic satires in the sense of portraying types and ideals: the characters often stand, in a nearly allegorical sense, for philosophical, socio-political and spiritual positions, the positions that Bulwer-Lytton felt were most lamentably representative of his era. He considered this type of novel 'the *'noblest sphere'* of fiction', the form appropriate to a moral mission to save modern society from itself.³³ He furnished as vehicles for this mission stories that are romantic, mysterious and action-packed – page-turners of their time – but their most fascinating feature is the critical diagnosis they provide of the materialism of British culture and society of the 1840s to 1860s. In delivering this diagnosis, Bulwer-Lytton does not disguise his own beliefs and prejudices, which makes them easy to identify among the array of discourses about politics, recent history, science and occult spirituality that he was actively exploring and even citing in footnotes in his novels.

Zanoni opens in January 1842 (the author's present) in a rare-book shop in Covent Garden that specializes in the 'works of Alchemist, Cabalist, and Astrologer'.³⁴ In looking for books on Rosicrucianism, the frame narrator encounters an initiated elderly gentleman who entrusts him with a manuscript of his own, which the younger man agrees to shepherd into print. As the reader comes to suspect, the old man is one of the three main characters in the body of that story, the once-young English painter named Clarence Glyndon. While on tour in Italy in the 1780s, Glyndon falls in love with a beautiful concert vocalist, Viola Pisani. Because of his inability to love spiritually, or against class difference, he loses her to a powerful occultist named Zanoni. But, in order to experience human

psychoanalytic use of hypnosis, which has its origin in Mesmer's 'passes'. Psychoanalysis is in one sense the culmination of the 'science of the soul' that had been formulating throughout Victorian occult spiritualisms. On Freud and psychical research, see Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven, CT, 1993); Oppenheim, *Other World*, pp. 245–66; and Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven, CT, 1974), p. 109.

³³ Bulwer-Lytton, 'Art of Fiction', quoted in Allan Conrad Christensen, *Edward Bulwer-Lytton: The Fiction of New Regions* (Athens, GA, 1976), p. 18. Bulwer-Lytton was well aware that his occult romances, like romance in general, were perceived as being in direct competition with realism, and therefore as morally irresponsible in their failure to portray social and emotional life realistically. He overrode such criticisms by claiming for his fiction a more noble mission to represent spiritual, not material, reality.

³⁴ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (1842; Rockville, MD, 2009), p. ix. Hereafter I cite this work parenthetically by page number in the body of the chapter.

love, Zanoni must compromise the spiritual discipline that has permitted him to live as a young man for 5,000 years, an example of the 'demi-immortal oriental' character type.³⁵ Glyndon apprentices himself to Zanoni's master, Mejnour, but fails in sorcerer's-apprentice fashion, with dire after-effects. Near the end of the novel, Glyndon re-encounters Viola and Zanoni in Paris, where the story climaxes at the height of the French Revolution. He finally escapes the Terror to a long life of relative conventionality in London, though as one who has witnessed alchemy, magic, clairvoyance, mesmerism, demi-immortality and demonic spectres of the spirit world. The plot thus weaves together four primary thematic strands: aesthetic, romantic, political and spiritual/supernatural. Questions about what constitutes ideal art, ideal love, political harmony and spiritual as opposed to materialistic existence are intertwined, and the answers converge. The novel hopes to demonstrate that debased art, instrumental love and revolutionary politics are signs of 'a *spiritual* rather than a merely social or political crisis'.³⁶ All are symptoms of the spiritual malaise of modernity.

A catch-all term for that modern spiritual malaise was 'materialism'. *Zanoni* might be read as a taxonomy of the types of materialism that Bulwer-Lytton, like many of his contemporaries, felt were plaguing modern spirituality. In aesthetics, materialism is called 'the Real'. The old gentleman in the bookshop insists on the 'distinction between the Real and the True, in other words, between the imitation of actual life and the exaltation of Nature into the Ideal' (*Zanoni* xiii). The narrative associates the former with the 'Dutch School' and the later with Greek heritage (a debate that will be joined by George Eliot, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, among many others). Bulwer-Lytton 'made of the art of fiction a vehicle to carry on the idealist tradition of Romantic poetry and so helped not only to save the soul of man but also to save fiction to serve visions other than that of mimetic realism'.³⁷ Realism is for philistines, whereas the romance of the old gentleman's manuscript and, by implication, of the novel that contains it 'is truth for those who can comprehend it, and an extravagance for those who cannot' (*Zanoni* xviii). Thus the novel's aesthetic theme reflects upon its own form – occult romance – as it attempts to be a material medium through which its spiritual theme might be heard to speak, rap or manifest. Within this framework, Viola and her singing function as emblems of this ideal beauty, in a familiar gender-stereotypical way. Glyndon's friend Mervale, the voice of 'sober England' with a bulging bankbook,

³⁵ The demi-immortal oriental character type is theorized in Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, and is refined and applied in 'The Economics of Immortality: The Demi-Immortal Oriental, Enlightenment Vitalism, and Political Economy in *Dracula*', *Cahiers victoriens & édouardiens* (forthcoming 2012). It is a character who possesses indefinite bodily longevity, derived from an 'Eastern' source, but whose spiritual immortality is thereby placed in jeopardy. It poses a threat to the traditional Judaeo-Christian soul and afterlife. *Dracula* is a prime example.

³⁶ John Coates, 'Zanoni by Bulwer-Lytton: A Discussion of Its "Philosophy" and Its Possible Influences', *Durham University Journal*, 76.2 (June 1984): 223–33, p. 226.

³⁷ Christensen, *Edward Bulwer-Lytton*, p. 221.

tries to persuade him against Viola on the grounds that 'what men respect is the practical, not the ideal' of marrying for love beneath one's station (*Zanoni* 98). When Jean Nicot, a debased painter, atheist and representative of the French Revolution, betrays Glyndon, Zanoni and Viola to the Committee of Public Safety, sending the latter two to the dungeon to await the guillotine, the narrator chides him for 'the False Ideal that knows no God, and the False Love that burns from the corruption of the senses, and takes no luster from the soul!' (*Zanoni* 338). Revolutionary politics, atheism and sexually motivated love – all trade the ideal for the real, signifying the spiritual failure of modern materialism.

The novel's term for materialism in the realms of politics and religion is 'philosophy', because since spiritual concerns 'are out of fashion, nothing now goes down but scepticism and philosophy' (*Zanoni* 24). While Glyndon, Nicot and, against his better judgement, Zanoni are vying for Viola's hand in Naples, in Paris historical characters such as Nicolas de Condorcet (1743–94) and Guillaume-Chrétien de Malesherbes (1721–94) are shown talking philosophy. They concur on 'the superiority of the Moderns to the Ancients', mock 'religion as a fable' and await the fruits of the 'Age of Reason! – Equality in instruction, equality in institutions, equality in wealth!' (*Zanoni* 29, 30, 40). They embody the views actively opposed by Bulwer-Lytton in his politics, in his theory of art, and in his defence of spiritualism against materialism. He, 'in his scorn for the doctrine of equality and his hatred for revolutionary bloodshed, ... was too ready to overlook the viciousness of the *ancient régime*'.³⁸ These characters, therefore, must suffer the historical irony of being shown to celebrate the advent of the Revolution that will imprison and guillotine them.

To drive his point home with unmistakable force, Bulwer-Lytton mirrors Robespierre's character with its double in the spirit world, called the Dweller of the Threshold. Earlier in the novel, Glyndon, in his ambition to acquire the occult powers that he has witnessed in Zanoni, transgresses Mejnour's interdiction against tampering with the alchemical elixirs in the laboratory. Without knowing what he is doing, he opens himself to perceive and communicate with the non-human beings of a parallel dimension, chief among them the Dweller of the Threshold. This loathsome apparition with burning eyes is all the more frightful for the fact that it 'was not all a spirit, but partook of matter enough, at least, to make it more deadly and fearful an enemy to material forms' (*Zanoni* 242–3). Zanoni and Mejnour, through long and arduous initiation, are fortified to live in constant awareness of this parallel realm, but as masters of its inhabitants. The young Glyndon, like Robespierre in his pride and thirst for power beyond his abilities to control it, has now made himself susceptible to be haunted, literally, by the unforeseen consequences, until Zanoni finally exorcises the ghostly entities. Through the latter section of the novel, the Dweller of the Threshold stalks the blood-drenched streets of Paris, trailing Glyndon and Zanoni just as they are being trailed by Nicot and Robespierre's other spies. This materialistic spirit is the spirit

³⁸ Wolff, *Strange Stories*, p. 208.

of the Revolution, that monstrous offspring of sceptical philosophy, as opposed to the anti-materialistic spiritualism that the novel champions.

Thus 'philosophy' is shorthand both for Enlightenment scepticism, which for many equated with atheism, and for 'natural philosophy', namely science. In *Zanoni*, and even more directly in *A Strange Story*, Bulwer-Lytton struggles mightily to rationalize spiritualism to science, science to spiritualism. In this, he was representative of a complex, pervasive, but frequently unarticulated Victorian response to occult spirituality: a desperate longing to believe in the phenomena implicit in mesmerism and explicit in spiritualism combined with the scepticism that accompanied a growing conviction that science was now the ultimate truth-telling authority. At stake was nothing less than the existence of the immortal human soul, of which all spirit manifestations came to serve as evidence. As Dr Julius Faber, the stand-in character for Bulwer-Lytton, says in *A Strange Story*, 'Certainly I would rather believe all the ghost stories upon record than believe that I am not even a ghost'.³⁹ For Bulwer-Lytton, as for the many he represented, spiritualism was too vital *not to have* a scientific basis, while science, too important to ignore, *had to be made* to underwrite spiritual phenomena. I believe that he lived his entire adult life struggling to resolve the paradox of materialist spiritualism and spiritual materialism (akin to Thomas Carlyle's 'Natural Supernaturalism'), refusing to surrender either his spiritual beliefs *or* his scientific scepticism about them.⁴⁰

This is made allegorically explicit in *A Strange Story*. The protagonist is a medical scientist, Allen Fenwick, who must be led, in part by witnessing supernatural phenomena, to realize that his purely intellectual science is 'the hallucination by which Nature is left Godless – because Man is left soulless' (*Strange* 242). His antagonist, Margrave, has used occult science, alchemy, to attain the demi-immortality of perpetual youth, though now as a soulless body, vitalized but amoral, the final killing of which is a mercy to the extent that death is thought to reconnect the soul to the body and then free it. Neither Fenwick's overly 'philosophical' science nor Margrave's unholy science is tenable, yet disregarding science is not conceivable either. This is the dilemma. The attempt to resolve it is staged in the novel as a series of convoluted dialogues between Fenwick and his scientific-turned-spiritual mentor, Faber, an eminent pathologist and devout believer in the soul. In an early conversation, Faber convinces Fenwick that the paranormal phenomena he has witnessed were produced by retinal after-images, 'diseased imagination' and 'strong mental impression' (*Strange* 298). He appeals to the physiological and psychological explanations that in fact would demystify mesmerism, culminating

³⁹ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* (1866), in *The Works of Edward Bulwer Lytton*, 33 vols (New York, 1901), vol. 10, p. 429. Hereafter I cite this work parenthetically by page number in the body of the chapter.

⁴⁰ On Natural Supernaturalism, see Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1832; London, 1959). As quoted in Christensen, *Edward Bulwer-Lytton*, p. 80, Carlyle wrote to Bulwer-Lytton that *Zanoni* 'will be a liberating voice for much that lay dumb imprisoned in many human souls'.

in James Braid's theorization of 'hypnotism' in 1843.⁴¹ Faber, like Braid, predicts the scientification of spiritualist concepts that would commence with the founding of psychology as a quasi-scientific discipline starting in the 1870s and of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. Here, Faber might appear as the representative of scientific scepticism debunking supernatural phenomena. But, no: the text uses the very same occasion to undercut that scientific authority, since the reader knows that Fenwick *has* witnessed genuine supernatural events. Margrave does possess the power to place others in a mesmeric trance, to exercise clairvoyant thought-control, and to project from a great distance a seeing and speaking image of himself, a 'luminous phantom', 'Scin-Laeca, or shining corpse' (*Strange* 257). The text thus enacts the debate between spiritualism and science in which thousands of Victorians were engaged, internally and publicly, giving neither Spirit nor science the upper hand.

Having supposedly disillusioned Fenwick of mesmeric or alchemical supernaturalism, Faber later switches to advocating for *Christian* supernaturalism, 'that link between life here and life hereafter which is found in what we call Soul' (*Strange* 311). This is the alternative to the soulless demi-immortality of Margrave, who says: 'I count on no life beyond the grave. I would defy the grave, and live on' (*Strange* 349). Yet, Fenwick continues to witness further proofs of the supernatural, some coming even from his wife Lillian, who is hysterically possessed by Margrave but whose purity of love and peculiarly feminine sensitivity (in this highly gendered worldview) imbues her with a power to sense when Fenwick is in jeopardy and call out to him with her spirit (much as Jane Eyre does to Rochester). When Fenwick and Lillian next meet up with Faber in Australia, where the action concludes, he surprises Fenwick and the reader yet again by explaining Margrave's magic wand in terms of 'animal magnetism and electro-biology' (*Strange* 411–12). Here he seems to oscillate between John Elliotson's materialist defence of mesmerism and Chauncey Hare Townsend's spiritualist defence of the same. As the final baffling move in an argument that is dispersed across two hundred pages, Faber then mounts a full *scientific* justification of the soul and the afterlife, employing a version of the Deist 'argument from design'.⁴² He argues, in short, that it would be unnatural and against the precepts of science if Nature (God) produced capacities, such as that for spiritual devotion, that were deceptively useless because they were unmatched by an object to which they apply.

In the process of arriving at this final position, Faber's character has acted out, one after the other, the full range of contradictions that Bulwer-Lytton, and the many for whom he spoke, was struggling to resolve. *A Strange Story*, in the series of dialogues between Fenwick and Faber, gives voice to all four of the camps that I have identified in mid-Victorian discourse about mesmerism and spiritualism:

⁴¹ I refer to Braid, *Neuryphology*.

⁴² For an example, see especially Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story*, p. 447. With 'argument from design' I refer to William Paley, *Natural Theology or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802; Oxford, 2006). Faber's character could provide an example of what is described in Reed, *From Soul to Mind*, p. 82.

materialist champions of a scientific basis for natural supernaturalism, even if one must wait for science to advance sufficiently to be able to explain the spiritual evidence; *materialist opponents* who as scientific sceptics deny the existence of anything supernatural, perhaps including the human soul; *spiritual champions* or true-believing spiritualists for whom anything supernatural may be proof of the existence of a Spirit World and, therefore, an afterlife; and *spiritual opponents* to occult supernaturalism on religious grounds who may view belief in occult phenomena as a sacrilegious infringement upon that singularly privileged supernatural entity, the traditional Judaeo-Christian soul.

A similar, though less fully articulated, pattern occurs in the earlier novel, *Zanoni*. Mejnour, though not evil in the way that Margrave is in *A Strange Story*, also represents occultism without the soul, without the physical death and spiritual rebirth promised by Christianity, and also without the warmth of human love. Zanoni breaks from Mejnour and surrenders his demi-immortality to model ideal love with Viola (though they appear to be living together out of wedlock) and to become a Christ-like sacrificial figure. He sacrifices his mortal life in order to save Viola and their son, to defeat the Dweller of the Threshold and the Terror of the Revolution in one swoop, and, most importantly, to demonstrate that the earthly demi-immortality acquirable through alchemical means is less desirable than a heavenly afterlife. This is the predominant moral both of *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story*. But, while it is given precedence toward the ends of the novels, this ostensibly Christian moral fails to recuperate the plethora of occult phenomena that dominate the main bodies of the novels and that they strive to convince readers are real.

In this contradiction, Bulwer-Lytton was again giving fictional expression to a pattern that existed more broadly in his culture. The perceived crisis in Christianity, which received empirical support from the 1851 *Census of Religious Worship*, was a primary impetus for the development of occult spirituality in the nineteenth century.⁴³ As the spiritualist Hudson Tuttle wrote in 1867:

*There is no alternative, material science is fast driving Christianity to the wall. It has taken all the thinkers of the world. The church holds only those who do not think. Spiritualism is the last stronghold against the tide of materialism, and if it fail to establish its claims, the former will be supremely triumphant.*⁴⁴

Bulwer-Lytton's metaphysical novels model the rescue of modern spirituality by occultism in order then to re-empower a Christian spiritualism. More precisely, there is a three-stage movement: first, occultism is enlisted to demonstrate the reality of spiritual phenomena (which Christianity was failing to do); then occultism is shown to be incomplete or materialistically flawed in its spirituality; finally, it is possible to return to a Christian belief which, through this process, has been

⁴³ My primary source on the 1851 census is Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850–1914* (New York, 1996).

⁴⁴ Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism*, p. 56.

reinvigorated to stand up to materialism. The bargain, however, for Christianity is that it has been largely stripped of most of its traditional doctrine. *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story* use occult spiritualisms to arrive at an esoteric Christianity from which God, heaven, sin/redemption, and even the word 'Christianity' have been, if not removed, then muted, a pattern that will be repeated in the novels of H. Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli.⁴⁵ Instead one finds euphemisms such as 'the Divine One' and 'the Great Religion', and the predominant focus is on the individual soul and a free-floating conception of the afterlife that is divorced from the traditional, dualistic geography of heaven and hell (*Zanoni* 301, 377). The Reformation finds its endpoint in this move to a de-institutionalized focus on the utterly freed but potentially isolated individual Spirit.⁴⁶

In order to effect this rescue of spiritualism for Christianity by the occult, Bulwer-Lytton draws upon extensive study and direct experience of mesmerism and spiritualism to super-load these novels with nearly every historical and contemporary variety of occultism. One driving mystery in *Zanoni* is which among these is foremost, which is the true origin of the protagonist's powers. Some scholars have argued that it is Rosicrucianism, since the frame narrator and Glyndon are Rosicrucian and it is invoked periodically throughout the novel.⁴⁷ But *Zanoni* and *Mejnour* appeal to a broader range of occultisms and give precedence not to Rosicrucianism but to a more ancient esoteric source. In the first place, mesmerism is more pervasive in both novels than is Rosicrucianism. *Zanoni* influences others with his 'haunting eyes', heals with the 'deep sleep' of mesmeric medicine and compels others 'by a power not [their] own' (*Zanoni* 18, 86, 92). *Mejnour* repeatedly alludes to mesmeric vitalism – 'Life is the one pervading principle' – and he and *Zanoni* live indefinitely without aging by accessing an 'all-pervading and invisible fluid resembling electricity' (*Zanoni* 224, 228). In addition, both novels mix in a substantial dose of alchemy and magic, regularly invoking Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus, magic potions and the philosopher's stone. Sometimes *Zanoni* and *Mejnour* are presented simply as 'the first Herbalists – the master-chemists of the world' (*Zanoni* 64). This is all part of the argument that supernaturalism *is* natural, that 'magic (or science that violates Nature) exists not, – it is but the science by

⁴⁵ I refer in particular to Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886; Los Angeles, CA, 1947); H. Rider Haggard, *She* (1887; Oxford, 1998); and H. Rider Haggard, *Ayesha: The Return of 'She'* (1905), in *The Classic Adventures: Ayesha: The Return of She, Benita: An African Romance* (Poole, UK, 1986).

⁴⁶ Willburn, *Possessed Victorians*, provides a counterpoint to my argument here. She develops the concept of 'possessed individualism' to describe an alternative among practitioners of spiritualism, and in the novels of certain authors, to the liberal 'possessive individualism' that is more akin to the endpoint of Protestant individualism that I find to have been more pervasive in Victorian culture.

⁴⁷ I refer to my primary sources on Rosicrucianism in Bulwer-Lytton: Coates, 'Zanoni by Bulwer-Lytton'; and Ian Findlay, 'Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Rosicrucians', in Luanne Frank (ed.), *Literature and the Occult: Essays in Comparative Literature* (Arlington, TX, 1977), pp. 137–46. In arguing against the centrality of Rosicrucianism to *Zanoni*, I am siding against Coates and Findlay with Wolff, *Strange Stories*, pp. 163–5, 183–5 and 233.

which Nature can be controlled' (*Zanoni* 225). One could continue this list of occultisms. It would have to include also allusions to 'other worlds', the Dweller of the Threshold, Zanoni's spirit-familiar or angel, Adon-Ai, and even intimations of a spiritual evolutionary model – 'grades and heavens of spiritualized being' – which became a not uncommon feature first within spiritualism and then in late-century hybrid religions (as well as in Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds*) (*Zanoni* 193, 250).

Indeed, Bulwer-Lytton, both in his fiction and through his advocacy of investigating every occultism he encountered, predicted and likely shaped the intensely syncretic character of some of the new hybrid religions that emerged after his death. The rampant sampling from and interweaving of many mystical and religious traditions that one finds in Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* is inspired by, if not in part modelled on, *Zanoni*, though further investigation is required.⁴⁸ As if following Bulwer-Lytton's example, Blavatsky synthesized elements of a broad range of ancient and modern spiritualisms, claimed that they constituted an alternative lineage that preceded traditional world religions and posited as the carriers of that lineage an elite adepthood in contrast to common spiritualists. One likewise finds this pattern in the romance novels of the late-Victorian decades, for instance in Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* and Haggard's *She* and *Ayesha*.⁴⁹ Corelli's fiction clearly bears the stamp of multiple types of influence from Bulwer-Lytton, though no study I know of has drawn out the comparison.

A second way in which Bulwer-Lytton modelled, in advance, subsequent new occultisms is in the claim to an ancient occult origin that gains its authority in part by historical precedence over any institutionalized world religion. (The alternative to this strategy for religion builders is to claim a new direct transmission from a deity, as in the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.) Though *Zanoni* invokes a broad range of occultisms, it also thereby effectively teases readers with the prospect of revealing which one of them is the purest source. Mejnour points towards it when he says to Glyndon: 'I allow, however, that the Rosicrucians formed a sect descended from the greater and earlier school. They were wiser than the Alchemists, – their masters are wiser than they' (*Zanoni* 214). What earlier school, and who are the masters of the masters? The Dweller of the Threshold gives a hint when it addresses Zanoni mockingly as 'young Chaldean!' – merely 5,000 years old (*Zanoni* 296)! The novel implies that Mejnour and Zanoni had in fact lived among the ancient Babylonian or Mesopotamian Chaldeans (and both Blavatsky in building Theosophy and Corelli in building her fictional spiritualism will later enlist the Chaldeans). But then the unnamed narrator draws back from

⁴⁸ On Bulwer-Lytton's influence on Blavatsky, see Christensen, *Edward Bulwer-Lytton*, p. 234; Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 149; and Wolff, *Strange Stories*, p. 186.

⁴⁹ See J. Jeffrey Franklin, 'Memory as the Nexus of Identity, Empire, and Evolution in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and H. Rider Haggard's *She*', *Cahiers victoriens & édouardiens*, 53 (2001): 141–70; and J. Jeffrey Franklin, 'The Counter-Invasion of Britain by Buddhism in Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* and H. Rider Haggard's *Ayesha: The Return of She*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (Spring 2003): 19–42.

a conclusive identification, saying that ‘not to us of an aged and hoary world is vouchsafed the NAME which, so say the earliest oracles of the earth, “rushes into the infinite world”’ (Zanoni 130). The closest the novel gets to naming it is as the ‘holy and spiritual Theurgia, – of a magic that could summon the Angel, or the Good Genius, not the Fiend’ (Zanoni 371).⁵⁰ Thus Bulwer-Lytton leaves his readers midway between this primal but obscure origin and a spiritually recharged but doctrinally stripped Christianity. Perhaps the real point is to keep the ultimate source mysterious by ever pointing backwards and insisting that it only can be known to the fully initiated adept. This, after all, is the strategy used to effect by the adepts of Theosophy, the Golden Dawn, and, for that matter, the Church of Scientology, a more recent occult-scientific religion that rivals the hybridity of its late-nineteenth-century antecedents.

I have attempted to highlight the ways in which Edward Bulwer-Lytton was a pivotal figure both in literary history and in the history of spiritualism and the occult in the nineteenth century. In literary history, he was a father – if not *the* father – of the occult romance novel. His metaphysical novels contributed to at least three trends in the representation of spiritualism that have been repeated in occult romances ever since. The first is in portraying an antithesis between romantic love and spiritual practice. This elaboration of the traditional Western body/soul dichotomy, with its history of ‘mortifying the flesh’, serves to generate a huge amount of plot-productive sexual tension, not only between human lovers but especially between human and demi-immortal characters (most recently, in particular, vampires). According to the same logic, truly ideal love, which most often means romance exquisitely heightened by sexual abstinence, correlates with spiritual advancement – though seldom does it remain unconsummated. Second, Bulwer-Lytton championed the signature Romantic creed that Art is a spiritual vocation, that aestheticism is akin to spiritualism, a claim that will be taken to one extreme by the Decadents, championed in particular by Marie Corelli, and then problematized by the Modernists. His novels align true or ideal art with genuine spiritualism, artistic channelling of ‘genius’ or ‘imagination’ with spirit channelling.⁵¹ Whatever one may think of the quality of Bulwer-Lytton’s art or

⁵⁰ ‘Theurgy’, according to *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn, vol. 13 (Farmington Hills, MI, 2005), p. 9156, ‘refers to actions that induce or bring about the presence of a divine or supernatural being’; it is distinguished from ordinary magical practice less by its techniques than by its aim, which was religious (union with the divine) rather than secular – in other words, spiritual rather than material

⁵¹ For consideration of the relationship between Bulwer-Lytton’s aesthetics and spiritualism, see Gavin Budge, ‘Mesmerism and Medicine in Bulwer-Lytton’s Novels of the Occult’, in Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (eds), *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (Amsterdam, 2006), pp. 39-59, p. 47; and Joseph I. Fradin, “‘The Absorbing Tyranny of Every-day Life’: Bulwer-Lytton’s *A Strange Story*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16.1 (June

spirituality, he worked with dedication towards adepthood in both arenas. His own religious practice, aside from periodic Church attendance and lip-service to Anglicanism, 'was therefore part aesthetic and part spiritual'.⁵² Finally, *Zanoni* and *A Strange Story* develop the character type that I call the demi-immortal oriental, a character whose bodily, material longevity originates in an 'Eastern' source and often comes to figure as a blasphemous alternative to the traditional Judaeo-Christian spiritual immortality of the soul. This figure will reappear after Bulwer-Lytton not only in novels by Corelli and Haggard, but also in those by Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, Richard Marsh and James Hilton.⁵³ Bulwer-Lytton himself was engaged in the 'cult of youth', as fictionalized in Margrave, Dorian Gray and others.⁵⁴ He was fascinated by the idea that some vitalistic power, at once spiritual and scientific, might permit life extension (as does the natural substance 'vriil' in his 1871 novel *The Coming Race*). But, then, was not and is not one of the primary motivations for interest in occult spirituality – not to say religion in general – the mystery of death and the profound wish for eternal life?

In the history of Victorian spiritualism and occultism, Bulwer-Lytton performed a dual gate-keeping function. Translating the past into the present, his work served as a siphon filtering ancient, medieval and modern esoteric and occult precedents into the discourses underlying the mesmerism and spiritualism movements of his day. Projecting the present into the future, his work predicted and influenced the construction of the hybrid religions of the latter part of the century. Bulwer-Lytton was a pivotal figure in the historical evolution that I have argued occurred from the paradigms of mesmerism and spiritualism to those informing late-century hybrid religions. He served this function less because of any brilliant prescience on his part than because he felt and mirrored back to his society one of the most widely shared and deeply troubling dilemmas of his age: profound longing for spiritualism coupled with ultimate belief in scientific materialism. To his credit, Bulwer-Lytton remained faithful to each while fiercely worrying the apparently irreconcilable differences. It is this very contradiction in him that I think is *most* representative of a predominant Victorian response to spiritualism and the occult throughout the century. His intensely focused ambivalence, and the resulting, tortured solutions to the contradictions between spiritualism and science that his writings formulate, modelled responses that would be enacted not only in subsequent fiction but also in British culture and society.

1961): 1–16, p. 15. Cottom develops the point that 'art came to be the legitimate supernatural in that it was understood to be the proper medium for the exercise of the powers traditionally attributed to the supernatural' (*Abyss of Reason*, p. 94).

⁵² Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 138.

⁵³ The figure of the demi-immortal oriental multiples in the twentieth century in early horror cinema, followed by superhero cinema and films in the subgenre I call martial-arts-Buddhism – including among many others *Star Wars* (1977), *The Matrix* (1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *Bullet-Proof Monk* (2003).

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, p. 88.

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