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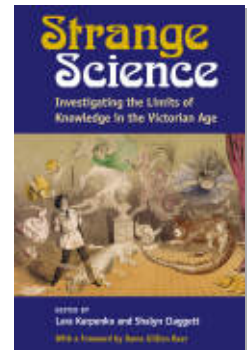
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Inductive Science, Literary Theory, and the Occult in Edward Bulwer- Lytton's "Suggestive" System

Anna Maria Jones



If, then, some tyrannical Afrite, wroth with my modest disavowal of a system, or my arrogant pretensions to suffer my thoughts to grow without cord or stake, should say to me, "System of some kind thou shalt choose," my system should be the suggestive, because it is given to few men to prove, and all men to suggest. . . . Thought is valuable in proportion as it is generative. If vital itself, though it be but a germ, it vitalises thoughts in others which may bloom into petals, or mature into fruits not vouchsafed to the thinker in whom it originates. I cast my thoughts freely abroad; let the winds waft them loose. It is according to the soil on which they fall that they will be sterile or fertile.

—Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Caxtoniana* (1863)¹

When one thinks of the foremost scientific thinkers of the nineteenth century, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (hereafter Bulwer) is unlikely to make the short list. Indeed, despite his many successes as a popular novelist and essayist during his lifetime, today he is even unlikely to make the list of great Victorian literary theorists or practitioners. Yet, it is worth taking Bulwer's intellectual labor seriously on both counts. Bulwer's literary theory is inextricably bound with his understanding of Baconian

science, and both of these concerns are interconnected with his interest in the occult. This is not to say that Baconian induction drives the plot of Bulwer's fiction in the way, for example, that astronomy governs Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* or evolutionary theory underpins H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*. Inductive science is not a fixed point by which to navigate Bulwer's oeuvre or, in any straightforward way, a "through line" that connects his works. Rather, he appropriates Bacon idiosyncratically and with considerable license in both his fiction and his essays—indeed, Bulwer's creative repurposing of Baconian science in the service of his literary and occult theories demonstrates the "suggestive system" that he outlines in the epigraph: in Bulwer's work, Bacon's scientific method "mature[s] into fruits not vouchsafed to the thinker in whom it originate[d]."²

As I will argue, Baconian induction is foundational to Bulwer's "suggestive" system of intellectual inquiry, which insists upon the impossibility of predicting the effects of a text on its readers and which, consequently, privileges eclectic collection of facts, texts, and ideas over some more "systematic" pursuit of knowledge. Bulwer's creative appropriation of Baconian science enables him to draw connections analogically across various scientific, occult, and literary fields of study and to blend opposing epistemological and aesthetic impulses, materialist and idealist. In this essay I trace Bulwer's "suggestive system," primarily in *Caxtoniana*, his 1863 collection of essays, which treat, as the subtitle asserts, "life, literature, and manners," and which first appeared serially in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from February 1862 through October 1863; I end, however, with brief attention to *Zanoni* (1842), Bulwer's first occult novel, in which he stages an evocative demonstration of his inductive system of reading at work. Bulwer's insistence on the power of thought to "mature into fruits not vouchsafed to the thinker in whom it originates,"³ I argue, decouples text from author, thereby enabling Bulwer to consider the discursive afterlives of ideas—his own and others'—as they continue to circulate and to shape readers in surprising ways and in distant futures.

Bulwer adopts his inductive methodology from William Whewell and William Godwin, both his onetime mentors.⁴ In his second occult novel, *A Strange Story* (1861), for example, the narrator's mentor, Dr. Faber, quotes Bacon (via Whewell) to encourage in the skeptical narrator a faith in the divine to undergird his scientific pursuits:

I see on your table the very volume of Bacon which contains the passage I commend to your reflection. Here it is. Listen: "Take an

example of a dog, and mark what a generosity and courage he will put on when he finds himself maintained by a man who, to him, is instead of a God. . . . So man, when he resteth and assureth himself upon divine protection and favour, gathereth a force and faith which human nature could not obtain.”⁵

In *A Strange Story*, as in *Caxtoniana*, Bulwer takes his cue from Whewell’s 1833 Bridgewater Treatise, *On Astronomy and General Physics Considered with Reference to Natural Theology*, invoking Bacon to argue against the “hallucination by which Nature is left Godless—because Man is left soulless.”⁶ But it is William Godwin who provides Bulwer with a pattern for harnessing the Baconian method of inductive reasoning to a theory of literature and readers.

According to Godwin in *The Enquirer*, his 1797 collection of essays on literature, culture, and knowledge, inductive reasoning is crucial to understanding what books actually *do*. Whereas a book may be written to illustrate a particular moral, its real influence on readers, or “tendency,” as Godwin calls it, may diverge widely. The moral, he writes, is that “ethical sentence to the illustration of which the work may most aptly be applied,” but the tendency “is the actual effect it is calculated to produce upon the reader, and cannot be completely ascertained but by experiment.”⁷ To attend too rigidly to a book’s moral—what general principle it illustrates *in theory*—is to miss what it may be doing to readers *in practice*. And, Godwin warns, “To ascertain . . . the genuine tendency of a book, is a science peculiarly abstruse.”⁸ But he also suggests in the preface to *The Enquirer*, with indirect allusion to Bacon, that

the intellectual eye of man, perhaps, is formed rather for the inspection of the minute and near, than of immense and distant objects. We proceed most safely, when we enter upon each portion of our process, as it were, *de novo*; and there is danger, if we are too exclusively anxious about the consistency of system, that we may forget the perpetual attention we owe to experience, the pole-star of truth.⁹

Godwin’s emphasis on *de novo* analysis—which is to say, starting afresh with each new object of study instead of moving too quickly to conclusions or proceeding too confidently from preconceived notions—echoes Baconian edicts: to interpret nature through the careful collection of facts and to free one’s intellect from biases (*idola*).¹⁰ Indeed, Godwin claims, “an incessant recurrence to experiment and actual observa-

tion . . . is the method adopted” in *The Enquirer* itself, rather than “laying down one or two principles and then developing them and following them to a variety of inferences.”¹¹ In other words, Godwin undertakes an inductive method in his own literary and cultural meditations.

In *Caxtoniana* Bulwer cites Godwin explicitly in describing this dichotomy and notes:

A writer may present to you, at the end of his book, some unexceptionable dogma which parents would cordially admit into the copy-book ethics of their children, yet, in the process of arriving at his harmless aphorism, he may have led the mind as much astray into mischief as it is in his power to do. On the other hand, a writer may seek to work out a proposition, from the moral truth of which there would be a very general dissent, and yet be either harmless, or often instructive and elevating.¹²

To accommodate this unpredictability, Bulwer, like Godwin, proposes an approach to intellectual inquiry that privileges minute and varied observation and experimentation and that resists too-hasty judgments, acknowledging even the value of pseudoscientific missteps as much as, or perhaps even more than, the elucidation of infallible laws:

It is noticeable how much even the fallacies of a great writer serve, not the less effectually, because indirectly, to the advancement of truth, by stimulating the energies of the writers who oppose the fallacies, and, in so doing, strike out new ideas and fresh discoveries. How much of his researches into alchemy may have warmed and emboldened the imagination of Newton, in whom imagination seems to have been only less powerful than reason!¹³

Bulwer’s invocation of Newton here is typical of much of *Caxtoniana*, which works on multiple levels: to link scientific experimentation to creativity, to encourage the suspension of bias against the occult, and to draw analogies among different kinds of intellectual endeavor. As he writes, “All the acquisitions of the human intellect are relations to each other. . . . If there be some specialty in art, literature, science, active life, in which we can best succeed, that specialty is improved and enriched by all the contributions obtainable from other departments of study.”¹⁴ And, so, the “indirect” benefit of any given idea, text, or author cannot be determined except by observation.

I follow Lawrence Poston in tracing the outlines of a “Godwinian” Bulwer. Poston reads Bulwer in “triangulation” with Godwin and Mary Shelley as political novelists who “engage issues of power and control” in psychological, occult, and supernatural terms.¹⁵ I would certainly agree with this characterization, but I read Bulwer’s project, particularly in *Caxtoniana* and in his occult fictions—*Zanoni*, “The Haunted and the Haunters” (1859), and *A Strange Story*—as more epistemological than political. And this is why I find his invocations of Baconianism (heretofore unexamined by scholars, as far as I know) of particular interest. By exploring Bulwer’s “suggestive” mode, I propose a tentative explanation of the inconsistencies and contradictions in his ideas, which have often been attributed (more or less disparagingly) to a canny ability to capitalize on multiple literary markets rather than to any genuine intellectual commitments. For example, Joseph Fradin’s characterization in 1961 of Bulwer as a mostly unsatisfying if also “highly symptomatic novelist, sensitive not merely to changes in the barometer of taste but to changes in the intellectual atmosphere,” may appear somewhat dated now, but it is in many ways still typical.¹⁶ Christopher Lane’s treatment of Bulwer’s philosophical exploration of misanthropy is considerably more flattering to him, arguing that “his essays thicken recent interest in hatred, antagonism, and anti-communitarianism—voiced by such disparate thinkers as Giorgio Agamben, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Claude Lefort, Carl Schmitt, and Slavoj Žižek,” but Lane, too, cites Bulwer’s value as “something of a Victorian weathervane.”¹⁷ Other critics have been much less generous.¹⁸

Marie Mulvey-Roberts notes wryly that “Bulwer-baiting is not just a recent phenomenon, it was also a national sport for his contemporaries as well. . . . Bulwer appeared to some to be a shifting, ephemeral and nebulous figure, rather like his own literary creation, the ‘Dweller of the Threshold,’ who appears in *Zanoni*.”¹⁹ I suggest that this very “shifting, ephemeral and nebulous” quality bespeaks Bulwer’s desire to “let [his] thoughts grow without cord or stake,” according to his suggestive system. As he argues, with recourse to scientific language, “‘Non fingor [*sic*] hypotheses,’ said Newton, with a scorn we revere in a Newton, to whom scorn was so rare. Still, if Newton disdained an hypothesis, he rejoiced in a guess.”²⁰ Here again, Bulwer’s idiosyncratic Newton is both a “mechanical” scientist pursuing his Baconian method of experimentation and also an intuitive and creative genius, a blend of occult visionary and inductive observer, on a level with the greatest of literary geniuses: “I was mistaken in calling Shakespeare ‘peerless’ in the gift of clairvoyance—Newton’s

clairvoyance is not less marvellous than Shakespeare's. To imagine the things they have never seen, and to imagine them accurately, constitutes the poetry of philosophers, as it constitutes the philosophy of poets."²¹

Rather than reading Bulwer's enthusiasm for occult disciplines, from alchemy to mesmerism to clairvoyance, as indicative of an unfortunate lack of skepticism (an extreme case of what was surprisingly common among [otherwise serious] Victorian intellectuals like Harriet Martineau, Thomas Carlyle, and George Eliot, among others) or of a venal desire to profit from contemporaneous tastes, we might, rather, read this eclecticism and credulity in the spirit of Bulwer's own "suggestive" system: as providing "generative" value for him and his readers.²² In this I follow Mark Knight's suggestion that "rather than consigning these esoteric studies (and Bulwer with them) to the margins of nineteenth-century culture, it is more helpful to consider the light they shed on some of the main scientific and philosophical debates of the period."²³ If Bulwer's image of a clairvoyant Newton or a magical Bacon makes for "strange science," it also offers a useful reminder that the categories into which we divide our own intellectual labors—scientific or humanistic, material or spiritual, critical or creative, empirical or intuitive—were by no means so discrete for Victorian thinkers.

Bacon, Newton, and Victorian Epistemology

The fact that emerging scientific theories and new discoveries were central to Victorian literary and cultural discourses is no new insight, but the importance of the debate over the scientific method itself has received less attention in Victorian literary studies, despite the fact that, as George Levine notes, "Bacon . . . was a pervasive presence in the consciousness of theorists of science, and his way of seeing the world was a more or less 'official' and certainly pervasive one in Victorian England."²⁴ Francis Bacon's inductive method—wherein the scientist must start from observable facts and work (only slowly and patiently) from these to the formulation of theories or broad principles, as opposed to working deductively from the abstract theory toward description of particulars—was hotly debated by Victorian intellectuals. His privileging of fact-gathering appealed to empiricists, and his emphasis on the practical application of scientific discoveries made him attractive to utilitarians and industrialists. Philosophical materialists pointed to Bacon's emphasis on observa-

tion as justifying the primacy of sensory phenomena; idealists sometimes criticized him as too narrowly focused on minutia, and thus blind to the need for larger ideas and abstractions, but also sometimes presented him sympathetically as a theological scientist. Jonathan Smith argues that the waning of the popularity of Baconian induction as the nineteenth century progressed was linked to the rise in a hypothetico-deductive method that “sought to portray science as an imaginative, speculative, creative enterprise.” He also suggests that this decline in Bacon’s fortunes was linked to a concomitant rise in Newton’s popularity.²⁵ However, as Richard Yeo notes, and as becomes clear reading the Victorians on Bacon, even applying the terms “Baconian” and “Baconianism” to nineteenth-century science and scientists is problematic: “These terms . . . have been objects of controversy and multiple interpretation to an extent which renders them practically useless as simple descriptive epithets.”²⁶ Certainly, Bulwer’s versions of Baconian and Newtonian science bear the stamp of his creative license.

Nevertheless, Bulwer is clearly participating in the Victorian attempt to yoke imagination to scientific inquiry. Interestingly, however, for Bulwer this does not involve a rejection of Bacon’s empirical method as “too sterile, too mechanical, and too impersonal to capture the artistic quality of the scientist doing science,”²⁷ but rather requires a conception of Bacon himself as accommodating imagination while *also* being methodologically committed to fact-gathering. For example, for Bulwer, as for his fellow believer in mesmerism Harriet Martineau—to whom he originally suggested mesmerism as a cure for her illness²⁸—Bacon’s adherence to unbiased observation confers legitimacy on explorations of the occult, wherein the “facts” of successful mesmerism, inexplicable clairvoyance, and other wonders had, according to their proponents, not *yet* been collected into incontrovertible knowledge or coherent systems. Martineau’s 1851 collaboration with Henry George Atkinson, *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development*, which extols the virtues of atheism, Baconianism, and mesmerism in equal measure, begins with “mottoes” from Bacon, chemist Sir Humphrey Davy, and phrenologist Franz Gall (among others). Also, the book includes numerous invocations of Bacon like this one:

Many persons, from fancying that mesmerism and *clairvoyance* indicate a spiritual existence, or something supernatural, have become converted from scepticism to the belief of a future life. . . . but mes-

merism and *clairvoyance* are as natural as the instinct of animals, and no more wonderful. . . . We must follow our great master Bacon, and make a stand against the fallacy of natural theology.²⁹

Indeed, for authors aiming to distance themselves and their inquiries from theology, their reverence for Bacon and natural law approaches religious zealotry, as G. H. Lewes pointed out in his scathing two-part review in the *Leader*.³⁰

Martineau and Atkinson's *Letters* are interesting in relation to Bulwer for a couple of reasons. First, they appropriate Bacon in very similar ways to Bulwer, but from almost opposite poles of the idealism-materialism debate, thus underscoring the slipperiness (and ubiquity) of Baconianism in Victorian intellectual circles. Moreover, while Bulwer receives slightly more attention from literary critics today than Martineau,³¹ they are both figures who were extremely influential and widely read in their day, but who have since fallen into relative obscurity. Our picture of the Victorians' relationship to "strange science" remains incomplete without considering these unlikely convergences as well as the "usual suspects" (e.g., Darwin, Eliot, Lewes, Spencer) in the circulation of Victorian scientific discourses.

Bulwer, though staunchly opposed to the materialism that Martineau and other Comtean positivists championed, puts Bacon to similar use, urging the suspension of prejudices in the examination of "some of the modern thaumaturgia":

Possibly, if a philosopher who possessed in an equal degree the virtue of candour and the acuteness of science, would condescend to examine, as Bacon and Newton would unquestionably have examined [them] . . . possibly he might either make an immense progress in our knowledge of the laws of nature, or prevent incalculable mischief in the spread of a new superstition.³²

A philosopher is never justified in denying phenomena just because they seem, on the face of things, to contravene the laws of nature, for "if a philosopher is to pronounce for himself what is impossible and what is not, there would soon be no philosophy at all."³³ Bulwer's suppositious Bacon and Newton here are together praiseworthy for their willingness to observe without bias. Disposing of his imagined naysayer, Bulwer concludes: "Certainly Newton would not have so answered, because he never refused to examine."³⁴

Of course, these (mis)appropriations of Bacon and Newton may be evidence in support of Smith's claim that "the decline in Bacon's reputation as a methodologist had its roots in part in the work of those nineteenth-century thinkers who admired him."³⁵ G. H. Lewes's acerbic criticism, in *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (1853), of those who sought to link Bacon and Newton reads uncomfortably as if he had Bulwer specifically in mind (though he might very well have been thinking of Martineau and Atkinson). Referring to the same line that Bulwer misquotes, Lewes writes: "Newton's assertion—*Hypotheses non fingo*—I make no hypothesis—has been incessantly repeated by men who fancy themselves Baconian thinkers when they restrict their incompetence to what they call 'facts.'" These "ideas of science," Lewes declares, "are utterly irrational."³⁶ Tone aside, Lewes's comment points to Bacon's and Newton's multipurpose utility for materialists, idealists, occultists, among others, as, indeed, the Victorians themselves were well aware.

Thus, Bulwer finds Bacon's empirical method appealing because, in his interpretation, it accommodates both spiritual faith and the pursuit of material knowledge. As "L—," a semiautobiographical persona in Bulwer's 1830 Socratic dialogue "The New Phaedo," remarks to his interlocutor, "[Bacon] makes us feel less earthly in our desires, by making us imagine ourselves *wiser*—the love of a divine knowledge inspires and exalts us. . . . With the same hand that limits our progress on earth, he points to the illimitable glories of heaven."³⁷ "The New Phaedo" appeared much earlier than *Caxtoniana*, but Bulwer seems here to be modeling his own suggestive system: he finds value in Bacon that Bacon himself may very well not have intended. Bacon is useful not just for the limits he places on scientific observation, but also for the imaginative possibilities he engenders, enabling his readers to envision themselves as wiser, better future selves.

The reverence for Bacon that L— evinces comes after he "grew chilled and dissatisfied with the materialists" and leads him to his own analogical system. He explains his intellectual progress: "Helvetius charmed my fancy—sharpened my intellect—but filled not my soul. Locke, Condillac, alike left me disappointed—and asking solutions to questions which they either dared not answer—or discouragingly evaded." After finding the "Scotch, and . . . the German reasoners" (that is to say, the empiricists and the idealists), likewise inadequate, L— experiences a sort of enlightenment: "My books were deaf and sealed, but round me was the Universe, and the life of things became my teacher!—Yes—not from metaphysics, but from *analogy* I rebuilt up my crumbling

faith,—and became a Philosopher to myself.”³⁸ Those familiar with Gillian Beer’s subtle analysis of analogy in *Darwin’s Plots* will not be surprised that analogical reasoning was a hallmark of Victorian science, though they will also, perhaps, remember Beer’s caution that its status was by no means uncontested. Not only was analogy, as she notes, “part of the armoury of Natural Theology,” because it “seemed to provide evidence for a teleological order,” but Victorian thinkers, natural theological and materialist alike, understood its epistemological slipperiness: “Its seductively partial applicability, its tendency to suppress all disanalogous elements, means that it can claim more than it proves.”³⁹ So we might read L——’s *Bildung* here merely as Bulwer’s Whewellian espousal of natural theology over the “godless” materialism he found so inadequate, but as I will argue in what follows, it is more than this. Analogy is central to the suggestive system that Bulwer develops in *Caxtoniana*.

*Caxtoniana: “Normal” Clairvoyance,
Moral Effects, and New Theories*

When Bulwer links Shakespeare’s creative genius with Newton’s in “On the Normal Clairvoyance of the Imagination,” he argues by analogy: the “poetry of philosophers” is like the “philosophy of poets,” in that both involve “the gift of seeing through other organs than the eyes,” a faculty that is “more or less accurately shared by all in whom imagination is strongly concentrated upon any selected object, however distant and apart from the positive experience of material senses.”⁴⁰ Both creative writers and scientists must be able to imagine what they do not yet see, in the first case in order to describe people, places, and times that are beyond the writer’s literal observation and, in the second case, because “men disciplined in the study of severest science, only through reason discover what through imagination they pre-see.”⁴¹ This essay is typical of *Caxtoniana*, and it does its work on several registers at once, linking science, the occult, and literary creativity.

The essay begins by acknowledging the difficulty of proving the existence of real clairvoyance inductively: “So uncertain, indeed, so unreliable, are the higher phenomena ascribed to mesmeric clairvoyance, that the experiments of such phenomena almost invariably fail when subjected to those tests which the incredulous not unreasonably demand.”⁴² Bulwer hedges his bets somewhat, perhaps unwilling to endorse wholeheartedly occult beliefs that might attract ridicule.⁴³ But this acknowledg-

ment also provides the setup for his strange argument: if we can't find sufficient evidence to prove mesmeric clairvoyance, then we need look no further than the closest poem or novel to see a species of that same faculty: "Nothing is more frequent among novelists, even third-rate and fourth-rate, than 'to see through other organs than their eyes.' . . . They can describe scenes they have never witnessed more faithfully than the native who has *lived* amid those scenes from his cradle."⁴⁴ But it is not merely that the literary imagination is able to supply information that may *seem* credible; rather, the author literally *becomes* clairvoyant, much in the manner of George Eliot's protagonist in *The Lifted Veil* (1859), mystically able to see places he has never been. Bulwer offers himself as proof:

Just as a chemist who suggests a theory naturally adds to his suggestion the statement of his own experiments, I offer my personal evidence in favour of the doctrine I advance—viz., "that there is nothing so rare as to excite our incredulous wonder in the faculty of seeing 'through other organs than the eyes.'" I have had sometimes to describe minutely, scenes which . . . I had never witnessed. I visited those scenes later. I then examined them, with natural apprehension that I must have committed some notable mistakes to be carefully corrected in any subsequent edition of the work. . . . In no single instance could I ever find, after the most rigid scrutiny, that the clairvoyance of imagination had deceived me.⁴⁵

It is not incidental that Bulwer likens himself to a chemist using his own experiments in support of his theory; as he elsewhere refers to Sir Humphrey Davy's writings, we might imagine that he has in mind Davy's experiments huffing nitrous oxide (with his friend Coleridge) in pursuit of a theory of the properties of gasses. Davy, himself a proponent of Baconianism, certainly blurred the lines between the scientist as objective observer and romantic visionary.⁴⁶

Bulwer's literary clairvoyance, then, does double duty. It lends occult mystique to his "brethren in the masonry of fiction," but at the same time it demystifies mesmeric clairvoyance that, taken by itself, seems "too preternatural, too transcendent for human attainment."⁴⁷ Bulwer draws an analogy between "real" clairvoyance and literary creativity, only to merge the two analogues into one phenomenon, in which the literary version is factual proof of the occult. And, to make this move, he draws yet again on analogy: the creative imagination of the writer is like that of the scientist, Newton, who possesses the ability to imagine what he will later dis-

cover through experimentation. Bulwer concludes with one last analogy: “The truth really seems to be, that the imagination acquires by custom a certain involuntary unconscious power of observation and comparison, correcting its own mistakes, and arriving at precision of judgment, just as the outward eye is disciplined to compare, adjust, estimate, measure, the objects reflected on the back of its retina.”⁴⁸ Bulwer transposes the inductive faculties of the scientific “outward eye” to the clairvoyant “gift of seeing through other organs than the eyes,” thus inviting his reader to reconceive of both simultaneously.

If analogy enables Bulwer to suggest correspondences among the occult, literary imagination, and inductive science in “On the Normal Clairvoyance of the Imagination,” elsewhere in *Caxtoniana* he combines these same elements to theorize the process by which “suggestive” writing and reading generate new ideas. In “On the Moral Effect of Writers,” the essay in which he refers to Godwin and also insists upon the value of Newton’s alchemical research, Bulwer reflects upon the slippage between the author’s intentions and the effect that his or her works may produce. The issue clearly engenders a certain level of anxiety on his own behalf, but it also underscores the similarities between occult knowledge and literary creativity:

Certain I am that every author who has written a book with earnest forethought and fondly-cherished designs, will bear testimony to the fact, that much which he meant to convey has never been guessed at in any review of his work; and many a delicate beauty of thought, on which he principally valued himself, remains, like the statue of Isis, an image of truth from which no hand lifts the veil.⁴⁹

Tellingly, Bulwer invokes the same imagery here that he uses in *Zanoni* to describe, at different times, the search for occult knowledge and the difficulty of divining an author’s meaning in a literary work. In both cases, he refers to Schiller poems (“The Veiled Image at Sais” and “Cassandra”) that he himself translated in 1844.⁵⁰

The veiled statue of Isis in *Zanoni*, as in Schiller, represents the perilous allure of occult knowledge. In an epigraph from “The Veiled Image at Sais,” Bulwer quotes the reckless “youth” who disregards the priest’s warnings and pulls aside the statue’s veil (with predictably dire results): “Sey hinter ihm was will! Ich heb ihn auf (Be behind what there may—I raise the veil).”⁵¹ The doomed youth is likened to Glyndon, *Zanoni*’s young protégé who, similarly, disregards his mentor’s warnings and

grasps at occult knowledge for which he is unprepared. But, Bulwer also deploys the allusion as a less fatal metaphor for the gap between the author's intentions and his work's apprehension by readers. In the "Note" that he appended to all editions of *Zanoni* after 1853, Bulwer tells his readers: "We behold the figure, we cannot lift the veil. The Author himself is not called upon to explain what he designed."⁵² In this case, the veiled statue offers more promise than warning, for if an author cannot control the way he is (mis)read, he may take comfort in the idea that future generations of readers may understand his "genius" differently: "Neither Ben Jonson nor even Milton comprehended the sovereign Mastership of Art in Shakespeare. But Shakespeare himself could not have been conscious of his own art. And no writer, whatever his moral object, can foresee what in the course of ages may be the moral effect of his performance."⁵³ Here author and reader are together "unconscious" of all the potential (and potent) meanings within a text. "We behold the figure, we cannot lift the veil."

That even Shakespeare was underappreciated in his own time is seemingly a consolatory message for Bulwer, sensitive to criticism and often mocked by his own contemporaries despite his great popularity. But more than that it bespeaks an approach to reading that, as he remarks, "confirm[s] the wisdom of complete toleration to the freedom of all opinion," because we cannot predict what effect any given book may produce on its readers, or what other books and ideas it might generate as a result of its being read: "Had some mistaken benevolence of intention suppressed the publication of Hume's sceptical theories . . . it would have suppressed also all those great arguments for an immaterial soul in man. . . . Kant would have continued in his 'dogmatic slumber;' Reid would have remained in quiet adhesion to Locke; the materialism of Condillac would still be reigning over the schools of France."⁵⁴ Materialism begets idealism dialectically. To read (or not read), then, with preconceptions—that is to say, to be "too exclusively anxious about the consistency of system"⁵⁵—is to foreclose the possible benefits that cannot be predicted ahead of time or even necessarily traced after the fact. "We cannot," Bulwer writes, track all the "sources from which we derive the ideas that make us what we are." Indeed, the powerful effects of texts are so powerful as to extend beyond those who actually read them: "Few of my readers may have read Chaucer; fewer still the 'Principia' of Newton. Yet how much poorer the minds of all my readers would be if Chaucer and Newton had never written! . . . But who shall resolve to each individual start the rays of heat and light, whose effects are felt by all, whose

nature is defined by none?⁵⁶ Here Chaucer and Newton are to readers as “rays of heat and light,” an analogy that suggests (again) that to trace books’ effects, one must become like Newton, who undertook just such a study of the nature of light in his *Opticks* (1704). Thus, as I will argue in the coda, Bulwer provides the readers of *Zanoni* with an instructive example of his own text’s effects on one reader.

Coda: Zanoni and Its “Ingenious” Reader

Bulwer’s first occult novel, *Zanoni* tells the tragic story of the eponymous hero, a Chaldean mystic who has mastered the secrets of alchemy. In Naples the immortal Zanoni falls in love, against his better judgment and the advice of his mentor Mejnour, with a beautiful young opera singer, Viola, who cannot comprehend the occult knowledge that could give her the same immortality. Zanoni tries (for everyone’s good) to give Viola to his rival for her affections, a callow if promising English gentleman, Glyndon, but Glyndon rejects the offer in order to join Zanoni’s and Mejnour’s brotherhood, and Zanoni marries Viola. Glyndon fails to adhere to the strict discipline required to follow in Zanoni’s footsteps and, encountering the hideous supernatural being, the “Dweller of the Threshold,” that guards the knowledge he seeks, Glyndon recoils in horror from Zanoni and Mejnour and his occult pursuits. Glyndon convinces Viola, who has become increasingly terrified of her husband’s seemingly magical abilities, to run away with him to Paris, unfortunately on the eve of the Reign of Terror. Events reach their crisis when Zanoni sacrifices his own life to save Viola and Glyndon from the guillotine. Since its publication, *Zanoni* has been interpreted variously as a Godwinian meditation on immortality and human perfectibility, indebted to Godwin’s *St. Leon* (1799), a Carlylean critique of the French Revolution, and a romance in the German tradition.⁵⁷ It has often been understood, going back to Victorian readers, as expressing Bulwer’s “revolt from the chilling materialism of the age,”⁵⁸ and, thus, philosophically linked to his second occult novel, *A Strange Story*. *Zanoni* certainly includes evidence aplenty to support all of these readings. But given Bulwer’s insistence on the gap between a story’s moral and its tendency, we perhaps ought to be cautious in arriving at the “key” to the novel’s meaning. Following his and Godwin’s injunction to pursue an inductive approach to the “abstruse” science of parsing readers’ literary interpretations, my coda is less a reading of *Zanoni* than a reading of the reading of *Zanoni*.

As I mentioned previously, Bulwer's note, appended to the 1853 and subsequent editions of *Zanoni*, pondered the impossibility of readers arriving at one "correct" interpretation of his novel; in language very similar to that which he would use a decade later in his *Caxtoniana* essays, he stipulates that "*Zanoni* is not, as some have supposed, an allegory; but beneath the narrative . . . typical meanings are concealed."⁵⁹ If it were an allegory, it would be easy to interpret, as "an Allegory is a personation of distinct and definite things." But types are trickier: "A writer who conveys typical meanings, may express them in myriads." And, just as one cannot easily distinguish all the rays of heat and light produced by Chaucer and Newton, so here even the author himself "cannot disentangle all the hues which commingle into the light he seeks to cast on the truth."⁶⁰ And, thus, "the author of *Zanoni* gives . . . no key to the mysteries, be they trivial or important, which may be found in the secret chambers by those who lift the tapestry from the wall."⁶¹ Why, then, a few sentences later, is there just such a key, which must be insufficient to the task of decoding his "typical" novel?

In 1842, a few months after the publication of *Zanoni*, Harriet Martineau offered Bulwer a little something she had written, she claimed, to help her friends who were not as good at interpreting literature as she and who would, therefore, struggle with *Zanoni*. Bulwer was pleased to receive it, and in 1853, he added this key as an appendix to the novel following his note, though without naming Martineau as the author.⁶² Robert Wolff reads this decision as Bulwer's anxious desire to insure that he was properly understood by his readers, which then makes his previous disclaimer about the novel's indecipherability insincere. Wolff finds Bulwer's note, then, "disingenuous, defensive, and rather adding to the mystification of *Zanoni* than elucidating it."⁶³ Disingenuous it may be, but not, I would suggest, as Wolff claims, because Bulwer has Martineau do the exegetical heavy lifting while he declines to endorse or condemn her reading.

As in *Caxtoniana*, in the note Bulwer advocates a "suggestive" mode for reading. Referring to Martineau's key (and speaking of himself in the third person), Bulwer writes: "He leaves it to the reader to agree with, or dissent from, the explanation. 'A hundred men,' says the old Platonist, 'may read the book by the help of the same lamp, yet all may differ on the text; for the lamp only lights the characters—the mind must divine the meaning.' The object of a Parable is not that of a Problem; it does not seek to convince, but to suggest."⁶⁴ That Martineau provides a definitive interpretation, confidently reading all the characters as allegorical

figures, each clearly representing an Idea (Science, Idealism, Human Instinct, etc.), suggests that she does not understand the distinction that Bulwer is at pains to articulate. An uncharitable interpretation might be that Bulwer includes Martineau's key as an example of misreading—the product of one too much wedded to her system to discern whatever truths may lie in the “minute and near” details.⁶⁵ Perhaps this would be to read its inclusion as a mean-spirited in-joke. However, to read the appendix more charitably, we might say that Bulwer uses the opportunity to offer evidence of the gap between moral and tendency. In the novel itself characters presented with the same information, the same books, and the same natural and social phenomena come to widely divergent conclusions: if Zanoni and Mejnour receive profound truths, Glyndon and Viola stubbornly reject the “Universe and the life of things.”⁶⁶ So, too, *Zanoni's* actual readers illustrate Bulwer's suggestive system. Bulwer does certainly “cast [his] thoughts freely abroad,”⁶⁷ and they do prove valuable insofar as they are generative of Martineau's interpretations, however far afield from his intentions they may or may not be. By including Martineau's key, Bulwer shows what fruits his ideas have produced in one instance, but he also forwards intellectual exchange more broadly, enabling Martineau's ideas to cross-pollinate his own.

To conclude, while we can read Bulwer's suggestive approach to reading as engaging in his culture's widespread interest in scientific methodology in general (and Baconianism in particular), we can also see it as anticipating our own literary-critical theories of unstable texts, interpretive communities, and discursive functions. As Bulwer remarks (clairvoyantly, one might imagine), “Critics, in later times, gain repute by discovering what the author did not mean.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Bulwer's sense of the afterlives of texts—growing unpredictably, organically in excess of their authors' intentions, generating new connections and ever-changing significations—might remind us of the conclusion to Foucault's seminal essay “What Is an Author?,” in which he suggests that the questions to ask about a text are not those that refer to the author-as-origin, the questions that reassert “the privileges of the subject,” but instead those that analyze the subject “as a variable and complex function of discourse.”⁶⁹ Given the many variant translations of Foucault's essay, which provide differing glosses of his theory of the “author-function,” Bulwer's comment on future interpreters' license holds as true for Foucault's exegetes as it did for his own, or Bacon's for that matter.⁷⁰ In Bulwer's suggestive system we can find, not just a strange instance of the intersection of Victorian scientific, literary, and occult discourses but a nascent theory to describe the

“proliferation of meaning” that arises in such intersections.⁷¹ Of course, to compare Bulwer’s eclectic theory-building in the all-but-forgotten *Caxtoniana* and *Zanoni* with a pivotal essay by one of poststructuralism’s foremost theorists may strain credulity (even if Foucault does mention Bacon and Newton in “What Is an Author?”); nonetheless, Bulwer’s eclectic repurposing of Baconian induction should serve as a reminder that undertaking the intellectual labor required to envision unlikely connections is worthwhile precisely because “Thought is valuable in proportion as it is generative.”⁷²

Notes

1. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “On Essay-Writing,” in *Caxtoniana: A Series of Essays* (1863; London: George Routledge and Sons, 1875), 150.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Bulwer studied with Whewell at Trinity College, Cambridge, during which time he discussed Bacon and induction frequently with the then tutor and fellow. According to T. H. S. Escott, “Whewell was then meditating his various books on the inductive sciences and on moral philosophy in England. These formed the subject of many conversations with Bulwer.” *Edward Bulwer, First Baron Lytton of Knebworth: A Social, Personal, and Political Monograph* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1910), 45.

5. Bulwer helpfully provides the provenance for his allusion to Bacon in a footnote: “Bacon’s Essay on Atheism. This quotation is made with admirable felicity and force by Dr. Whewell, page 378 of Bridgewater Treatise, On Astronomy and General Physics considered with Reference to Natural Theology.” *A Strange Story* (London: Sampson and Low, 1862), 2:67.

6. *Ibid.*, 64.

7. William Godwin, *The Enquirer* (London: G. G. & J. Robinson, 1797), 136.

8. *Ibid.*, 133.

9. *Ibid.*, vi.

10. For an excellent broad overview of Bacon and his influence, see Paolo Rossi, “Baconianism,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, 5 vols. (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), 1:172–79.

11. Godwin, *Enquirer*, vii, v.

12. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Moral Effect of Writers,” in *Caxtoniana*, 112.

13. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

14. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “Hints on Mental Culture,” in *Caxtoniana*, 101.

15. Lawrence Poston, “Bulwer’s Godwinian Myth,” in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton: Bicentenary Reflections*, ed. Allan Conrad Christensen (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 78–79. See also Andrew Brown, “Metaphysics and Melodrama: Bulwer’s *Rienzi*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 36, no. 3 (1981): 266.

16. Joseph I. Fradin, “‘The Absorbing Tyranny of Every-Day Life’: Bulwer-Lytton’s *A Strange Story*,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16, no. 1 (1961): 2.

17. Christopher Lane, "Bulwer's Misanthropes and the Limits of Victorian Sympathy," *Victorian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2002): 598.

18. Margaret F. King and Elliot Engel remark: "Since he is hardly a genius of the first order, Bulwer's humorless pretensions, as reflected in his turgid, pompous prose, do encourage a certain pleasure in denigrating him." "The Emerging Carlylean Hero in Bulwer's Novels of the 1830s," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 36, no. 3 (1981): 277.

19. Marie Mulvey-Roberts, "Fame, Notoriety and Madness: Edward Bulwer-Lytton Paying the Price of Greatness," *Critical Survey* 13, no. 2 (2001): 115. The scholarly disclaimers about the relative merits of Bulwer's works that preface so much scholarship would make a study in themselves. I agree with Peter W. Sinnema's assessment that "Lytton's widely accepted status as a third-rate Victorian novelist justifies the confidence with which critics declaim upon his monotonous interest in metaphysical perplexities and his reduction of characters to predictable types without, generally, any attempt to demonstrate how such 'doctrine[s]' . . . are manifested in particular prose narratives." "Domesticating Bulwer-Lytton's Colonial Fiction: Mentorship and Masculinity in the Caxtons Trilogy," *English Studies in Canada* 26, no. 2 (2000): 155. There are, of course, exceptions to the scholarly neglect of (or, worse, contemptuous attention to) Bulwer and his works. John Coates reads Bulwer, in *Zanoni* in particular, as formative rather than reflective of "the ideas of his age." "*Zanoni* by Bulwer-Lytton: A Discussion of Its Philosophy and Its Possible Influences," *Durham University Journal* 76, no. 2 (1984): 224. For the most thorough treatment of Bulwer's occult fiction see Robert Lee Wolff, *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction* (Boston: Gambit Press, 1971). For excellent and varied treatments of many of Bulwer's works, see Allan Conrad Christensen, ed., *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton: Bicentenary Reflections* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004). See also Felicia Bonaparte, "The Mythification of History and the Historicizing of Myth: Bulwer, Wagner, and *Rienzi*," *Clio* 37, no. 3 (2008): 365-93; Gavin Budge, "Mesmerism and Medicine in Bulwer-Lytton's Novels of the Occult," in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, ed. Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2006), 39-59; Nicholas Daly, "The Volcanic Disaster Narrative: From Pleasure Garden to Canvas, Page, and Stage," *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 2 (2011): 255-85; Mark Knight, "'The Haunted and the Haunters': Bulwer Lytton's Philosophical Ghost Story," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 28, no. 3 (2006): 245-55; Ted Underwood, "Historical Difference as Immortality in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Novel," *Modern Language Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2002): 441-69; Stanwood Walker, "Redeeming the 'City of the Dead': Metaphysical Fiction, Touristic Fantasy, and the Historical Other in Bulwer's *The Last Days of Pompeii*," *Victorian Newsletter* 116 (Fall 2009): 27-51.

20. Bulwer-Lytton, "On Essay-Writing," 150.

21. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "On the Normal Clairvoyance of the Imagination," in *Caxtoniana*, 40.

22. Bulwer-Lytton, "On Essay Writing," 150.

23. Knight, "'Haunted and Haunters,'" 245.

24. George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 20. Although neither discusses Baconianism in any detail, for excellent accounts of Victorian scientific methodologies see also George Levine, *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christopher Herbert, *Victorian Relativity: Radical Thought and Scientific Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

25. Jonathan Smith, *Fact and Feeling: Baconian Science and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 13.
26. Richard Yeo, "An Idol of the Market-Place: Baconianism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *History of Science* 23, no. 3 (1985): 252.
27. Smith, *Fact and Feeling*, 13.
28. Wolff, *Strange Stories*, 90.
29. Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 139.
30. The review appeared in two parts. See [G. H. Lewes], review of *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, by Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, *Leader*, March 1, 1851, 201–3; [G. H. Lewes], "Second Notice," review of *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, by Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, *Leader*, March 8, 1851, 227–28. He remarks acerbically in the latter of the authors' proffered evidences of mesmerism and clairvoyance: "They must excite ridicule such as will throw discredit upon the work; and they cannot be accepted by any cautious mind, however predisposed to believe in the marvels of mesmerism. And, in saying this, we are not prejudging mesmerism" (227).
31. And Martineau is certainly better remembered for her more prosaic works like *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34) and *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte* (1853) than for her collaboration with Atkinson.
32. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "On the Spirit in Which New Theories Should Be Received," in *Caxtoniana*, 136.
33. *Ibid.*, 138.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Smith, *Fact and Feeling*, 16. For discussions of the ways Baconianism was associated with political and philosophical controversy see also Antonio Pérez-Ramos, *Francis Bacon's Idea of Science and the Maker's Knowledge Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Yeo, "Idol of the Market-Place," 251–98.
36. G. H. Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences: Being an Exposition of the Principles of the "Cours de Philosophie Positive" of August Comte* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), 104–5.
37. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "The New Phaedo, or, Conversations on Things Human and Divine with One Condemned," in *The Student: A Series of Papers*, vol. 2 (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), 159. L—— often appears to be a projection of Bulwer, in places narrating fictionalized biographical details that were Bulwer's own. "The New Phaedo" first appeared in installments in the *New Monthly Magazine* beginning in 1830 and was collected, along with other essays from the same journal, in volume form in 1835.
38. *Ibid.*, 240–41. For a comprehensive account of the Victorian empiricism/idealism debates see Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Leves, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010).
39. Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76–77. See also Michael Carignan, "Analogical Reasoning in Victorian Historical Epistemology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003): 445–64; Jonathan Farina, "Dickens's As If: Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality," *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 3 (2011): 427–36; Kevin Lambert, "The Uses of Analogy: James Clerk Maxwell's 'On Faraday's Lines of Force' and Early Victorian Analogical Argument," *British Journal*

for the *History of Science* 44, no. 1 (2011): 61–88. Kaja Silverman offers a much more utopian, if less historically grounded, account of analogy as an epistemological (and ethical) alternative to individualism in which individuals are “linked to each other through reversible and ontologically equalizing similarities.” *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4.

40. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Normal,” 38–39.

41. *Ibid.*, 40.

42. *Ibid.*, 35.

43. Leslie Mitchell’s biography paints him as acutely sensitive to ridicule, particularly (though by no means exclusively) in relation to his occult interests: “He investigated phenomena at the risk of his reputation, calling on parallel, scientific experiments to justify his actions. He was very aware that, in this respect, he was walking a tightrope and that there was every risk of falling into complete nonsense.” *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 144.

44. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Normal,” 39.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Smith reads Davy in relation to the Romantic poets, arguing, “Wordsworth gives poetry a scientific basis in fact, in careful observation and exact description, which is then imaginatively transformed in an inductive manner. . . . Davy contends that science utilizes this same poetic transformation of empirical data into the elegant laws of nature which in turn reinforce the beauty and harmony of the natural world.” *Fact and Feeling*, 58.

47. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Normal,” 39, 36.

48. *Ibid.*, 41.

49. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Moral,” 118.

50. See Friedrich Schiller, “The Veiled Image at Sais,” and “Cassandra,” in *Schiller’s Poems and Ballads*, trans. Edward, Lord Lytton (1844; New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), 61–63, 98–102.

51. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (1842; London: G. Routledge, 1856), 140.

52. *Ibid.*, 301.

53. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Moral,” 114.

54. *Ibid.*, 124.

55. Godwin, *Enquirer*, vi.

56. Bulwer-Lytton, “On the Moral,” 125.

57. For discussions of Bulwer’s various antecedents, see especially Bonaparte, “Mythification of History,” 365–93; Coates, “*Zanoni*,” 223–33; King and Engel, “The Emerging Carlylean,” 277–95; Lane, “Bulwer’s Misanthropes,” 597–624; and Lawrence Poston, “Beyond the Occult: The Godwinian Nexus of Bulwer’s *Zanoni*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 37, no. 2 (1998): 131–61.

58. William Mathews, introduction to *Zanoni*, in *Novels and Romances of Edward Bulwer Lytton*, vol. 23, ed. William Mathews (Boston: Little, Brown, 1893), xi. See also Budge, “Mesmerism and Medicine,” 39–59.

59. Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni*, 301.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 302.

62. Wolff, *Strange Stories*, 208ff.

63. *Ibid.*, 217.

64. Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni*, 302.

65. Godwin, *Enquirer*, vi.
66. Bulwer-Lytton, "New Phaedo," 241.
67. Bulwer-Lytton, "On Essay-Writing," 150.
68. Bulwer-Lytton, "On the Moral," 117.
69. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 117–18.
70. For a list of variant translations of "What Is an Author?" see Richard Lynch, "Michel Foucault's Shorter Works in English," Michel-foucault.com, last modified October 30, 2010, <http://www.michel-foucault.com/bibmf/>. For a discussion of these variants, see Joseph Long, "A Company of Shades: Subject and Authorship in Samuel Beckett's Prose," in *Subject Matters: Subject and Self in French Literature from Descartes to the Present*, ed. Paul Gifford and Johnnie Gratton (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 115–16; see also Richard Lynch, "Two Bibliographical Resources for Foucault's Work in English," *Foucault Studies* 1 (December 2004): 71–76.
71. Foucault, "What Is an Author?" 119.
72. Bulwer-Lytton, "On Essay Writing," 150.