

Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*: A Victorian Adventure in Consciousness

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Abstract

Originally published in 1842 and often referred to as “a Rosicrucian novel,” *Zanoni* by British literary figure Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton rates as a Victorian thriller, love story, and esoteric philosophical treatise rolled into one. Couched in an elevated literary tone, packed with paranormal happenings, and laced with allusions to facets of the esoteric path well-known to AMORC members, *Zanoni* rates as high-quality literary entertainment for the esoterically inclined. However, twenty-first century Rosicrucians reading *Zanoni* for the first time are often bewildered by the stilted authorial tone and unexpected literary features of this nineteenth century novel, a fiction classic beloved by generations of AMORC readers for its colorful portrayal of issues and techniques intimately connected to the Rosicrucian path. This paper renders *Zanoni* more readily understandable for today's readers by situating it within its historical and literary context in the field of literary genre study. It evaluates three genre categories into which the novel *Zanoni* might fit. Considering theme, setting, plot, character, dialogue, and narrative voice, the paper demonstrates that this novel employs and embodies the features of three distinct genres: Goth, Silver Fork, and Occult Fiction. Further, the paper reveals how the use of literary conventions drawn from each of these genres provides an opportunity for Bulwer-Lytton to showcase philosophical and spiritual principles advocated by the Rosicrucian Order both in his day and in ours. In sum, this paper provides a comfortable and informed platform from which the reader can enter and enjoy *Zanoni*.

« *Zanoni* » de Bulwer-Lytton : Une aventure victorienne à l'intérieur de la conscience

Par Maureen Richmond, M.A.

Résumé

Le roman de Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (1842) intègre et illustre au moins trois genres importants dans le monde littéraire victorien : 1) le Ghost ou Goth, 2) le genre « à la mode », sentimental, aussi appelé « silver fork » dépeignant les hautes classes de la société, et 3) le roman occultiste. Les caractéristiques de ces genres se marient avec l'intérêt inné de l'auteur pour la métaphysique, l'occultisme, le classicisme, l'idéalisme et la philosophie spirituelle, en un résultat intellectuellement riche qui aborde des questions existentielles, connues depuis toujours, mais qui étaient tout particulièrement à l'étude dans l'Angleterre victorienne. Le message primordial de ce roman est : tandis que la communion avec les mondes spirituels plus élevés ennoblit la conscience humaine, l'effort de se détacher complètement des préoccupations terrestres semble aller à l'encontre la vraie nature de l'homme. L'auteur gère l'intrigue de manière à affirmer la

valeur de la vie et de l'expérience humaine même face à des forces politiques et sociales démoralisantes. Ainsi faisant, Bulwer-Lytton se forge son propre chemin dans la pensée victorienne et devient un leader de l'opinion publique, grâce à son impressionnante popularité littéraire.

Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*: Una Aventura Victoriana en la Conciencia

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Resumen

La novela de Edward Bulwer-Lytton de 1842 titulada *Zanoni* incorpora y ejemplifica al menos tres géneros significativos para el mundo literario victoriano: 1) Fantasma o Goth, 2) Moda, Sentimental o Silver Fork, y 3) Ficción oculta. Las características de estos géneros se mezclan con el interés innato del autor por la metafísica, el ocultismo, el clasicismo, el idealismo y la filosofía espiritual para formar una rica oferta intelectual que aborda cuestiones existenciales conocidas en todas las épocas, pero que se examinaron especialmente en la época victoriana. El mensaje principal de la novela es que, si bien la comunión con los mundos espirituales superiores ennoblece la psique humana, el esfuerzo por desprenderse por completo de las preocupaciones terrenales parece ir en contra de la verdadera naturaleza humana. El autor dirige la trama de tal manera que afirma el valor de la vida y la experiencia humanas, incluso frente a fuerzas políticas y sociales desmoralizadoras. De esta manera, Bulwer-Lytton abre su propio camino en el pensamiento victoriano y se convierte en un líder del sentimiento público, como lo demuestra su vasta e impresionante popularidad literaria.

***Zanoni*, de Bulwer-Lytton: Uma Aventura em Consciência da era Vitoriana**

Maureen Richmond, M.A.

Sumário

O romance de 1842 de Edward Bulwer-Lytton, intitulado *Zanoni*, incorpora e exemplifica pelo menos três gêneros significativos para o mundo literário vitoriano - 1) Estranho ou Gótico, 2) Elegante, Sentimental ou Literatura do "Berço de Ouro" e 3) Ficção Oculta. As características desses gêneros misturam-se com o interesse inato do autor em metafísica, ocultismo, classicismo, idealismo e filosofia espiritual para formar uma mostra intelectual que aborda questões existenciais conhecidas em todas as eras, mas que estavam sendo estudados profundamente na era vitoriana. A mensagem principal do romance é que, enquanto a comunhão com os mundos espirituais superiores enobrece a psique humana, o esforço para se desligar completamente das preocupações terrenas parece ir contra a verdadeira natureza humana. O autor dirige o enredo de modo a afirmar o valor da vida e da experiência humanas, mesmo diante de forças políticas e sociais desmoralizantes. Desta forma, Bulwer-Lytton corta seu próprio caminho no pensamento vitoriano e se torna um líder do sentimento público, como demonstrado por sua vasta e impressionante popularidade literária.

Zanoni von Bulwer-Lytton : ein viktorianisch geprägtes Abenteuer in das Bewusstsein

Maureen Richmond, MA

Zusammenfassung

Der Roman „Zanoni“ von Edward Bulwer-Lytton wurde 1842 geschrieben. Er beinhaltet und ist ein Beispiel für die letzten drei Literaturgenres des viktorianischen Zeitalters. Diese waren 1) Gespensternovellen oder Schauerromane, 2) elegante, sentimentale oder High Society Geschichten und 3) okkulte Fiktion. Die typischen Charakteristika dieses Genres harmonieren mit den eigenen Interessen des Autors wie der Metaphysik, dem Okkulten, dem Klassizismus, dem Idealismus und der spirituellen Philosophie. Hieraus entstand ein umfangreiches intellektuelles Angebot, das die existentiellen Fragen aller Zeitepochen anstreift aber insbesondere diese des viktorianischen Zeitalters eingehend behandelt. Die wichtigste Botschaft dieses Romans ist, dass, obwohl die Kommunion mit den höheren spirituellen Sphären die menschliche Seele erhebt, dennoch der Versuch sich gänzlich vom Weltlichen loszulösen nicht der wahren menschlichen Natur entsprechen würde. Der Schriftsteller lenkt die Geschichte auf eine bestimmte Weise, um den Wert des menschlichen Lebens und seiner Erfahrungen ungeachtet entmutigender politischen und sozialen Druck zu bekräftigen. Bulwer-Lytton bildete seinen eigenen Weg im viktorianischen Denkmuster und regte die öffentliche Stimmung an; seine Popularität war groß und beeindruckend.

I. Thesis

The Victorian Era has been characterized as a period of spiritual anxiety during which new scientific, educational, social, and philosophical paradigms arose and clashed with the previously dominant Protestant Christian theology. Reflective of this tension, the literature of the period depicts inner and outer conflicts concerning faith, and the all-important question concerning the ideals in which faith should be placed. In poems and novels written throughout the Victorian Age, this internal spiritual dialogue raged. In what might be an answer to the need for spiritual guidance, the novel form emerged and presented characters struggling with questions familiar to the average Victorian individual. One such case is the novel *Zanoni* by British Victorian author Edward Bulwer-Lytton.

Filled with classic Victorian elements such as spirits and paranormal happenings, aristocratic tastes, allusions to classical times, conflict between the ideal and the real, homilies of spiritual edification, and the disparity between the purely spiritual and the purely material, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1842 novel titled *Zanoni* embodies period flourishes which clearly situate this work in its time and place. Even so, its author presses beyond the known markers of Victorian literature to create original genres and to manage the question of spiritual evolution in a remarkably sensitive manner, a manner which reveals that the author clearly understood the

gaping difference between a completely ascetic spiritual ideal on one hand, and a more humanized embrace of both spirit and body on the other.

II. Genre Classification of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*

A unique and attention-getting factor on the literary scene, Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* has been perceived as many things by many perspectives. Critics and literary analysts have categorized this work as everything from Gothic and ghost literature to fashionable, sentimental, or silver fork novel as well as occult fiction. Prominently featuring a number of spirit presences which operate in various ways, the tale told in *Zanoni* easily falls within the ghost genre so plentifully represented in Victorian literature, a period some consider almost synonymous with the literature of ghosts (Armitt 2002, 151). Making it further reasonable to consider *Zanoni* a member of the Victorian ghost genre is the fact that the author has been described as "...a master of ghostly terror" (Mulvey-Roberts 88). Yet, equally compelling is the argument for categorizing *Zanoni* as Gothic, a genre not new to the Victorian Era but rather one which had emerged in the late eighteenth century and which enjoyed a revival during the following century (Kitson 2002, 164). In the century prior to the Victorian Era, the term Gothic had simply connoted subject matter archaic and medieval (Kitson 2002, 164). However, in the nineteenth century, the term Gothic acquired new and more precise connotations. By the time of the Victorian writer Bulwer-Lytton, the Gothic novel had come to be characterized by subject matter turning upon hauntings, castles, the macabre, abnormal psychology, the interface of the paranormal with the everyday, the exaggeration of anxiety, and by a literary style which relied upon complex narrative devices, allowed for digressions, showcased prolixity, and which lacked any comforting and objective authorial presence (Kitson 2002, 165). At least one contemporary scholar of genre analysis has firmly positioned Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* in this category (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 83). In fact, this same scholar has identified Bulwer-Lytton not only as a Gothic writer but also as the progenitor of a specific type of Victorian Gothic novel, one which she calls "metaphysical Gothic." Metaphysical Gothic is a genre characterized by an intellectual approach to magic, mysticism, and spirituality, the texts of which often include scholarly footnotes and philosophical discussions integrated seamlessly with the plot line and printed page (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86). As will be shown, Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* contains these very elements and hence with good reason might be categorized as a metaphysical Gothic novel.

However, it is not only the creation of the metaphysical Gothic novel with which Bulwer-Lytton is credited. Importantly, Bulwer-Lytton is also considered one of the chief architects of the fashionable, silver fork, or sentimental novel of the Victorian Era (Cronin 38, Powell 61). The novel of this genre draws its characters from the privileged and aristocratic class, pictures an exclusive world, employs known and actual locations, settings, shops, and entertainment venues, and depicts a melodramatic plot line carried on primarily by the literary device of dialogue or conversation (Cronin 2004, 38 – 39). In that the plot of *Zanoni* features a mysterious occult adept of fabulous wealth, takes place in known locations in Naples and Paris, follows several characters gripped in dramatic personal emotion, and moves often by the device of dialogue, it hardly stretches credulity to place it in the genre of the fashionable, sentimental, and silver fork novel.

Considering *Zanoni* in the light of the fashionable, silver fork, or sentimental genre reveals that Bulwer-Lytton found it not beneath him as a writer to cater to the Victorian hunger for sophistication and class. In fact, the privileged and cultured life was treated in a number of Bulwer-Lytton's novels. As part of a greater thrust in Bulwer-Lytton's writing career, *Zanoni* continues the theme of polite high society, an environment apparently of keen interest to his audience. In *Zanoni*, Bulwer-Lytton features a debonair male who leads the cast of characters and who sets a spiritual and sartorial style admired by all. Perhaps a bit of Bulwer-Lytton himself appears in this flashy yet tasteful protagonist, a symbol of what the author might have secretly imagined or hoped himself to be. In reality, Bulwer-Lytton did pursue the life of the privileged and leisure upper crust in his middle and later life, following upon the financial successes of his early novels. Thus, viewing *Zanoni* through the lens of the fashionable, silver fork, or sentimental novel, brings out the autobiographical side of the text as emblematic of the author's own preoccupations. Perhaps *Zanoni* even embodies what were at one time the author's own imaginings of the life he wished to lead.

A less specific label has also been applied to *Zanoni*. Because of the overt mention of Rosicrucianism and other factors, *Zanoni* has been categorized by some scholars simply as occult fiction (Webb 2016, 28). If the field of the occult is understood to include mystical societies, alchemy, star study, telepathy, psychic projection, dream experiences, and spirit communication, then the fictional treatment in *Zanoni* easily qualifies as occult fiction. Certainly the narrative voice of the text invokes the Rosicrucian Brotherhood as the source of the story and makes reference specifically to Chaldean star lore at a key juncture in the plot line (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 115). These and other similar mentions render this genre claim perhaps as legitimate as any other. Viewing *Zanoni* through the lens of the occult fiction genre foregrounds the author's interests in the psychic, metaphysical, and paranormal, while it also allows these factors in the plot to be considered for their own value, rather than as mere plot devices.

In whatever genre or genres Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* may ultimately and rightfully be placed, a general truth about the author's approach remains relevant in any study of the text at hand. Most fundamentally, Bulwer-Lytton adapted his presentation to the expectations of the Victorian readership. As one scholar of Victorian literature has commented, "The spirit of the age demanded of the novelists that they should be learned, profound, thoughtful, philosophic, teachers and guides of the people" (Walker 1910, 754). The spirit of the age was of course represented by the choices of the reading public. As representatives of this spirit, Victorian readers constituted the barometer of the times. They gravitated toward and bought the books of authors such as Bulwer-Lytton who could, against the anxieties and uncertainties of the period, inform and inspire them with worthy ideas.

A writer like Bulwer-Lytton provided what the unravelling Christian faith no longer could – shining ideals worth pursuing. This was the literary Holy Grail for which Victorian readers thirsted. To this challenge Bulwer-Lytton apparently rose, for as critics continue to attest, all of his literary productions were characterized by elegance of thought and philosophy, intellectual rigor, and the effort to disseminate ennobling knowledge through fiction, a fact which set Bulwer-Lytton above and apart from other writers of the Victorian Era (Brown 2004, 30; Powell et al. 2001, 61). To this end, in all his works Bulwer-Lytton embedded the traces of his sophisticated and refined interests, including the classics and metaphysics (Powell et. al. 2001,

62). As a result, when Bulwer-Lytton deceased in 1873, he was recognized and eulogized as England's foremost literary figure (Brown 2004, 29). This spirit of elevated knowledge for which Bulwer-Lytton was acknowledged at the end of his writing career also breathes throughout the pages of his mid-career novel, *Zanoni*, a novel so diverse and rich as to deserve all the genre classifications just discussed while it also seeks to ennoble, uplift, and instruct. As such, the intellectual character of *Zanoni* is evidence of the author's own valorization of several fields of study – occultism and classicism particularly, as will be shown.

III. Author's Life and Interests

An adult by the beginning of the Victorian Age of 1837 - 1901, British literary figure Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton lived from 1803 until 1873 (Powell et al. 2001, 61). Although not born into great wealth (Brown 2004, 39), Bulwer-Lytton benefitted from a classical English gentleman's education and was fortunate to inherit early in life a sophisticated scholarly library from his maternal grandfather (Powell et al., 61). Through the contents of this library, Bulwer-Lytton fell under the spell of German metaphysics, and then in college under the charm of Italy (Powell et al. 2001, 62), which country he later visited and gathered experience for the settings used in much of his subsequent fiction (Walker 1910, 647). Bulwer-Lytton's university years also brought him under the influence of French political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a source of inspiration which would surface a decade later in *Zanoni* as a plot line interwoven with the course of the French Revolution.

However, there was nothing about which Bulwer-Lytton was more passionate than metaphysics, mysticism, the occult, and spirit communication (Walker 1910, 651). In fact, according to one prominent Bulwer Lytton scholar, the author was quite literally steeped in the paranormal, including mesmerism and psychical research (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86). With a profound conviction of the soul's immortality, Bulwer-Lytton investigated the field of the occult in earnest, consulting with Victorian Era spirit mediums and hosting the celebrated spirit communicator D.D. Home at the Bulwer-Lytton family residence in Knebworth, England (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86; Webb 2016, 27; Walker 1910, 651). Bulwer-Lytton himself was known to have embraced the practice of conversing with ghosts (Webb 2016, 27), a skill perhaps made easier of acquisition since his Knebworth residence was reputedly haunted (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 84). Further, Bulwer-Lytton's imagination thrived in the mystical and mysterious, a fact reflected in the furnishings of his home. His Knebworth residence was decorated in true Gothic style, populated with griffins, gargoyles, and other mythical creatures (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 84). Amongst his effects were an opium pipe and an authentic skull of an ancient Egyptian priest (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 88).

Yet for Bulwer-Lytton, the occult was much more than mere entertainment or decoration. Evidence has been found which shows that Bulwer-Lytton was a practicing member of the mystical and esoteric Rosicrucian Order of his day, in which he held a high leadership position (Webb 2016, 32). Further, Bulwer-Lytton claimed the faculty of prevision or precognition, which he used to perform psychic readings for acquaintances, a matter known to have carried profound connotations for him (Walker 1910, 652; Webb 2016, 37). In keeping with this visionary stance, Bulwer-Lytton embraced dreams as a source of literary inspiration. In the year 1835, Bulwer-Lytton experienced a dream of a magus who had discovered an elixir of life

capable of erasing disease, age, and death (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86). The central theme of the dream formed the core notion Bulwer-Lytton would use to write *Zanoni*, eventually published seven years after the instigating dream (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86).

Clearly, Bulwer-Lytton followed his own version of the spiritual path, not constrained by the dominant Christian paradigm of the surrounding culture. Although he loosely affiliated himself with the Church of England, it is likely that the choice to do so sprang from a need to maintain appearances rather than from an actual doctrinal affinity (Webb 2016, 27). Instead of Christianity, Bulwer-Lytton pursued metaphysics and classicism (Powell et.al. 2001, 62). In fact, Bulwer-Lytton ultimately contributed to an important Victorian literary trend which featured the presentation of the ancient classical world as a challenge to aspects of Christian doctrine, a bold stance which in his time exposed any writer so doing to serious threats of legal prosecution and imprisonment (Goldhill 2011, 156, 199, 202). Yet even this did not deter Bulwer-Lytton from integrating the metaphysical into his fictional works. Just as Bulwer-Lytton's life was full of mediums, Gothic surroundings, and esoteric organizational connections, his books were full of alchemy, astrologers, and Kabbala (Webb 2016, 28).

Reflective of his interests, Bulwer-Lytton's personal life was imaginative. As a youth, he married into a gypsy tribe, though that marriage was later dissolved, to be followed by a conventional but notoriously turbulent marriage (Walker 1910, 646). When once asked about the concept of psychic influence or animal magnetism, he is reputed to have replied that there was no other living person who had delved into the subject more deeply than himself (Webb 2016, 37). Thus, it seems plain enough that Bulwer-Lytton's spiritual life cut its own course through the unconventional, paranormal, occult, and metaphysical. As a result, Rosicrucianism, precognition, dreams, alchemy, and spirit communication all occupy pride of place in Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*. What is more, Bulwer-Lytton employed these themes in such a manner as to use them as teaching points and not merely as mood enhancers. In fact, Bulwer-Lytton is said to have pioneered a literary style that instructed while it entertained; it was in this way that the author shared his love of metaphysics, psychical research, and esoteric teachings with his readership (Mulvey-Roberts 2002, 86).

The consequent effect was stunning. In response to *Zanoni* and other novels Bulwer-Lytton penned, he was in the mid-1850s considered the leading novelist of his time and in the late 1850s hailed by a prominent essayist as "unquestionably the greatest living novelist of England" (Brown 2004, 29). Parallel to these critical accolades, Bulwer-Lytton enjoyed a raging popularity, with reader stampedes following his every publication (Brown 2004, 30). As a result, Bulwer-Lytton attained to a degree of compensation and wealth simply unheard of for a writer of novels in his time (Brown 2004, 29). Of course, Bulwer-Lytton had also his detractors. Accusations of empty posturing, bombast, stagecraft, and charlatanism certainly came his way (Brown 2004, 32; Walker 1910, 652). Even so, Bulwer-Lytton is still judged a pivotal figure in the literary culture of the Victorian Age (Brown 2004, 35).

IV. Themes in *Zanoni* Reflecting Genre Classifications and Author's Interests

A. Paranormal Phenomena, Ghost and Goth

Nearly every page of *Zanoni* contains reference to events and entities which would surely qualify as paranormal. From the beginning of the story until the final pages, the plot turns upon instances of foreknowledge, telepathy, psychic sensitivity, the appearance of spirits, intentional invocation of spirits, magical potions and elixirs which alter both mind and body, and the strange effects surrounding the pursuit of esoteric knowledge. Much of the paranormal activity emanates from the character for the whom the book is named and who is presented as a fabulously handsome adept with astounding powers of telepathy, precognition, and psychic influence. For example, early in the narrative, an account of Zanoni's abilities is rendered by an Italian bystander who reports, "He fixed his eye upon the Sicilian; never shall I forget that look! It is impossible to describe...it froze the blood in my veins. The Sicilian staggered back as if struck. I saw him tremble; he sank on the bench..." (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 60). In this passage, the reader is given to understand that Zanoni is capable of stopping any aggressor with the power of a mere gaze, suggesting considerable mind-force in play behind the obvious physical action. Bulwer-Lytton's featuring of these paranormal abilities suggests that he intended to draw attention to these aspects of human functioning in such a way as to present them as possibilities to which all might attain. In fact, the plot turns around the desire of secondary character Clarence Glyndon to enter a tutelage with either protagonist Zanoni or his associate Mejnour for precisely that purpose. Even though many might interpret Bulwer-Lytton's use of extraordinary abilities as nothing but sensationalism designed to attract readers and sell books, it is more likely that the author meant to share his own high regard for psychic and spiritual development in what amounts to an instructional text embedded in fiction. Such a notion might find support from the prevalence of the paranormal theme in the plot of *Zanoni*.

Yet another example of paranormal phenomena occurs when the protagonist Zanoni uses his power of thought or psychic projection to protect the lead female character and her family home from invasion by local brigand forces. The protagonist Zanoni never even appears on the scene, but instead acts from afar during the night to halt the attack. In the morning "...three men were found dead at the threshold of the principal entrance..." (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 205). Here again, the obvious implication is that the protagonist Zanoni operates a powerful psychic force, something over and above normal human methods. The same is true for his powers of precognition, which are presented when he accurately foretells the occurrence and time of day that a prominent person shall pass away (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 113-115). Equally impressive are Zanoni's capacities for compelling spirits of the air and of the higher spiritual dimensions to manifest in tangible form, a task he accomplishes in an episode during which he invokes Adonai, Dweller of the Starbeam in a Greek seaside cave (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 207). All of these plot developments and many others like them position the tale firmly in the region of the paranormal and foreground Bulwer-Lytton's intention to bring attention to the mechanics of paranormal phenomena.

That's hardly where Bulwer-Lytton stops, however, in his creation of an exotic and gripping atmosphere. Just as *Zanoni* is paranormal in one direction, it is also Gothic in another due to its inclusion of hauntings, castles, authorial digressions, and stylistic prolixity. The hauntings appear in the castle of the stern occult taskmaster Mejnour, where impulsive English spiritual seeker Clarence Glyndon stumbles into a deliberately enchanted chamber containing a seductive but dangerous white mist which morphs into a menacing, serpentine spirit entity. In his first encounter with the mist, Glyndon "...saw dim, spectre-like forms floating through the mist..."

which so disconcerted him that he nearly fainted from fear (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 183). Authorial digressions are not far behind. In fact, right in the middle of this gripping scene, the narrating voice launches into a discussion of a classic painting which depicts the River of the Dead in Hades and the painterly technique used to evoke an eerie atmosphere (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 183). As well, prolixity accompanies the digression, where the reader encounters "...and the bloodless things that tenanted it had no life, their forms blending with the dead waters till, as the eye continued to gaze, it ceased to discern them from the preternatural element they were supposed to inhabit" (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 183).

Thus, distinctive elements of the Gothic genre cluster visibly in this passage, which is typical of much of the novel in content and tone. That Bulwer-Lytton integrated such unmistakable features of the Gothic genre in *Zanoni* suggests that the author understood the popular appeal of this genre and delighted in its ambience himself. Digression and stylistic prolixity seem to come naturally to Bulwer-Lytton, who stops the flow of the plot on a regular basis to pontificate on everything from classical wisdom to the socio-political philosophy underlying the French Revolution. Yet, these asides and their attendant verbosity play an important role, for they afford the author time and space to show his stuff as an abstract metaphysical philosopher as well as a social critic and historian. Therefore, it would seem that Bulwer-Lytton embraced and borrowed from the Gothic genre both because it fit with his passion for the occult and because the format native to this genre would support his need to directly address the reader with a meta-narrative dancing over and above the apparent story line. The reflective Gothic narrator is thus a comfortable role for Bulwer-Lytton, an opportunity to comment on the deeper meaning of the struggles into which he casts his characters and a moment in the sun to advertise his particular brand of metaphysical belief.

However, Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* goes well beyond mere Gothic content to evidence clear markers of the Metaphysical Gothic genre, integrating an intellectual approach to the subjects of magic and mysticism, even to the point of incorporating scholarly references and discussion of abstract philosophical principles right in the flow of the fictional text. For example, Section VI of Chapter 2 is headed by a substantive quotation by Count de Gabalais from a translation of Alexander Pope's eighteenth-century epic satire, *The Rape of the Lock*. The quotation concerns the sticky problem of determining if an individual has magical knowledge and power. The fact it's borrowed from English literary canon suggests that Bulwer-Lytton meant to stimulate reader interest in traditional, quality literature which may have included the very themes with which he was concerned. In any case, the reference to Pope adds a highbrow, intellectual component to the reading experience, a marker of the Metaphysical Gothic genre.

Immediately following the Pope excerpt, there ensues an entire page of general philosophical musings in the service of the esoteric, such as "Real philosophy seeks rather to solve than to deny" and "...a more erudite knowledge is aware that by alchemists the greatest discoveries in science have been made, and much will seem abstruse, had we the key to the mystic phraseology..." (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 80). These remarks (and many others like them) break in on the action and seem to hold the story line in suspended animation while the author treats of the philosophical issues which underlie and parallel the action. Throughout *Zanoni*, Bulwer-Lytton included sections of this nature which issue forth not from any character, but from the voice of the narrator and which operate completely aside from the flow of the story. The

inclusion of such textual elements suggests strongly that Bulwer-Lytton harbored at least two purposes – first to entertain and enthrall his readers, and second to instruct and improve. The latter of these two objectives reveals how seriously and reverentially Bulwer-Lytton estimated the nature and content of metaphysical and esoteric study. These fields of inquiry were important enough to Bulwer-Lytton for him to respectfully educate his readers about the general principles of his favorite subjects, rather than simply writing to supposedly credulous readers and impressing the naïve with amazing tales.

B. Classicism, Multiculturalism, and the Fashionable or Silver Fork Genre

If Bulwer-Lytton intended to expand the consciousness of his English Victorian readers through metaphysical philosophy, he meant also to enlarge their frames of reference through exposure to the atmospheres of other times and places. *Zanoni* is peppered throughout with mentions of classical philosophers, ancient landmarks associated with key figures in western cultural development, veridical continental venues and locations of the 1700s, and the places and lifestyles of the powerful and prestigious. It would be impossible to read this novel and fail to experience a mental journey through time, grand houses, and crumbling castles, together with urban and rural eighteenth-century Italy and France. No reader of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* could be accused of failing to expand the mind via arm-chair travel.

The author includes a dazzling list of sages and places drawn from classical antiquity, a special interest of his own which surely adds an element of refinement to the reading experience and which connotes a respect for classical learning. Further, the mention of classical philosophers dovetails with the pedagogical method of the Rosicrucian Order, claimed by the preamble of the text to be the source of the story and which holds that all the great philosophers of antiquity were initiates of the mystery traditions which have informed the doctrines of the Order. The Order therefore advocates study of the classical greats and their intellectual descendants for the purpose of advancement on the metaphysical path. Perhaps in a bid to support that agenda, Bulwer-Lytton reels off the names of Pythagoras, Iamblichus, Herodotus, and Virgil, the tomb of whom provides the location for an important episode situated outside of eighteenth-century Naples (1845, 111, 112, 115, 178, 205, 206). He speaks of the Egyptian Mysteries, held by Rosicrucians to be one of the earliest sources of metaphysical teachings (1845, 148), alludes to the mysterious Etruscan civilization which predated Rome (1845, 148), and moving up through the early C.E. centuries, touches on the Alexandrian magicians Appollonius and Paracelsus (1845, 114, 180).

Much of the allusion to classical learning arises in dialogue, spoken by the learned Zanoni and his associate, the stern taskmaster Mejnour. For example, Zanoni confronts the excitable Englishman Glyndon about the young man's distracting emotional unrest, identifies this characteristic as an impediment on the metaphysical path, and says to Glyndon, "Your nature wants the harmony, the music which, as the Pythagoreans taught, at once elevates and soothes" (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 112). Only an inattentive reader could fail to note the implication. It's as if the esoteric adept Zanoni had stepped right out of the pages of the novel and advised any reader genuinely interested in developing the same powers active in the character Zanoni to buckle down and read Pythagoras on music. The hints to the wise are all present and smartly showcased, the intellectual bread-crumbs all carefully laid out in dialogue which could be understood to address the reader directly, thus functioning not only as entertainment, but also as

content-rich spiritual or educational guidance. Here is Bulwer-Lytton's love of classicism at work in the service of his beloved path of metaphysics and mysticism.

If Bulwer-Lytton was eager to nudge his readers along the path of metaphysical development via study of classical learning, he was equally intent on expanding the minds of his readers through a multicultural and multilingual context. Throughout the course of the novel, multilingualism is presented as a great asset, with Zanoni's mastery of English, Italian, French, Turkish and Greek a model in that direction (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 81, 205). The course of the novel itself passes from eighteenth-century urban Naples to the idyllic Greek Islands to *Paris boulevé* during the French Revolution. Moreover, seventeenth-century Germany is the location of the newly emerged Rosicrucian movement alluded to in the first pages of the novel as the source of the *Zanoni* story, thus implying the presence of the German language. Taskmaster Mejnour hails from an unspecified eastern or middle-eastern milieu, and Zanoni spent prior time in India, bringing back natives of that country in their indigenous dress as staffers minding his estates. Thus, the pages of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* exposed his reading audience to the cultures and languages of some seven or eight countries, all totaled, thus disabusing them of any English Victorian tunnel-vision from which they may have suffered. As scholar of Victorian literature Martin Bidney has said, "The Victorian novel would be a far different and lesser thing without the stimulation of imagination and philosophic ideas from Germany, France, Italy, and Russia" (Bidney 99). Bulwer-Lytton was on the front end of this wave, including elements from three of the four countries mentioned by Bidney and adding several of his own. In this approach to the creation of genre fiction, Bulwer-Lytton was right in step with his contemporaries, if not somewhat ahead, just by following his own internal compass as it pointed to a greater and wider world.

Yet, Bulwer-Lytton was not satisfied to raise his reader's sights through integrating elements of classicism and multiculturalism into *Zanoni*. Pressing forward on all counts possible, the author also sought to refine the tastes of his readers through the inclusion of elements proper to the novel genre called fashionable, sentimental, or silver fork. In keeping with the requirements of this genre, *Zanoni* follows the stories of several monied individuals who have the leisure to pursue metaphysics as their major daily occupation. Although the fashionable novel in general treats of the privileged class not necessarily involved in metaphysical pursuits, in Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*, personal development in the science of metaphysics is the entertaining objective pursued in the same way as are travel and polite partying in other fashionable novels. For example, secondary character Clarence Glyndon is a wealthy English traveler keen to develop telepathy and precognition, protagonist Zanoni a fabulously wealthy adept who can apparently attract whatever material or existential thing he might desire, and the taskmaster Mejnour a mystic with no material concerns and the comfortable resident of a remote mountain castle.

Several plot episodes occur in palaces and villas of wealthy (and unscrupulous) Neapolitans (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 146), thus completing the picture of an aristocratic and exclusive world typical of the fashionable novel. However, it should also be said that Bulwer-Lytton guides the narrative through the bandit-ridden hills above Naples and into the gritty streets of Paris during the violent French Revolution. Still, a great portion of the novel takes place among the genteel

and the advantaged, thus reflecting the primary interests of the fashionable novel genre, doing so by the requisite movement of emotion-laden plot via long segments of dialogue.

For example, when Zanoni confronts a group of men antithetical to his purposes, the entire scene is carried by verbal sallies (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 58), as is common with the fashionable novel as a novel of conversation. Rounding out the fashionable novel theme, Bulwer-Lytton includes mention of actual entertainment venues, streets, buildings, and historic landmarks. For example, a key scene involving the lead female character takes place at the tomb of Roman poet Virgil, just outside Naples (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 126). Another scene transpires at Mount Vesuvius (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 132), in the eighteenth century a popular tourist destination. Naples itself becomes the subject of colorful description, as Bulwer-Lytton narrates, “On returning from Vesuvius or Pompeii, you enter Naples through the most animated...Neapolitan quarter, - through that quarter in which modern life most closely resembles the ancient...” (1845, 138). In this way, Bulwer-Lytton integrated the polite concerns of the fashionable, silver fork, or sentimental genre, which surely spoke to the desires of his Victorian readers for expensive travel and classy entertainment.

C. Idealism vs Realism, Spiritism vs Materialism, and Art vs Commerce

The split between the higher realms of thought so loved by Bulwer-Lytton and the common world of commerce and competition is a marked theme throughout the novel. The author even suspends plot action to philosophize about this very conflict, which may very well be the central tension in the entire novel. Frequently the character Clarence Glyndon embodies this conflict, torn as he is between the voice of his artistic muse on one hand and the voice of his thoroughly pragmatic acquaintance Mervale on the other. Glyndon’s inner struggle pits his attraction to painting against his fear of social disapproval and economic exclusion from his conservative Victorian circle back in England. Bulwer-Lytton stages Glyndon’s internal conflict around this theme in such a way as to embody all the tensions of soul contrasted to body, spirit contrasted to materiality, and idealism contrasted to a commercial realism.

Commenting as a narrator who allows himself the liberty to address both his characters and his readers directly, Bulwer-Lytton writes, “You must have a feeling, - a faith in whatever is self-sacrificing and divine, whether in religion or in art, in glory or in love; or Commonsense will reason you out of sacrifice, and a syllogism will debase the Divine to an article in the market” (1845, 92). The author goes on to urge both Glyndon and the reading audience to acknowledge that “...the loftiest order of art...is the perpetual struggle of Humanity to approach the gods” (1845, 92), thus equating the pursuit of ideal art with the spiritual quest. Bulwer-Lytton then resolves the duality of spirit and matter by producing an epithet or metaphysical proverb: “They who command best the ideal, enjoy ever most the real” (1845, 110), stated as a narrator’s aside. His recommendation is clear. To all spiritual seekers who may be reading, Bulwer-Lytton suggests that the primary emphasis should be laid upon the ideal, the spiritual, and upon art in contrast to the actual, material, and commercial.

In this bias, Bulwer-Lytton articulates the widespread Victorian malaise with creeping industrialization and commercialization. His is a voice for the antique and for the aesthetic as palliatives or even correctives to an increasingly crass and abrasive secular culture. Ultimately,

Glyndon acts on Bulwer-Lytton's authorial advice as well as direct urging from Zanoni inside the plot action. In an inspired moment, Glyndon dramatically repudiates Mervale's gloomy materialistic outlook and opts to hurl himself into his painterly art (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 106). Consequences follow, but the point has been made and the scales of judgment tipped to art over social approval, spirit over matter, and the ideal in preference to the real.

D. Spiritual Philosophy Embedded in Conversation and the Occult Fiction Genre

That Bulwer-Lytton intended to bring to the attention of his reading public certain philosophical and metaphysical principles is made evident in the way he uses his characters to articulate key ideas. The occult adept Zanoni functions as one of Bulwer-Lytton's preferred mouthpieces, frequently giving voice to lengthy declamations on the nature of consciousness, the role of desire, the importance of self-discipline, and the poignant conflict between the ascetic life and the normal emotional needs of the human being.

Often seemingly solitary in his elevated point of view, Zanoni in his homilies indeed appears to lecture the less masterful characters in the novel. For example, in admonishing the youthful Glyndon to get a grip on his overly-active mind and emotions, Zanoni states, "...truth can no more be seen by the mind unprepared for it, than the sun can dawn upon the midst of night" (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 111). Zanoni goes on to advise Glyndon that the attainment of absolute serenity is requisite for the sensing of high truths (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 111). Not long after, it is Zanoni again who points out to Glyndon that if anything hinders metaphysical progress, it is fear and the perturbations it brings to mind and emotions (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 114). In these three passages, Bulwer-Lytton unabashedly employs one of his main characters to convey spiritual teaching points which carry relevance not only inside the plot, but outside of it as well. The importance of proper preparation, of serenity, and of the mastery of fear are ideas Bulwer-Lytton wants to cast into the minds of his readers via Zanoni's discourses. Here is Bulwer-Lytton's literary artistry at the service of his role as metaphysical savant and guide. Again the author instructs while at the important business of entertaining.

Philosophical and metaphysical principles embedded in conversation add yet another layer of imparted information as Bulwer-Lytton speaks through the foreboding and exacting taskmaster, Mejnour. It is Mejnour who, in conversation with Glyndon, reveals the exact heritage of the esoteric order to which he and Zanoni belong and of which they are the two sole surviving members. Established prior to the year 1300 C.E. and a precursor to the Victorian Rosicrucians, their Order is an occult organization promoting longevity through natural means and pursuing higher knowledge through the use of alchemy, spirit invocation, number study, and star contemplation (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 180 – 181). Mejnour articulates some of the beliefs of the Order when he reveals in conversation with Glyndon that space is the infinite (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 188) and that the laws which regulate creation decree that "nothing wicked can long endure" (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 148). In this way, the author introduces the specifics of real-world esoteric philosophy into his fictional tale.

Throughout the novel, both Zanoni and Mejnour function as the spokespersons for the esoteric doctrine to which Bulwer-Lytton aims to draw attention: in a word, that of the Rosicrucian Order of his day, of which the author was a practicing member and high officer. It is to the teachings

of this actual Order existing in Victorian England (and previously in continental Europe) that Bulwer-Lytton draws attention through the utterances of his fictional characters, Zaroni the Rosicrucian adept and Mejnour his mentor and associate within the Order.

E. Transcendence Both Celebrated and Questioned

While ghostly apparitions swirl, tantalizing scenes of travel and privileged lifestyle rush past, and tormented monologues treating of the tension between the ideal and real unfold, the deeper plot dynamics of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zaroni* make their own orbit around a profound metaphysical issue: to be a god or to be a human; that is the question. Zaroni as the prime protagonist finds himself in precisely this quandary, in spite of the fact he's reached the status of an immortal who has lived for millennia (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 125). The plain fact is that Zaroni is undergoing some type of initiatory test himself (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 124), a test which appears to involve a decision whether he will unify himself with humanity and compassionately serve the common interest or if he will leave human evolution behind forevermore, as is taught by the eastern school from which Mejnour hails. Mejnour adjures Zaroni to eschew the human world, citing it as a region of appalling cruelty (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 190). On the other hand, Mejnour explains to Glyndon that few earthlings can endure the quest to adeptship such as what Zaroni has attained (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 151). And Zaroni himself warns the naïve Glyndon away from the demanding esoteric path (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 89). Meanwhile, Zaroni lets slip on several occasions that he's not so altogether thrilled with his high isolation and might be glad to surrender his superhuman solitude (Bulwer-Lytton 1845, 152). In fact, as the novel progresses, Zaroni falls farther and farther in love with a human female, a celebrated Neapolitan opera singer and spiritual sensitive named Viola.

Thus, Bulwer-Lytton presents the path of adeptship in several lights. Through the eyes of Glyndon, it is an alluring prize only the attainment of which will settle his soul. Through the eyes of Mejnour, it is the only alternative (albeit a brutal one) to the distasteful nature of earthly life. Through the eyes of Zaroni, it is both demanding and rewarding, but ultimately, not as rewarding as the bliss of human love.

In presenting the path to esoteric adeptship in this way, Bulwer-Lytton has entertained a profound philosophical question, one which has plagued the religious and spiritual paths for ages: Is it more essential to detach the self from earthly concerns, or more essential to blend in with human life and practice spiritual wisdom in that context? Bulwer-Lytton has posed the question and rendered an answer in the form of protagonist Zaroni's choice to forsake his perfect serenity in order to experience a more human existence with his beloved Viola.

In turning the plot in this direction, Bulwer-Lytton has voiced his own supposition that too much transcendence leads to aridity and spiritual imbalance, as symbolized in Mejnour's flat demeanor and sometimes unfeeling nature. With the protagonist's choice to turn toward instead of away from human existence, *Zaroni* ends by affirming both the value of human life and the wonder of spiritual realms, but not by sacrificing the first to the second. Thus, Bulwer-Lytton answers his own question about the degree to which the ascetic path should be pursued. His answer in *Zaroni* is simple: Yes, pursue the highest spiritual star, but not to the point of insensitivity.

Conclusion

Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel titled *Zanoni* incorporates and exemplifies at least three genres significant to the Victorian literary world – 1) Ghost or Goth, 2) Fashionable, Sentimental, or Silver Fork, and 3) Occult Fiction. The characteristics of these genres blend with the author's innate interest in metaphysics, occultism, classicism, idealism, and spiritual philosophy to form a rich intellectual offering which touches on existential questions known in all ages but which were under particularly close examination in the Victorian Era. The over-riding message of the novel is that while communion with the higher spiritual worlds ennoble the human psyche, the effort to completely detach from earthly concerns appears to go against true human nature. The author directs the plot in such a way as to affirm the value of human life and experience even in the face of demoralizing political and social forces. In this way, Bulwer-Lytton cuts his own path in Victorian thinking and becomes a leader of public sentiment, as demonstrated by his vast and impressive literary popularity.

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